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UNCONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE IN CRISIS WORK BASED ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MALAYSIAN COUNSELORS

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Abstract:

Unconditional acceptance is one of the core attitudes in helping professionals to establish successful therapeutic relationships. Despite unconditional acceptance was accepted in most helping professional settings, it received less attention in academic scientific research due to scholars' disagreement regarding unconditional acceptance as a single separable construct from empathy and genuineness as proposed in person-centred therapy. The knowledge gap led to the implementation of this study, employing a qualitative method, specifically descriptive phenomenology. It aims to describe Malaysian counselors' experience exercising unconditional acceptance while encountering clients from various backgrounds. The thematic analysis revealed that unconditional acceptance encompasses acceptance of the client as a person, acceptance of the client's reality experience as part of them, and acceptance of the client's traumatic reaction. The findings indicate by years of experience, Malaysian counselors show high competency in practicing unconditional acceptance. It was found that unconditional acceptance requires counselors to have empathy, increasing their ability to comprehend the clients' situation and justify their emotional reactions. Counselors especially novice

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counselors need proper training and guidance to increase their ability to unconditionally accept their clients, their life experience, and their traumatic reactions. This study contributes to deepening the comprehension of implementing unconditional acceptance in counseling settings. It also provides new perspectives on improving the training curriculum for counselors in Malaysia, specifically in strengthening their skills in exercising unconditional acceptance and empathy attitudes.

Keywords:

Unconditional Acceptance, Counseling, Therapeutic Relationship, Malaysian Counselors

Introduction

Counselors, a part of the helping profession, are in high demand these days. They provide counseling and crisis intervention to clients in need, enhancing their ability to cope with current situations and developing new adaptive coping and problem-solving skills (Robert, 2015). During the intervention process, counselors employ professional skills, techniques, and knowledge to build rapport with their clients by establishing therapeutic relationships. This involves adopting the attitude of compassion, active engagement, empathy, and emotional presence, all of which are crucial (Sadler-Gerhardt & Stevenson, 2012; & Coaston, 2017).

In establishing the therapeutic relationship, Rogers, the founder of Person-Centered Therapy, proposed that counselors employ positive regard or non-possessive warmth, congruence or genuineness, and empathy (Farber & Doolin, 2011). At the early stage of the theory development, the concept of non-possessive warmth was used interchangeably with other terms such as affirmation, respect, warmth, support, prizing, and acceptance, before he settled on the term "*unconditional positive regard*" (Farber & Doolin, 2011). However, some scholars still used terms such as non-possessive warmth, therapist affirmation, and positive regard and affirmation to refer to positive regard (Ort et al., 2022). For this study, we employ the term "*unconditional acceptance*" to reflect unconditional positive regard, based on Roger's statement that counselors experience unconditional positive regard when they warmly accept each aspect of the client's experience without any conditions (Roger, 1957). Recent studies also support this argument, relating unconditional or non-judgmental acceptance to warmth, unconditional positive regard, and affirmation (Tan, 2021).

When it comes to crisis intervention, professional counselors must represent unconditional acceptance to gain the trust of their clients. This ensures the effectiveness of their intervention, techniques, and approaches in assisting clients in recovering from traumatic experiences and facilitating therapeutic change (Fridley, 2010; & Jacobson, et al., 2015). Unconditional acceptance involves the caring and non-judgmental acceptance of clients' emotions, thoughts, and behaviors (Corey, 2005). Counselors also avoid shaming, disapproval, criticism, warning, or labeling when communicating with clients. Instead, they show respect, appreciation, and affirmation for clients' strength and capacity to grow (Tan, 2021). Although counselors may personally experience disapproval or be disgusted by certain clients' actions, they do not reject or disapprove of the client as a person (Noraini, 2019).

Recognizing the importance of establishing therapeutic relationships for clients' well-being, formal counseling training emphasizes unconditional acceptance. Counselors are reminded to

accept their clients as they are without judging their behavior, thoughts, and emotions. This attitude, empathy, and genuineness form the basis for counselors' personality and characteristic development (Noraini, 2019). Acceptance, respect, and empathy also help reduce client resistance and defensive reactions (Tan, 2021). Furthermore, unconditional acceptance has become a fundamental value in clinical social practice training and implementation (Moudatsu et al., 2020). In nursing practice, it has been discovered that suppressing personal prejudices, unconditionally accepting patients, and engaging in caring practice increase the benefit of knowledge and skills that patients can gain from nurses (van der Wath & van Wyk, 2020).

However, formal counseling training seems to have lacked guidance and preparation for counselors to work with clients with criminal backgrounds, such as sexual offenders, resulting in negative attitudes, biases, and stereotypes toward these populations (Huebner et al., 2022). Additionally, while unconditional acceptance is widely employed in psychotherapy, regardless of the fundamental theories the counselors and therapists use, the attitude remains an under-researched construct (Ort et al., 2022). Many studies have demonstrated the outcome of the three attitudes of empathy, genuineness, and unconditional acceptance. Still, they often fail to report the separate outcome of each construct (Farber & Doolin, 2011). One of the reasons is that scholars still disagree on determining these three constructs as a single variable (Ort et al., 2022). Rogers was quoted to suggest empathy was a prerequisite for unconditional acceptance or positive regard, while genuineness was a prerequisite for attaining empathy and unconditional acceptance (Farber & Doolin, 2011). This notion suggests that these three constructs are inseparable.

This study was conducted to address the issues related to the practice of unconditional acceptance. It aims to describe the experience of Malaysian counselors in practicing unconditional acceptance toward their clients, regardless of who they are. This includes clients with criminal backgrounds, mental health issues, and experiences of traumatic incidents. The counselors' experiences practicing unconditional acceptance are expected to shed light on the dimensions of acceptance and whether this practical attitude relates to empathy and genuineness. The study also provides other perspectives on improving the training curriculum for counselors in Malaysia.

Methodology

This section discusses the study's methodological procedures, which include research design, data collection, research participants, and data analysis. Each of these procedures was explained separately throughout this section.

Research Design

This study was conducted based on a qualitative and descriptive phenomenological approach. The study employed the descriptive phenomenological approach to appreciate the pure essence of the studied phenomenon based on the lived experience of the targeted subjects in their natural setting (Lopez & Willis, 2004). This approach believes that humans respond to external stimuli based on their perception in interpreting the meaning of their interaction with the stimuli, and researchers must report their findings of the studied phenomenon purely from the participants' perspective. Researchers must adopt a bracketing attitude by setting aside their knowledge, experience, theoretical perspective, and personal interpretation to describe the participants' experiences (Laverty, 2003; & Caple, 2018). The employment of a descriptive phenomenological approach was found to be a suitable method for researchers to deeply

comprehend the phenomenon of unconditional acceptance purely from the participants' lived experiences.

Research Participants

In this study, 11 participants were recruited through a non-probability sampling approach because randomization was believed to be impractical in selecting suitable candidates (Vehovar et al., 2016). They were selected based on the inclusion criteria first set before the selection was made. The inclusion criteria include 1) participants must be among Malaysian counselors from the public service setting, 2) have working experience in a mental health setting, prison setting, law enforcement setting, or social welfare setting, 3) have at least three years of concurrent experience in the related settings, and 4) be certified as a registered counselor by Malaysian Board of Counselors. In selecting suitable candidates, researchers first contacted the officer from the Malaysian public service department to obtain the names of the potential participants. Researchers formally submitted an official letter briefly explaining the nature of this study and the inclusion criteria for selecting research participants. Of the shortlisted potential candidates, eleven officers agreed to participate in this study. They could commit to an in-depth interview during the data collection process.

Data Collection

An in-depth semi-structured interview was employed to gain the data from the research participants. The in-depth semi-structured interview was the primary data collection approach in the phenomenological study (Langdrige, 2007). After receiving official approval from the organization that the participants are servicing, researchers set up the interview date with each research participant. They were also free to choose the interview platform in traditional face-to-face mode or virtually. The in-depth interview session was conducted once with each participant, lasting one and a half hours to three hours. Altogether eleven in-depth interviews were conducted. With the participants' permission, audio and video recordings were utilized during the interview. During the interview, researchers adopted a bracketing approach, putting aside their professional knowledge, experience, theoretical foundation, and personal perception to capture the essence of the participants' experiences.

Data Analysis

The interview was transcribed verbatim. Researchers then analyzed the verbatim thematically by using a software application. Throughout this process, researchers followed the data analysis procedure outlined in descriptive phenomenology. Researchers also underscored the application of a bracketing attitude during the analysis to preserve the purity of the experiences, thereby confirming only the pure essence of the participants' lived experiences was reported.

Ethical Considerations

The recruitment of human subjects in this study raises ethical considerations. Researchers first ensured the research participants had returned their informed consent form, reflecting their agreement to participate in this study. The participants were explained in detail about the content of the informed consent form to ensure they understood the nature of this study, their rights as research participants, the preservation of their confidential information and identities, and their autonomy to discontinue the session or refrain from answering certain questions. All participants agreed to be recorded in video and audio during the interview sessions. The participants were also permitted to use their data for journal publication. Researchers also maintained unconditional acceptance and empathy while listening to the participants'

experiences. This created a non-judgmental environment, encouraging the participants to freely express their thoughts, emotions, beliefs, and perceptions without feeling judged by the researchers' responses.

Results

The description of the finding of this study was divided into two parts, specifically demographic description and thematic analysis findings. Demographic description represents the brief information about the participants' professional background, providing a comprehensive understanding of the participants' nature of work. In addition, the thematic analysis findings represent this study's main findings.

Demographic Description

The first part is the demographic description. This study involved eleven participants from four different settings. All of them are already experienced counselors. Some of them no longer work in a similar setting. Table 1 below briefly represents the demographic background of the participants. Pseudonyms referred to participants.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Research Participants

Participants	Gender	Setting of experience	Targeted clients
Zudi	Male	Prison Department	Prison inmates
Azna	Female	Police Department	Children and women crime victims
Geena	Female	Social Welfare Department	Communities
Athy	Female	Social Welfare Department	Communities
Arul	Male	Mental health Department	Mental illness patients
Reina	Female	Social Welfare Department	Communities
Nora	Female	Social Welfare Department	Communities
Anju	Female	Social Welfare Department	Communities
Lai	Female	Social Welfare Department	Communities
Dil	Female	Police Department	Children and women crime victims
Ying	Female	Police Department	Children and women crime victims

Table 1 describes the demographic information of the research participants. Overall, this study involved two males and nine female participants. One of the participants had working experience in a prison setting, another had experience in a mental health setting, the other five participants had experience in social welfare settings, and the other three participants had experience in a law enforcement setting, specifically a police department. The participants generally encountered clients with criminal backgrounds, clients with mental issues, victims of crime, and clients with social issues, including natural disasters.

Finding of Thematic Analysis

The second part represents the main findings of this study based on thematic analysis. The thematic analysis revealed that unconditional acceptance in crisis work encompasses acceptance in three areas: 1) the client, 2) the client's reality, and 3) the client's traumatic reactions. A detailed description of the lived experience of Malaysian counselors in practicing unconditional acceptance was provided in the following subheading.

Unconditional Acceptance of the Client

The first area of unconditional acceptance is to accept the client unconditionally. It reflects that counselors set aside their judgment toward their clients regardless of who they are. Zudi, Azna, Geena, Athy, and Arul shared their perspective on accepting clients unconditionally based on their professional experience.

Although it was pretty challenging for Zudi to change his perception when he was first posted in the prison department, he overcame the issue and started to see his client more positively. At first, Zudi was disappointed and questioned the decision of his posting. However, the question just remains in himself. He tried to adapt and Zudi began to see the wisdom behind his appointment after a while. He admitted he learned a lot about the colors of life from prison life. He also started reflecting on his life based on his client's fate. Zudi no longer sees his clients as bad people. He underscored that counselors in prison accept the clients unconditionally without judging them as bad guys. He set in his mind that they are ordinary people who need to be helped.

Azna also emphasized the practice of unconditional acceptance. Based on her experience dealing with criminal suspects, Azna stressed counselors to be professional and treat the suspects as normal ordinary people. This is especially important to build a good rapport, exclusively when Azna was assigned to obtain a verbal confession about their involvement in the crime. Azna also ensured she maintained the proper way of conversation with the suspects as she would with anyone. This attitude helps her to develop a good rapport with the suspects and gain their commitment to reveal the truth.

Geena also highlighted the practice of unconditional acceptance toward the clients. Geena stated counselors must hold a non-judgmental attitude regarding the clients' conditions. As a counselor in a social welfare setting, she encountered various cases involving communities from different social backgrounds. The cases she encountered included domestic violence beyond the control of teenagers, children welfare, and ageing people welfare. She was also occasionally assigned to provide crisis intervention during a disaster. Therefore, she was always prepared to accept whoever came to her with whatever condition.

Athy also has a similar opinion. She also served in social welfare before being posted in the police department. Athy believed that the clients were not deliberately getting themselves in trouble. Instead, there are many environmental factors and personal factors that contribute to the situation. Athy made herself open to understanding her client's condition. She maintained her principle to accept the clients as they were.

Arul also maintained his principle not to judge and label his clients. He often encounters clients with mental and suicidal issues who were brought to the hospital where he served. He believed the clients who attempted to end their life had pathological issues and differed from healthy

individuals. Arul always treats his clients as patients who need to be treated medically. Arul also shared his experience dealing with a client who was severely injured due to her attempt to end her life by burning herself. The client was in critical condition and had low chances to survive. Arul was assigned to provide crisis intervention to calm the client's emotions and encounter her ending peacefully. Arul stressed the client was having psychological issues that led her to the attempt. He never judged and attributed her behavior as a reflection of her level of faith in God.

Unconditional Acceptance of the Client's Reality

The second area of unconditional acceptance in crisis work is related to the client's reality. An attempt to empathically respond to the client may sometimes make the counselors unable to accept the reality the clients encountered. Zudi, Reina, Nora, and Geena shared their experiences in accepting the client's reality regardless of how tragic the experiences would be.

Zudi's attachment to the prisoners made him used to listening to their side stories. Most of them portrayed they were unfairly charged with guilty. This situation led him to question justice that he believed was denied in his client's cases. After some time, when he referred to his religion, he realized God had hidden wisdom for letting the prisoners be imprisoned. He began to accept the clients' fate that the judges had found them guilty of the crime, and they had no evidence to prove otherwise. Now it was his role to ensure they were emotionally stable to live in prison.

Reina also found challenges in accepting the tragic realities of her clients. Reina, previously a morale officer in the social welfare setting, admitted that she was too emotionally involved with her clients during that time, causing her difficulty in accepting the tragic reality that her clients encountered. Therefore, she realized she could not remain emotionally involved when she held the counselor post. She learned that she should not too deeply process the emotion of the clients. Instead, she must accept that was their fate.

Nora also encountered similar challenges in accepting the reality of her clients when she first entered this job. Attributing herself as a villager, she never expected to encounter cases such as rape, incest, and children out of wedlock. She recalled visiting a house after receiving a complaint about a specific incident. She found four children in the house were born due to incest between a father and a daughter. She found it hard to understand what she saw, admitting she felt her world was reserved upside down. But after a while, she learned those were the realities of life. She believed God sent her those cases as a trial for her.

Like Nora, Geena also could never imagine encountering the realities of the abuse cases she watched on television. She once encountered an older woman severely injured after her abusive husband beat her. She felt very touched by her condition and was overwhelmed by her emotion for a few days. But she learned from her experience. She admitted that the emotion was still in herself but realized she needed to accept the reality to help the client.

The inability to unconditionally accept the clients' reality negatively impacts counselors, triggering their ability to function professionally as a professional counselor. Anju and Lai shared their valuable experience regarding this matter. Both encountered sexual assault cases of victims from different backgrounds.

Anju received an incest case involving a five years old girl who was brought to the hospital by her full-term pregnant mother. Anju was in her first week of training back then. She found it very hard to accept that a father acted immorally toward his daughter. She pitied the mother and the cute little girl and started questioning the incidents and the perpetrator. She cried with the mother until her supervisor guided her on what to do. She then learned that counselors need to be the source of calmness for their clients. Her reaction was unhelpful in sparking her client to move on and think of an appropriate action. Starting from that, Anju told herself to accept that traumatic incidents are unfortunately common in real life.

Lai, a freshie during her encounter with an illegal immigrant woman whom her employer sexually abused, found it difficult to accept the reality that happened to her client. Similarly, Lai started questioning the reality of the incident and the perpetrator. She could not believe her client had undergone such an incident, leading her to sympathize deeply. Her emotion carried her away, and she could not help her client much, prompting her to feel guilty toward the client. Sometimes, she wanted to abandon the case but thought the act was unethical and irresponsible. She had nobody to guide her at that time. She lost track, but she remembered once her lecturer advised her to let go of the client's cases when she returned home. She referred to her religion and started to realize the role of karma in causing such an incident, enabling her to hold back her emotion and helping her client cope with the situation.

Unconditional Acceptance of the Client's Traumatic Reaction

The third area of unconditional acceptance is to accept the client's traumatic reaction. In encountering a crisis incident, the clients may express varied emotional reactions such as anger, grief, and high dependency on counselors. Some are prompted to throw their feelings at counselors. Azna, Athy, Ying, Dil, Nora, and Geena disclosed their experience in encountering their clients' reactions.

Azna believes that a counselor must be able to manage clients' reactions. She talked about her experience encountering a client who lost her son due to abdominal injuries in a riot. The client showed high dependent on her once she trusted her. She kept contacting Azna for opinions to guide her in deciding about her son's incident. Azna realized her client's reaction occurred due to her trauma that she believed nobody could understand her except Azna. She accepted the situation but tried to put a gap to help her client be independent and functioning again.

Athy encountered a client who threw her anger at her. The client's house and other neighboring houses were destroyed in a fire incident. Athy, a novice counselor at the time, and her team were assigned to provide crisis intervention to the survivors. She approached the old lady, and the lady scolded her. Athy felt very upset with the client's reaction until she learned that the client had difficulty accepting that she had lost her house and the jewelry she collected for twenty-three years, including those she inherited from her late mother. Athy then realized and accepted that the client was not meant to yell at her; instead, she was expressing her traumatic reaction to losing something she loved. During her encounter, Athy was convinced by her senior counselors to keep calm and put trust she was not doing anything wrong instead, the client herself was emotionally unstable.

Ying also had a similar experience. She encountered a family who refused to let their dead little son undergo a post-mortem procedure. They threw their anger and frustration at Ying. Ying, who was already an experienced counselor, understood her clients' traumatic reactions. She

knew they were not angry at her, but they were in great grief at suddenly losing their little son due to accidentally falling from his apartment house. For Ying, the clients could not cope with their grief and felt triggered to let the child's body for post-mortem. Ying also understood her clients' cultural belief that the dead body should not be altered. Ying kept herself away from the family for a while to give them space to calm down and decide. She returned to help the family cope with their grief and understand the procedures.

Dil stated that she was prepared to accept her clients' traumatic reactions regardless of the form. She learned about the justice system, and some clients may feel disappointed with the investigation process and court decisions. Sharing her experience, she stated she encountered victims' families and suspect families who threw anger at her due to their disappointment. Dil admitted she did not feel hurt or hatred of their expression in encountering the situation. She was able to understand their feelings. She believed that they need someone to express their emotion, and she was chosen to be the one, thereby she could stay calm.

Nora also can learn the client's traumatic reactions immediately. She once encountered a young lady who came to see her late after office hours. She accepted the client for a crisis intervention session, believing the client had thought deeply before asking for assistance from a social welfare agency. She did not hold the client until the next morning, worrying she would change her mind. Nora understood the client might be contemplating seeking help or remaining in an unhealthy situation. She knew some factors had urged her to come to the office, thereby the intervention should not be delayed.

Likewise, Geena held the same belief as Nora. To Geena, different clients may have different perceptions of a situation, leading to different reactions. Some clients need immediate assistance once they decide to get help. Counselors must not perceive the client's issue as small and question their reaction to get the intervention. Instead, counselors need to be open and accept the variety of clients' traumatic reactions.

Discussions

Unconditional acceptance is one of the important professional attitudes in developing the clients' trust during counseling and crisis intervention, regardless of who the clients are. The current phenomenological study revealed that Malaysian counselors portrayed competency in implementing the practice of unconditional acceptance. The current study also discovered the essential areas in implementing unconditional acceptance, encompassing the client as a person, the client's reality experience, and the client's traumatic reactions. Based on the findings, three key conclusions can be proposed to improve the practice of unconditional acceptance, particularly among Malaysian counselors: 1) unconditional acceptance involves total acceptance of the client as a person, the reality of their experience, and their emotional reactions, 2) empathy with clear psychological boundary is essential to guide counselors to accept client unconditionally without losing themselves in the client's experience or reactions, and 3) exercising unconditional acceptance requires counselors to mentally and psychologically prepare themselves to face repertoires of clients' crises and traumatic experiences.

The first key point that can be captured from the findings is unconditional acceptance involves total acceptance of the client as a person, including their reality experience and their emotional reactions due to the experience, regardless of the client's background in criminal or non-

offending actions. This finding aligns with Roger's (1957) and Corey's (2005) notion that unconditional acceptance involves warm and no-condition acceptance from a counselor toward a client as they are which includes each aspect of the client's experience that encompasses their emotions, thoughts, and behavior. Based on the analysis, research participants who encountered clients with criminal backgrounds reflect a proper communication style while communicating with them, although they do not agree with their committed crimes. This practice parallels the argument by Noraini (2019) and Tan et al., (2021), who stated counselors should treat their clients with respect and appreciation while communicating with them. However, they may personally disapprove and feel disgusted by the client's actions. Interestingly, this study reveals that counselors must accept that the clients have encountered such experiences in traumatic incidents. The thoughts like *"the client does not deserve the experience"* or *"the experience was too much for the client"* indirectly reflect a judgmental perspective of the counselors even though they seem to empathize with the clients. The inability to accept the clients' experience as part of their life affects the counselors' functioning to support the clients to cope with their current experience, thereby delaying the process of post-crisis growth in clients. This brings us to the second key point.

The second key point underscores the importance of empathy with a clear psychological boundary in guiding counselors to unconditionally accept the clients without losing themselves in the client's experience or reactions. This finding proves unconditional acceptance relates to the attitude of empathy, as stated by Farber and Doolin (2011). Unconditionally accepting a client with a criminal background or traumatic experience was found quite challenging when research participants encountered such an experience for the first time. Counselors need to exercise the attitude of empathy to understand the clients' situation, their perceptions about the experience, and their emotional reactions. Zudi's and Athy's experiences are good examples to highlight the importance of empathy, inspiring unconditional acceptance. Zudi gradually learned to accept the prisoners without judgment when he listened to them and conducted interventions for them. Athy also started to accept the emotional reactions thrown at her after she learned the client was unstable after losing her precious properties in a fire incident.

Nevertheless, the finding indicates counselors must increase unconditional acceptance toward their clients and maintain their psychological boundaries while exercising empathy. Excessive empathy leads counselors to adopt the clients' way of thinking, thereby hindering counselors from unconditionally accepting the experiences as a part of their life process, leading them to judge that the clients do not deserve the experiences. This finding is supported by Bartikova et al., (2020), who found that violating a psychological boundary causes counselors to incorporate the clients' experiences with their own. Therefore, counselors need to be prepared and aware of the nature of their work as elaborated in the third point.

The third key point asserts that counselors must be mentally and psychologically prepared to encounter clients' repertoires of crises and traumatic experiences in order to practice unconditional acceptance. The limitation in current training in addressing the implementation of unconditional acceptance among counselors toward clients with criminal issues, including sexual offenses, was underscored by Huebner et al., (2022). They postulated lack of training in unconditional acceptance leaves counselors unprepared to accept clients from all backgrounds, resulting in stigma and prejudice towards them. The early experience of the research participants in the crisis intervention implies that, at the beginning, they were mentally unprepared to encounter such experiences. With proper guidance from senior colleagues and

supervisors, the participants gradually adapted to the situation after they were exposed to the practical training courses and the field experience. After years of experience, research participants showed high competency in implementing unconditional acceptance regardless of who they are, what they are experiencing, and how they may react due to the experience. They are prepared and open to meeting clients from all backgrounds in their service setting. This finding aligns with the finding by Levy and Lemberger-Truelove (2021), who conducted a mix-method study and discovered that school counselors who underwent training had more confidence to practice their counseling skills. In addition, supportive supervisors and colleagues play prominent roles in helping the counselors, especially novice counselors to be prepared for encountering the realities of their cases, enhancing their coping strategies (Sacheti, 2020).

In sum, the current study discloses Malaysian counselors' experiences with unconditional acceptance of clients with criminal cases, mental illnesses, and traumatic experiences. Through exposure to field experience and practical training courses, the counselors show their readiness to accept whoever their clients as they are. This includes accepting the clients' reality of experience and emotional reactions. The counselors' experience also indicates an empathic attitude is essential to inspire unconditional acceptance. Nevertheless, setting a psychological boundary is essential in guiding counselors' empathic attitude to prevent them from losing themselves in the clients' experiences. To maintain the attitude of unconditional acceptance, counselors need to be mentally and psychologically prepared to encounter clients with unexpected cases. Proper formal training courses related to the implementation of unconditional acceptance in counseling may benefit them in understanding the concept and its practicality in counseling and crisis work settings from an early stage.

Conclusion

The current study discovers unconditional acceptance is one of the crucial counselors' attitudes in developing therapeutic relationships with clients from various backgrounds, including those with criminal issues, mental problems, and encountering traumatic incidents. The study's findings highlight the importance of empathic attitudes in guiding counselors in cultivating an attitude of unconditional acceptance. Nevertheless, this study has limitations regarding addressing the intersection of unconditional acceptance and genuineness. This study also does not explore the strategies the counselors adopted to maintain warm interaction with their clients when there is a conflict in values. In addition, the counselors' coping mechanisms to overcome their perception of clients' experiences was unexplored. However, some participants stated they used to refer to their religion to overcome their triggered emotions and accept the reality of the clients' experience. These limitations are expected to shed light on the future direction of other upcoming scientific research in counseling.

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