



# **LIVED EXPERIENCE OF CRIMINOLOGY GRADUATES DURING CRIMINOLOGIST LICENSURE EXAMINATION PREPARATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Bachelor of Science in Criminology graduates from Foundation University in Dumaguete City, Philippines, who prepared for the Criminologist Licensure Examination (CLE) from 2019 to 2025. Through their personal narratives, the study examined the administrative, financial, emotional, psychological, and logistical challenges they encountered, as well as the coping strategies and transformative experiences that shaped their preparation. Using a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with selected recent CLE takers. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method, with ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, and bracketing strictly observed. Eight major themes emerged from the participants' experiences: administrative and external challenges, including Professional Regulation Commission requirements and financial concerns; time pressure and intensive preparation; self-discipline and personal sacrifices; effective study strategies; mental and emotional struggles such as anxiety and burnout; coping mechanisms and sources of motivation; personal growth and development; and faith and spiritual dependence. The findings revealed that CLE preparation extends beyond academic readiness, becoming a transformative journey marked by resilience, discipline, sacrifice, and professional identity formation. The study recommends stronger institutional support through improved PRC assistance, enhanced review programs, stress-management initiatives, mental health services, and equitable resources for future criminology examinees.

**Keywords:** *Board Examination Preparation, Criminologist Licensure Examination, Criminology Graduates, Coping Mechanisms, Lived Experiences, Professional Identity, Resilience.*

## INTRODUCTION

Preparing for a professional licensure examination is a significant transition for graduates entering regulated professions. Beyond examination performance and passing rates, preparation for licensure may involve substantial emotional, social, and professional experiences that are not fully captured by quantitative indicators. Recent qualitative research on professional licensure examinations has examined how examinees experience examination preparation and the transition into professional practice, highlighting the importance of understanding licensure as more than an assessment of knowledge and competence (Pantaleo et al., 2025). Phenomenological research on professional transitions likewise demonstrates how periods of uncertainty and role change may influence individuals' sense of identity, emotional experiences, and perceptions of professional development (Caponnetto et al., 2025). From this perspective, preparing for a licensure examination can be understood not only as cognitive preparation but also as a period in which graduates negotiate expectations, uncertainty, personal meaning, and emerging professional identities.

In the Philippines, the Criminologist Licensure Examination (CLE) represents an important professional milestone for graduates of criminology programs. Existing Philippine research has documented various academic and personal challenges associated with the CLE, particularly among examinees who did not pass the examination. Albina et al. (2022), for example, examined factors and challenges influencing CLE performance from the perspective of non-passers. More recent qualitative studies have likewise explored the experiences of criminology graduates during examination preparation. Colanggo et al. (2024) examined the strategies and resilience of successful criminologists during board-examination preparation, while Ramirez et al. (2024) explored the preparation experiences, strategies, challenges, and support systems of regional topnotchers in the CLE. These studies indicate that examination preparation may involve not only academic activities but also personal discipline, resilience, financial considerations, and social support.

Beyond academic and logistical challenges, graduates may also experience significant emotional and interpersonal difficulties during the licensure process. Bangaysiso et al. (2024) explored the lived experiences of non-passers of the CLE and identified challenges involving the review period, test anxiety, financial struggles, family problems, disappointment, and failure to meet expectations. Similarly, Colaljo and Cuevas (2024) examined the experiences of CLE repeaters through a phenomenological approach and documented the academic and personal challenges associated with repeated examination attempts. More recently, Geraga et al. (2025) investigated the lived experiences of CLE repeaters and identified academic pressure, performance anxiety, time-management difficulties, financial constraints, emotional struggles, self-doubt, fear

of failure, and family expectations among the experiences affecting participants' preparation and well-being. These findings suggest that the experience of becoming a licensed criminologist extends beyond academic preparation and may involve interconnected emotional, social, financial, and personal dimensions.

Comparable experiences have also been documented in other Philippine professional licensure contexts. Molina et al. (2024), for example, examined the preparation experiences of graduate students taking the Licensure Examination for Teachers through a phenomenological approach. Such research demonstrates the value of examining licensure preparation as a lived experience rather than solely as an academic or performance outcome. Although the LET and CLE involve different professional contexts, studies in these settings suggest that preparation for professional licensure may involve psychological pressures, financial considerations, time-management challenges, social support, and personal growth.

Recent Philippine studies have therefore begun to illuminate the experiences of successful examinees, repeaters, and non-passers of the CLE (Bangaysiso et al., 2024; Colaljo & Cuevas, 2024; Colanggo et al., 2024; Geraga et al., 2025; Pueblo et al., 2024; Ramirez et al., 2024). However, an important area remains insufficiently explored: how criminology graduates experience the preparation period itself as an interconnected lived and meaning-making experience. Existing studies have generally focused on particular groups or dimensions of the licensure experience, such as successful preparation strategies, resilience, repeated examination attempts, topnotcher practices, or the experiences of non-passers. Less attention has been given to how graduates experience the entire preparation period in relation to their daily study routines, emotional uncertainty, family and social expectations, financial circumstances, coping practices, relationships, and emerging professional identities. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the lived experiences of graduates preparing for the Criminologist Licensure Examination and by describing the meanings they attribute to their preparation, struggles, relationships, coping practices, and aspirations. Through a phenomenological approach, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of what it means to prepare for the CLE and to move toward becoming a licensed professional.

## Research Question

This study sought to determine the lived experiences of criminology graduates of Foundation University preparing for the Board Exam S.Y. 2019 -2025 with an end view of designing a guide or programs to help criminology graduates in their preparation for the board exam. It was guided by one central research question: *What are the lived experiences of Foundation University College of Criminology graduates from 2019-2025 as they prepare for the board examination?*

## Research Design

The study adopted a phenomenological research design, a qualitative approach that seeks to understand and describe individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to those experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology is concerned

with examining the nature and essence of a phenomenon through the experiences and perspectives of individuals who have directly encountered it (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, the phenomenological approach was used to explore the lived experiences of Foundation University Bachelor of Science in Criminology graduates as they prepared for the Criminologist Licensure Examination (CLE). The approach provided an opportunity to examine how graduates experienced and made sense of the challenges, motivations, coping strategies, and personal insights associated with CLE preparation within their academic and personal contexts.

Through this approach, the study explored factors that shaped participants' preparation experiences, including access to review materials, confidence and academic readiness, institutional support, time management, financial considerations, and emotional well-being. Understanding these experiences may provide insights that can contribute to the development of appropriate review strategies, institutional support programs, and preparation initiatives for future criminology graduates.

To obtain rich and detailed accounts of participants' experiences, the study employed semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews use predetermined questions or discussion prompts while allowing flexibility for participants to elaborate on experiences they consider important and for the researcher to ask follow-up questions when clarification or deeper exploration is needed (Longhurst & Johnston, 2023). This approach was appropriate for the study because it allowed participants to describe their CLE preparation experiences in their own words while providing the researcher with opportunities to explore relevant areas such as coping strategies, academic readiness, challenges, and sources of motivation. With participants' informed consent, the interviews were audio-recorded to facilitate accurate transcription and subsequent qualitative analysis.

## **Research Locale**

The research will be conducted at Foundation University (FU), a private higher education institution located in Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental. Geographically, Foundation University is situated at approximately 9.3068°N latitude and 123.3052°E longitude, close to major establishments, academic facilities, and student residential areas in the city. The consistently above-average licensure exam results is 71.43% vs. national average is 60% show that the college successfully prepares its students for professional certification. Official recognitions ranking among Top Performing Schools in Region 7, and commendation by PCAP (Professional Criminologists Association of the Philippines) provide external validation, they make FU stand out among peer institutions in the region. Foundation University is recognized for its academic programs, including the Bachelor of Science in Criminology, which provides theoretical, practical, and skills-based training. Graduates of this program often pursue the Criminologist Licensure Examination, making FU a relevant and meaningful setting for this study.

The research environment includes various study and review-related locations frequented by graduates, such as: Criminology Department and Classrooms, where foundational knowledge and pre-board lessons are delivered. Foundation University Library, which

offers access to criminology textbooks, review materials, study spaces, and digital references. Learning Resource Centers and Study Hubs, where students engage in individual or group study sessions. On-campus and nearby off-campus review sessions, as some graduates attend formal review programs offered within Dumaguete City. Boarding houses and residences of FU graduates, which serve as personal study environments during preparation. As of 2024, Foundation University hosts a diverse population of students, including numerous criminology graduates who pursue licensure.

The university maintains a student-centered academic culture that promotes discipline, critical thinking, and professional development—factors that strongly influence how graduates prepare for the licensure examination. The presence of accessible study spaces, supportive peer networks, and review opportunities within and around Foundation University contributes to a learning environment well-suited for examining the lived experiences of BS Criminology graduates preparing for the CLE.

### **Research Participants**

Given that this study is centered exclusively on Foundation University Dumaguete, the pool of participants is carefully narrowed to recent graduates of its Bachelor of Science in Criminology program. These individuals are specifically those who have recently completed their preparation for and taken the Criminologist Licensure Examination (CLE) a choice made to ensure their experiences with exam preparation remain fresh in their memory, allowing for more vivid and detailed accounts of their lived experiences.

To further align with the study's time frame (focusing on preparation between 2019 and the present), participants must meet two critical enrollment and exam requirements: they must be confirmed graduates of Foundation University's Criminology program, and they must have been enrolled as students at the university between 2019 and now, with their active preparation for the CLE occurring during that student period.

Additionally, their actual CLE attempt must have taken place in any year from 2019 through the most recent exam cycle, ensuring the data collected reflects the most current trends, challenges, and strategies in board exam preparation within the specified window. Practical considerations for data collection are also addressed: participants must be able to communicate effectively in either Filipino or English, as these are the languages that will be used for interviews, focus groups, or surveys. This ensures that there are no barriers to expressing their thoughts and experiences clearly.

Furthermore, all participants must provide voluntary written informed consent before joining the study a key ethical requirement that not only protects their rights but also ensures their insights are given freely and authentically, making their statements more genuine and well-informed.

Finally, a minimum of 12 participants will be selected for the study. This sample size is determined based on standards for qualitative research, where a larger group (compared to smaller, more intimate samples) helps capture a wider range of perspectives —

including differences in preparation strategies (e.g., self-study, review centers, group work), personal circumstances (e.g., financial constraints, work commitments), and exam outcomes. This diversity in perspectives ensures the study's findings are comprehensive and robust, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness and credibility of the research.

## **Research Instrument**

The primary mechanism for gathering qualitative data in this study was the semi-structured interview. This instrument was selected to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the participants' narratives, providing balance between a standardized thematic focus and the flexibility to pursue spontaneous, in-depth responses. The interview guide comprised a series of open-ended questions formulated in English, strategically designed to elicit detailed descriptions of the graduates' preparation strategies, psychological stressors, and adaptive coping mechanisms. By utilizing an open-ended format, the researcher ensured that the participants were not confined to predetermined responses, thereby allowing for the emergence of rich, nuanced insights into the reality of the board exam experience.

To ensure the highest level of accuracy during the data transcription phase, all interview sessions were digitally captured using a mobile Voice Memos application. The use of audio recording served as a vital tool for preserving the verbatim accounts, emotional nuances, and specific terminologies used by the graduates, which might otherwise be lost through manual note-taking. This approach allowed the researcher to maintain full engagement with the participants during the dialogue, fostering a more authentic and fluid exchange of information.

Data integrity and participant confidentiality were strictly prioritized throughout the collection process. The recorded audio files were stored securely, ensuring that the raw data remained exclusively accessible for the research. These protocols were established to uphold the ethical standards of qualitative research.

## **Data Gathering Procedure**

The data gathering was conducted from March 16 to April 10 during the second semester of the academic year. Prior to conducting the interviews, the researchers prepared and submitted a formal letter and interview guide to the appropriate university authorities for review and approval. This ensured that the study followed institutional requirements and ethical research standards.

After approval was obtained, qualified Criminology graduates were contacted and invited to participate. The researchers explained the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of the study. Before each interview, participants were provided with an informed consent form and were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. They were also informed that participation was voluntary and that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time.

Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted in a private and suitable setting.

Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes, depending on the participants' willingness to share their experiences. Follow-up and clarifying questions were used to obtain deeper insights into their experiences, particularly their academic challenges, emotional experiences, coping strategies, support systems, and preparation for the Criminologist Licensure Examination (CLE).

With the participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate documentation. The researchers also took notes during the interviews and maintained a reflexive journal to record observations and emerging insights. After each session, participants were thanked for their participation and informed that they could be contacted for member checking. The recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed verbatim and prepared for analysis using Colaizzi's phenomenological method.

## RESULTS

After the researcher's thorough analysis of the interview transcripts, a total of two emergent themes were identified. First major theme covers three subthemes, namely, A) Administrative and External Challenges: 1) Incomplete and Delayed Requirements, 2) Appointment Slot Constraints and System Issues, and Financial Burden and Constraint. The second major theme covers three subthemes, namely, (B) Psychological Warfare During CLE Preparation: 1) Fear of Failure and Catastrophizing, 2) Self-doubt and Social Comparison, 3) Overthinking, Anxiety, and Mental Blocks, and 4) Guilt and Moralization of guilt.

### Emergent Theme 1: Administrative and External Challenges

The experiences of the respondents revealed that preparing for the Criminologist Licensure Examination (CLE) involved not only academic preparation but also administrative, financial, technological, and logistical challenges. Incomplete or delayed requirements created uncertainty and anxiety, while limited appointment slots and system issues caused additional stress and frustration. Financial difficulties also affected respondents' ability to afford review centers, transportation, food, and updated learning materials. Furthermore, geographical adjustments and the need to balance work with review required participants to manage their time and resources carefully. Overall, these external challenges significantly influenced the respondents' motivation, concentration, and readiness for the examination, demonstrating that successful CLE preparation requires not only academic competence but also adequate financial, administrative, technological, and logistical support.

Under this first emergent theme are four sub-themes, namely: a) Incomplete and Delayed Requirements, b) Appointment Slot Constraints and System Issues, and c) Financial Burden and Resource Constraints

**Theme 1: Incomplete and Delayed Requirements.** The concept of this sub-theme captured the uncertainty and anxiety experienced by respondents when their examination requirements remained incomplete, delayed, or subject to corrections. Rather than

serving as a simple administrative concern, the status of their requirements became closely connected to their emotional well-being and motivation. The possibility of being unable to take the examination despite months of preparation caused respondents to question whether their sacrifices and efforts would ultimately be worthwhile.

Participant 1 described the difficulty of preparing for the CLE while remaining uncertain about her eligibility to take the examination, stating:

*Lisod gyud akong experience sa pag-andam para sa akong CLE examination kay duha na lang ka buwan, pero hangtod karon dili pa gihapon ko sigurado kung maka-take ba ko sa exam kay wala pa nako kompleto ang akong mga requirements sa PRC. Samtang nag-review ko, kalit lang gyud mosulod sa akong huna-huna, 'Unsa kaha kung mahimong walay pulos akong mga paningkamot ug mga sakripisyo nga akong gihimo karon kay 50% pa man ang chance nga maka-take ko sa exam?*

Trans: (My life experience in preparing for my CLE examination was hard because there are 2 months left, yet I am still not sure if I can take the exam because my PRC requirements are still not complete. The fact that you are reviewing, it will pop up in your mind: what if the efforts and sacrifices that I made today were useless since there's a 50% chance that I could take the exam?)

This statement reflected how administrative uncertainty interfered with the respondent's academic preparation. Despite dedicating time and effort to reviewing, the unresolved requirements created a persistent fear that these sacrifices might become meaningless if she were ultimately unable to take the examination. The uncertainty therefore extended beyond paperwork and became a source of psychological distress.

Participant 2 similarly shared,

*Usa sa mga unang hagit nga akong giatubang kay ang pagkakompleto sa tanan nakong requirements. Naay mga higayon nga adunay mga dokumento nga kulang o kinahanglan pa og correction, ug mas dugay pa sa akong gipaabot ang pag-process niini.*

Trans: (One of the first challenges I faced was completing all the requirements. There were times when documents were missing or needed corrections and getting them processed took longer than expected.)

This experience demonstrated how missing documents and processing delays disrupted the respondent's preparation. The additional time spent addressing administrative concerns could have otherwise been devoted to reviewing examination materials.

Another respondent expressed the emotional effect of uncertainty surrounding the Certificate of Authentication and Verification (CAV), stating: *Ang uncertainty bahin sa akong CAV... naa gyud mga higayon nga ma-discourage ko ug mawala akong motivation.*

Trans: (Uncertainty surrounding my CAV... naa gyud moments nga ma discourage ko ug mawala akong motivation.)

This indicated that unresolved documentation concerns could gradually weaken motivation. The respondent's experience demonstrated that uncertainty over administrative requirements could become emotionally exhausting, particularly when the examination date was approaching.

Participant 7 expressed a similar concern, *Dili ko sigurado kung maka-take ba ko sa exam kay wala pa nako makompleto ang akong mga requirements sa PRC.*

Trans: (I am not sure if I can take the exam because my PRC requirements are still incomplete.)

This statement further emphasized the recurring nature of administrative uncertainty among the respondents. The concern was not isolated to one participant but appeared across multiple accounts, suggesting that incomplete requirements were a common source of anxiety during CLE preparation.

Participant 8 also recalled: *Na-discourage ko kay abi nako dili ko maka-take sa February 2026 CLE exam tungod kay naay problema sa among mga requirements."*

Trans: (I was discouraged since I thought I couldn't take the February 2026 CLE exam because there was a problem with our requirements.)

This experience illustrated how administrative problems could reach a point where respondents began to question their participation in the examination itself. The resulting discouragement could negatively affect both motivation and concentration.

These accounts demonstrated that incomplete and delayed requirements created a psychological burden that accompanied respondents throughout their preparation. Instead of experiencing a stable and secure review period, they had to manage the possibility that administrative problems might prevent them from taking the examination. Thus, bureaucratic uncertainty became intertwined with the respondents' academic and emotional experiences.

**Theme 2: Appointment Slot Constraints and System Issues.** This sub-theme highlighted the difficulties encountered by respondents in securing examination appointment slots and dealing with technical problems in the registration system. What was expected to be a routine procedural process became a source of pressure because examination schedules were limited, quickly filled, and sometimes unavailable in the respondents' preferred locations.

Participant 10 described the difficulty of obtaining an appointment slot: *Sa dihang nakumpirma na nako nga pwede na ko maka-take sa exam, puno na ang slots sa PRC Dumaguete, Cebu, ug Bacolod, mao nga nisugal na lang ko; na-appoint ko sa Bohol uban sa akong mga higala.*

Trans: (When the time came that I confirmed that I could take the exam, the PRC Dumaguete, Cebu, and Bacolod were full slots, so I risked it; I was appointed in Bohol together with my friends.)

This account revealed how limited appointment availability forced the respondent to make an unexpected geographical adjustment. Instead of taking the examination in a more convenient location, the respondent had to accept an appointment in Bohol. This decision involved additional planning and preparation, particularly because the examination date was already approaching.

Another respondent stated: *Maka-stress gyud ang pagkuha og appointment slot kay dali ra mapuno ang mga available nga schedule, ug kinahanglan ko sige og check online para lang makakuha og slot.*

Trans: (Securing a slot for appointment was stressful because the available schedules filled up quickly, and I had to keep checking online just to get one.)

This experience demonstrated how competition for appointment slots created anxiety and required respondents to continuously monitor the registration system. The process consumed time and emotional energy that could otherwise have been directed toward examination preparation.

Technical difficulties further intensified these challenges. Participant 5 explained: *Naay mga higayon nga mag-crash ang website, ug kinahanglan nako balik-balikon ang proseso, nga makafrustrate ug makakapoy gyud.*

Trans: (There were moments when the website would crash, and I had to repeat the process again, which was frustrating and exhausting.)

The respondent's experience showed that technological problems could compound an already stressful registration process. Repeating the registration procedure increased frustration and created uncertainty about whether the appointment would eventually be successfully secured.

These experiences suggested that appointment availability and system reliability were significant external factors in the CLE preparation journey. The respondents were required to adapt to a registration environment characterized by limited slots, rapidly changing availability, and occasional technical difficulties. Consequently, administrative procedures became an additional source of emotional pressure before the examination itself.

**Theme 3: Financial Burden and Resource Constraints.** This sub-theme described how financial limitations affected the respondents' ability to prepare for the CLE. The expenses associated with examination preparation extended beyond review fees and included transportation, food, books, reviewers, and other educational materials. For some respondents, the accumulation of these expenses became a continuous source of concern.

Participant 4 expressed this struggle, stating:

*Lisod pud gyud financially. Gikan sa pagbayad sa review center, pamasaha, pagkaon, ug uban pang mga gasto, tanan gyud magtapok. Naay mga higayon nga magduha-duha ko kung makapadayon pa ba ko, pero akong gipahinumdoman ang akong kaugalingon nga investment ni para sa akong kaugmaon.*

Trans: (Financially, it was also a struggle. From paying for review centers, transportation, food, and other expenses, everything added up. There were moments when I doubted if I could continue, but I reminded myself that this was an investment for my future.)

This statement demonstrated the tension between financial difficulty and the desire to pursue professional goals. Although the respondent recognized the importance of investing in examination preparation, the financial demands created moments of doubt regarding whether she could continue.

Another respondent explained: *Tungod sa financial limitation, dili ko maka-afford og dugang nga mga reviewer o updated nga mga reference books.*

Trans: (Due to financial limitations, I could not afford additional reviewers or updated reference books.)

This reflected how limited financial resources directly affected access to learning materials. The respondent was unable to obtain additional resources that could potentially have enhanced her preparation.

Resource limitations were further emphasized by Participant 5: *Dili tanan nga mga libro ug references kay updated... mao nga kinahanglan ko mosalig sa mga notes nga gihulam nako.*

Trans: (Not all books and references were updated... I had to rely on borrowed notes.)

This experience showed that financial constraints could lead respondents to depend on alternative sources of information. While borrowed notes provided some assistance, the lack of updated references could make preparation more difficult, particularly for an examination requiring comprehensive and current knowledge.

These accounts revealed that financial challenges affected more than the respondents' ability to pay for review services. They also influenced their access to educational materials and their overall sense of preparedness. Financial limitations therefore became an important external factor that shaped the quality and sustainability of their examination preparation.

## Emergent Theme 2: Psychological Warfare During CLE Preparation

The second emergent theme captured the internal psychological and emotional struggles experienced by respondents while preparing for the CLE. Beyond the extensive academic content that had to be mastered, respondents were confronted with fear of failure, self-doubt, anxiety, overthinking, mental exhaustion, and feelings of inadequacy. These internal struggles often became as challenging as the examination subjects themselves. For many respondents, the review period was characterized by a continuous battle between their determination to succeed and their fear that they might fail. Even after spending several hours studying, thoughts about failure could suddenly emerge and disrupt their concentration. The possibility of disappointing themselves, their families, or the people who supported them intensified this psychological burden.

Under this second emergent theme are four sub-themes, namely: a) Fear of Failure and Catastrophizing, b) Self-Doubt and Social Comparison, c) Overthinking, Anxiety, and Mental Blocks, and d) Guilt and Moralization of Rest.

**Theme 4: Fear of Failure and Catastrophizing.** This sub-theme described the respondents' persistent fear of failing the CLE and the tendency to imagine negative consequences associated with failure. The thought of failing was often connected to concerns about wasted efforts, sacrifices, disappointment, and uncertainty about the future. Such thoughts became intrusive and interfered with the respondents' ability to maintain concentration.

Participant 1 expressed: *Unsa kaha kung walay pulos ra diay tanan nakong effort ug mga sakripisyo kay dili ra diay ko maka-take?*

Trans: (What if all my efforts and sacrifices were useless because I would not be able to take the exam?)

This statement demonstrated how fear was connected not only to the possibility of failing the examination but also to the possibility that previous sacrifices would become meaningless. The respondent's concern reflected the emotional investment attached to the licensure examination.

The same participant also shared: *Human og tulo hangtod upat ka oras nga review, kalit lang gyud mosulod sa akong huna-huna ang thought nga, 'Unsa kaha kung ma-fail ko?*

Trans: (After 3 to 4 hours of review, the thought suddenly comes into my mind, "What if I fail?")

This revealed how fear of failure could unexpectedly interrupt the review process. Even after several hours of studying, the respondent remained vulnerable to intrusive thoughts that could weaken concentration.

Participant 2 similarly stated: *Naa gihapon mga higayon nga mosulod sa akong huna-huna ang thought nga, 'Unsa kaha kung ma-fail ko?*

Trans: (There are still moments when the thought, “What if I fail?” comes into my mind.)

The phrase “gihapon” suggested the persistence of these thoughts despite continued preparation. This indicated that studying alone did not completely eliminate uncertainty or fear.

These experiences demonstrated that fear of failure was an ongoing psychological challenge. Respondents were not merely preparing to answer examination questions; they were also preparing themselves emotionally for the possibility of failure. The recurring “what if” thoughts became part of the internal battle that characterized the CLE preparation experience.

**Theme 5: Self-Doubt and Social Comparison.** This sub-theme highlighted how respondents evaluated their own preparedness by comparing themselves with classmates, friends, and other reviewees. Exposure to individuals who appeared more prepared or successful sometimes resulted in feelings of inadequacy, insecurity, and being left behind.

Participant 5 shared: *Kung makakita ko sa akong mga classmates o uban nga reviewees nga murag mas prepared pa sila, magduha-duha ko sa akong kaugalingon. Murag pirmi ko nga naa sa likod.”*

Trans: (Seeing classmates or other reviewees who seemed more prepared made me doubt myself. I felt like I was always behind.)

This statement demonstrated how observing the preparation of others influenced the respondent's perception of her own progress. Rather than serving exclusively as motivation, comparison created feelings of inadequacy and increased self-doubt.

Participant 10 similarly explained: *Tungod sa social media ug group discussions, nahibalo ko kung unsa ang performance sa uban, ug kasagaran makafeel ko nga nahibilin ko.*

Trans: (Social media and group discussions made me aware of how others were performing, and I often felt that I was falling behind.)

This reflected the influence of social media and group interactions on respondents' perceptions of their own preparation. Constant awareness of the progress of others could create pressure to match their performance, even when individuals had different circumstances and preparation strategies.

These experiences showed that the psychological pressure of CLE preparation was not generated solely from within the respondents. It was also influenced by their social environment. Comparing one's progress with that of others could cause respondents to question their abilities and feel that their own efforts were insufficient.

Thus, social comparison became another form of psychological warfare. Instead of simply asking whether they understood the examination material, respondents also questioned whether they were progressing quickly enough compared with their peers.

**Theme 6: Overthinking, Anxiety, and Mental Blocks.** This sub-theme captured the cognitive difficulties experienced by respondents as a result of excessive thinking, anxiety, information overload, and mental fatigue. Although respondents devoted substantial time to studying, psychological pressure sometimes prevented them from effectively processing or recalling the information they had learned.

Participant 3 stated: *Ang overthinking usa sa mga rason nganong ang ubang criminology graduates dili makapasar.*

Trans: (Overthinking is one of the reasons why some criminology graduates fail to pass.)

This statement emphasized the perceived relationship between excessive thinking and examination performance. The respondent recognized that the ability to manage one's thoughts was an important part of successful preparation.

Participant 5 described experiencing a mental block: *Bisan ang mga tubag nga pamilyar na nako murag dili na pamilyar, mura gyud og na-blank out akong huna-huna.*

Trans: (Even familiar answers felt unfamiliar, like my mind had gone blank.)

This illustrated how anxiety and cognitive pressure could interfere with retrieval of information that the respondent had previously learned. The problem was therefore not necessarily a lack of knowledge but an inability to access that knowledge under psychological pressure.

The same participant further explained: *Nahimo gyud nga problema ang information overload—daghan kaayong topics... makalibog kung unsa ang dapat unahon.*

Trans: (Information overload became a real problem—there were too many topics, and it became confusing which ones should be prioritized.)

This demonstrated how the extensive scope of the CLE could contribute to cognitive overload. With numerous subjects and topics to review, respondents sometimes struggled to determine which information deserved greater attention.

These experiences revealed that excessive information, combined with psychological stress, could affect concentration, memory, and decision-making. Consequently, effective CLE preparation required more than accumulating information; respondents also needed to manage the cognitive and emotional demands associated with processing that information.

**Theme 7: Guilt and Moralization of Rest.** This sub-theme described the respondents' tendency to associate rest with guilt and to view continuous studying as a responsibility

or obligation. Instead of perceiving rest as an essential component of effective preparation, some respondents felt that taking a break meant losing valuable study time.

Participant 2 expressed: *Usahay, ma-guilty pa gani ko kung mag-rest ko bisan kadali lang. Murag importante kaayo ang matag minuto.*

Trans: (Sometimes, I even feel guilty when I rest, even just for a short while. It feels like every minute is important.)

This statement showed how the pressure to maximize every available minute contributed to feelings of guilt when resting. The respondent perceived time as extremely valuable, creating a tendency to prioritize studying even when rest was necessary.

Participant 1 similarly shared: *Daghan kaayong sleepless nights... kapoy na kaayo ko physically ug mentally pero padayon gihapon ko.*

Trans: (There were many sleepless nights... I was already physically and mentally exhausted, but I still continued.)

This demonstrated the extent to which respondents pushed themselves despite physical and psychological exhaustion. The desire to succeed in the CLE encouraged them to continue studying even when their bodies and minds were already fatigued.

These accounts indicated that rest was sometimes viewed as an interruption rather than a necessary component of preparation. The belief that every minute should be spent studying created pressure to sacrifice sleep and recovery. Consequently, the pursuit of academic success could paradoxically contribute to exhaustion and reduced cognitive effectiveness.

The respondents' experiences therefore demonstrated that the psychological battle during CLE preparation extended beyond fear and anxiety. It also involved learning how to balance discipline with self-care. The inability to recognize rest as part of productive preparation could contribute to burnout, mental fatigue, and difficulty retaining information.

## DISCUSSION

Within the first emergent theme, "Administrative and External Challenges," participants described difficulties that extended beyond academic preparation for the Criminologist Licensure Examination (CLE). These included incomplete and delayed requirements, limited appointment slots, technical registration problems, financial constraints, and limited access to updated learning resources. Such challenges affected their readiness, motivation, and emotional well-being, demonstrating that CLE preparation was influenced by administrative, technological, financial, and logistical circumstances beyond their control.

The first sub-theme, “Incomplete and Delayed Requirements,” captured the uncertainty and anxiety caused by missing, delayed, or corrected examination requirements. Participants worried about their eligibility, CAV processing, and incomplete PRC documents. The possibility of being unable to take the examination despite months of preparation created discouragement and emotional pressure, making administrative concerns an important part of their CLE experience.

The second sub-theme, “Appointment Slot Constraints and System Issues,” revealed difficulties in securing examination schedules and dealing with technical problems. Participants reported that slots in preferred locations quickly became unavailable, requiring them to consider alternative locations. Website crashes and repeated registration attempts further caused frustration and exhaustion. These experiences showed the need for a stable and accessible registration system

The third sub-theme, “Financial Burden and Resource Constraints,” described the financial challenges associated with review centers, transportation, food, books, and reviewers. Limited resources prevented some participants from obtaining updated materials, leading others to rely on borrowed notes. These experiences demonstrated that financial capacity influenced access to effective preparation resources and contributed to additional stress.

The second emergent theme, “Psychological Warfare During CLE Preparation,” captured the emotional and cognitive struggles participants experienced during the review period. Fear of failure, self-doubt, social comparison, overthinking, anxiety, mental blocks, guilt, and exhaustion affected their confidence and concentration. The findings showed that CLE preparation required not only academic readiness but also psychological resilience, emotional regulation, and proper balance between studying and resting.

The fourth sub-theme, “Fear of Failure and Catastrophizing,” described participants’ recurring worries about failing and wasting their efforts and sacrifices. Thoughts such as “What if I fail?” created anxiety and uncertainty about their future. Although fear sometimes motivated them to study harder, excessive worry could negatively affect concentration and confidence.

The fifth sub-theme, “Self-Doubt and Social Comparison,” revealed how comparing their progress with classmates and other reviewees affected participants’ confidence. Social media and group discussions sometimes intensified feelings of being behind or inadequate. The findings emphasized the importance of focusing on personal progress rather than comparing oneself with others.

The sixth sub-theme, “Overthinking, Anxiety, and Mental Blocks,”\*\* highlighted difficulties involving excessive thinking, information overload, and memory problems. Participants experienced moments when familiar answers became difficult to recall or when they struggled to identify which topics to prioritize. These experiences demonstrated the importance of organized study strategies, stress management, and adequate mental rest.

Finally, the seventh sub-theme, “Guilt and Moralization of Rest,” described participants’ tendency to feel guilty when taking breaks. Some continued studying despite physical and mental exhaustion because they believed every minute was important. The findings emphasized that rest should be viewed as part of effective preparation rather than wasted study time, as adequate recovery supports concentration, memory, and overall well-being.

## **Conclusions**

This study employed Colaizzi’s descriptive phenomenological method to explore the lived experiences of thirteen (13) criminology graduates preparing for the Criminologist Licensure Examination (CLE). Through semi-structured interviews conducted in Cebuano, Tagalog, and English, the study systematically captured the challenges, psychological experiences, and personal adjustments encountered by the participants throughout their review process. The careful application of Colaizzi’s framework— involving systematic coding, extraction of significant statements, and formulation of central meanings—yielded two (2) primary emergent themes with several underlying sub-themes that encompass the core essence of their preparation.

In light of the findings, the study concluded that the lived experiences of criminology graduates preparing for the CLE are shaped by three interconnected realities. First, board examination preparation involves significant systemic and operational obstacles; graduates face external burdens such as administrative uncertainty, financial constraints, technological difficulties, and appointment-related concerns that complicate their academic routines. Second, the review period exacts a severe psychological and emotional toll, as participants continuously navigate fear of failure, self-doubt, social comparison, persistent anxiety, mental blocks, and physical exhaustion.

Finally, the journey to licensure is revealed to be as much a psychological trial as an academic endeavor, ultimately demonstrating that success requires exceptional personal persistence, adaptability, strong emotional regulation, and reliable institutional and personal support systems.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several recommendations are hereby offered:

### **Foundation University Administration**

The university should strengthen its support system for CLE examinees by Streamlining assistance for PRC requirements and documentation and enhance institutional review programs aligned with CLE standards.

## **College of Criminology**

The department is encouraged to implement structured and extended review programs provide time management and study skills training for these strategies can improve students' preparedness and confidence.

## **Faculty Members**

Faculty should Integrate board exam–focused teaching strategies offer academic mentoring and consultation sessions monitor students' emotional and academic readiness to ensures both cognitive and psychological preparation.

## **Review Centers**

Review centers should develop a flexible and accessible review schedules and provide updated and focused review materials address the needs of both first-time takers and repeaters to enhances effectiveness of review programs.

## **Future CLE Examinees**

Students preparing for the CLE are advised to practice effective time management, maintain consistent study routines, avoid excessive cramming and burnout, seek peer and family support, prioritize mental health and well-being to improve both performance and resilience. This will expand knowledge on CLE preparation experiences.

## **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

This study adhered to ethical standards in conducting qualitative research. Guided by autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits through informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw or skip questions at any time. Interviews were conducted with empathy, respect, and confidentiality to minimize possible emotional distress.

To protect privacy, pseudonyms were used, identifying information was removed, and all data were securely stored in encrypted, password-protected files. Participants were treated fairly, and their experiences were represented honestly and respectfully. The study also aimed to generate insights that could contribute to improved support and understanding of CLE preparation.

The trustworthiness of the study was established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through semi-structured interviews, rapport-building, and member checking. Transferability was addressed by providing sufficient descriptions of the participants and their CLE preparation experiences. Dependability was ensured through systematic documentation of participant

selection, data collection, transcription, coding, and analysis. Confirmability was strengthened through neutral questioning, reflexive journals, team discussions, and the use of direct participant quotations. These measures helped ensure that the findings accurately and authentically represented the participants' lived experiences.

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