SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES

Counsellors' Emotions at Work: What Can We Learn from Their Experiences?

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ABSTRACT

The counselling profession plays a pivotal role and is often considered emotionally demanding. However, previously published studies on emotions at work have been limited in terms of research among counsellors. Hence, this study aims to explore (1) how counsellors perceive their profession, (2) how their work emotions come about when dealing with clients, (3) and what are the main job demands and resources of the counsellors. The current study employed qualitative research using a phenomenological research design. Individual in-depth semi-structured interviews with 44 registered professional counsellors in Malaysia were conducted to understand their experience of, and perceptions about, the counsellor's job. Several themes developed based on the literature review, and discussions among the authors were made to see any disagreements regarding the selected themes. The team properly addressed any inconsistencies that arose. The first finding revealed that counsellors perceived their profession as a challenging occupation. As for the second finding, two themes were associated with the counsellors' emotions at work: (1) positive and (2) negative emotions. Working conditions were the most recurring theme in the last finding of the study that influenced the job demands. In contrast, emotional support and professional growth were two job resources that helped reduce stress among counsellors.

Keywords: Counsellors, counsellors' emotions, emotions, work emotions

INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a growing body of literature within the field of counselling that unveils the truth about how employees, particularly in the service industries, consistently regulate their emotional responses when dealing with clients (Bolton, 2004; Grandey, 2000; von Gilsa et al., 2014). Most of these studies have raised concerns about a dramatic increase in mental health problems in a people-oriented working environment. Although extensive research has been carried out in the said area, there is a lack of evidence about the underlying factors that induce emotional stress in workers and the mechanism they adopt to resolve those psychological conflicts. While several studies attempt to explain the phenomenon, they are mainly conducted in a Western context and have employed either quantitative or mixed-method instruments (Hayward & Tuckey, 2011; Kim et al., 2013). Hence, this present study takes on a more holistic qualitative methodology to explicitly explore the complexity of emotional reactions among service workers in Malaysia.

This study selected a group of professional counsellors working in several settings in Malaysia (e.g., agencies, schools, and universities) as the participants. They were chosen based on the nature of their work; they recurrently experience loads of emotions as a result of their close interactions with clients who are struggling with various emotional difficulties, life challenges, and mental health concerns (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983; von Gilsa et al., 2014).

Moreover, the burden of non-counselling duties, such as administrative and operating work, has further contributed to counsellors' emotional exhaustion and fatigue in counsellors (Falls & Nichter, 2007; Moyer, 2011; Wilkerson, 2009; Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006). Counsellors can also be greatly affected by countertransference, their conscious and/or unconscious feelings stemming from their relationships with the client, in which that feelings, in return, influence their emotional responses to work (Hayes et al., 1998, 2011).

The existing literature on counselling and mental health has shown that counsellors have a high tendency to develop serious psychological health conditions, including burnout and depression, when they focus too much on other people's well-being and neglect their own (Hardiman & Simmonds, 2013; Temitope & Williams, 2015). It is especially true when they have to work constantly with people who are severely traumatised and in pain, such as grieving over the loss of loved ones, which consequently takes a heavy toll on them (Fourie et al., 2008; Ling et al., 2014; Westman, 2001). Some research discovered that dealing with clients may not necessarily always be negative. Several studies, for instance, found that some employees experienced positive emotions, such as happiness (Rogers, 2012), engagement (Sonnentag et al., 2010) and flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014) throughout their work. Barsade and O'Neill (2014) disclosed that a vibrant culture of companionate love at work is positively associated with workers' satisfaction and teamwork; and a negative association with

absenteeism and emotional breakdown. Their study also revealed that the degree of affection, caring and compassion established between the workers and clients could also result in better outcomes for the clients, including patients' good mood, satisfaction and fewer trips to the emergency room.

This paper aims to comprehend how working conditions influence counsellors' emotions at work using the Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). According to this model, two overarching aspects of work are presumed to play a part in the intricacy of employees' emotional experience: job demands and job resources. The former is defined as "those physical, social, or organisational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological effort and are, therefore, associated with physiological and/or psychological costs" (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007, p. 122). In contrast, the latter is described as "those physical, social, or organisational aspects of the job that (1) are functional in achieving work-related goals, (2) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, and (3) stimulate personal growth and development" (p. 122). In other words, job demands refer to risk factors in the workplace. They are closely linked to health impairment—a mechanism whereby one's energies are exhausted (resulting from poorly designed jobs), leading to the depletion of mental and physical resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). On the other hand, job resources imply positive determinants of work motivation that

are functional in securing both work and personal goals (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) and are therefore helpful to offset the harmful impact of job demands (Bakker et al., 2011; Dollard & McTernan, 2011; Idris & Dollard, 2011).

To date, a plethora of research has been used to test the applicability of the JDR model. Santa Maria et al. (2018), for example, investigated the role of job demands and resources in emotional depletion among police officers and found that the imbalance between job demands and resources significantly impacted their behavioural and psychological well-being. In view of this, the study asserted that it is imperative for the authorities concerned to acknowledge the all-embracing constructs of job demands-resources in individual police officers so that their performance is always at a high level. Similarly, this present study is also interested in examining the complex interactions between job demands and job resources, particularly in the context of the counselling profession, a largely underexplored area. Since it is vastly concerned with understanding the detailed concept of emotional reactions, a qualitative approach is deemed to be a more appropriate research method to opt for, as it offers a greater insight into participants' personal experiences and therefore provides better explanations of the phenomenon being studied (Glaser, 2008; Idris et al., 2010; Kinman & Jones, 2005). Specifically speaking, this study aims to investigate (1) how counsellors perceive their profession, (2) how their work emotions come about

when dealing with clients, and (3) what the main job demands and resources among counsellors are.

A high level of burnout has been found among substance abuse counsellors, which can be attributed to a wide range of internal and external factors such as emotions, personality traits, work conditions, and work organisation (Vorkapić & Mustapić, 2012). It has also been reported that counselling professionals are prone to develop three classic burnout symptoms: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment, especially are handling clients with substance abuse problems (Bakker et al., 2001). Although some studies disclosed that a high level of self-consciousness and mindfulness could help counsellors buffer the negative effects of working with traumatic clients (Ender et al., 2019; Gutierrez & Mullen, 2016; Hardiman & Simmonds, 2013), many other studies showed that a high degree of empathetic demand and frequent exposure to clients could significantly create perfect conditions for occupational hazards (Baldwin-White, 2016; Vorkapić & Mustapić, 2012)

Research Questions

Based on the stated objectives, the following research questions have been formulated:

1. How do counsellors perceive their profession?
2. How do their work emotions come about when dealing with clients?
3. What are the main job demands and resources of counsellors?

The next section presents the research materials and methods, followed by results and a discussion of research findings. Finally, it concludes with managerial implications that can benefit practitioners and policymakers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

This study involved 44 counsellors registered as professional counselling practitioners in Malaysia and have worked in several local public agencies, namely The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, The Ministry of Education, and The Ministry of Urban Well-being, Housing and Local Government. As inclusion criteria, the selected counsellors must be registered with the Malaysian Board of Counsellors and have worked for at least five years as certified counsellors. The counsellors were carefully selected using purposeful or purposive sampling to gain information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Kinman & Jones, 2005; Maxwell, 2012). After finalising a list of registered counsellors from the Malaysian Board of Counsellors website, the researchers contacted the potential participants via phone to invite them to participate in the study. Once they had confirmed their participation, the researchers immediately emailed them the letter of invitation to inform them about the present study and to help explain their rights in the research (e.g., confidentiality, voluntary participation and right to withdraw). Most participants were

female with a bachelor's degree, while others had a master's degree.

Protocol of Study

In-depth semi-structured interviews were used as a method and protocol of the study to collect data (Furnham, 1997; Kinman & Jones, 2005). The study employed a phenomenological research design whereby the researchers describe the emotional experiences of individual participants about a phenomenon being studied (Maxwell, 2012). The flexibility and comprehensiveness of qualitative interviewing in seeking out the world views of research participants (Gill & Baillie, 2018; Gill et al., 2008) allowed for the discovery of new and unanticipated information, which was useful for understanding the complex array of emotional experiences of the counsellors.

The semi-structured interviews were held for a period of 20 to 40 minutes (for each person) at the participants' workplace in an informal manner to make them feel comfortable to promote active participation and thus obtain richer data. However, the interviews continued until 40 minutes up to one hour until data saturation was reached. All the interviews were conducted in Malay and audio recorded with the participants' permission. They were also asked to sign an informed consent form as approval for data collection prior to the interview.

The interview questions were thoroughly developed based on the researchers' understanding of the subject matter and also from the literature review (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The following are the main questions asked of the participants:

1. How do you perceive your profession?
2. What type of client normally seeks your help?
3. What are the best/most meaningful moments you have experienced as a counsellor? Why?
4. It is argued that a counsellor keeps thinking about their clients' problems. What do you think about this? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
5. Are your emotions relatively stable or changing from one time to another? Why?
6. What emotions dominate your life the most (e.g., happy? sad? enthusiastic? hopeless? Or something else?) Why?
7. As a counsellor, what are the matters that always stay in your mind? Why?
8. Counsellors often deal with many clients daily. How do you cope with your heavy workload?
9. It is claimed that psychological well-being is very important. How do you think your employer takes your psychological well-being into consideration?

Analysis

The data from the semi-structured interviews were systematically analysed using template analysis, a particular style of thematic analysis that is highly flexible in exploring

basic causes of complicated human actions without compromising the research's objectivity and reliability (King, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002). Additionally, template analysis is also helpful for the researchers to explain and interpret a phenomenon within the social and cultural context, or what have termed: a contextual constructivist (Madill et al., 2000). Due to the reasons mentioned above, this study believes that template analysis allows the researchers to discern better the intricate nature of emotions experienced by counsellors in a localised Malaysian setting.

All the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and scrutinised using NVivo 10 software to analyse the data. This process was repeated until all the focus points were taken into account, and the concepts were successfully grouped into themes (Glaser, 1992). Then, using the template analysis, the researchers produced a list of codes called a template, representing themes identified in the transcribed data. To ensure the confirmability of the themes and trustworthiness of data analysis and to avoid interpretation bias arising from the analysis,

15% of transcriptions were rated by second-rater or independent scholars (Kinman & Jones, 2005; Kvale, 1996) with counselling and psychology expertise.

RESULTS

Being a Counsellor is a Challenging Occupation

The primary aim of this study was to obtain an understanding of how counsellors perceived their profession. The initial analysis revealed that most counsellors expressed the view that working as a counsellor can be very intense and demanding. Two main themes emerged from the gathered data that describe why the counsellors perceived their work as challenging, as indicated in Table 1 below: 1) the nature of the job and 2) the clients.

According to the participants, it was the job conditions that made counselling a hard profession to succeed in. Many of them, for example, argued that working as a counsellor can be emotionally draining. Their statements such as "It's so tiring, you know; we have to always be mentally

Table 1

The reasons why the counselling profession is challenging

Themes	Subthemes
1. The nature of the job:	1. The profession involves many emotions.
	2. Social and cultural stigma in relation to the counselling profession.
	3. Counsellors need to do everything (holistic work) in their organisation.
	4. Counsellors need to be multi-skilled, undertake multitasking and have extra knowledge.
	5. The number of counsellors is very limited compared to the number of clients.
2. The clients:	1. Clients bring life-altering problems and situations.
	2. Clients' healing process takes a lot of time and effort.

prepared to help them (clients; P5)" and "it's tiring (being a counsellor) because we are dealing with people's emotions here" (P10), clearly indicate their lethargic and discouraged feelings about their work. Apart from that, the social and cultural stigma surrounding counselling was also one of the reasons for the participants' claim about their difficult role as a counsellor. They argued that the negative stigma that most people have about "mentally sick" people had to a certain extent, influenced their work motivation. They believed that the public's lack of awareness of the counselling profession had caused them to have such a perception. A participant, for example, pointed out: "People just do not understand what a counsellor really is. They just assume that a counsellor gives advice to those who have life problems…I don't know, but it affects us somewhat; it is like we are dealing with something bad" (P20).

Moreover, some participants also argued that they must provide a holistic counselling approach to patients (an approach that focuses on every aspect of human well-being, including physical, emotional, social, and spiritual), which had added to their emotional burdens. To make matters worse, the increasing number of clients that sought treatment from the counsellors had forced them to work beyond their physical and mental capacity, leaving them in a state of despair. In terms of clients, a few participants expressed that most of their clients took significant time and effort to heal, which caused them to work around the clock.

Although most of the counsellor-participants, to some degree, appeared pessimistic while describing their work, some were still positive about being a counsellor. They contended that being a counsellor consistently challenged them to improve themselves, as a good counsellor should be equipped with various knowledge and skills and positive attitudes. One of them said: "The counselling profession is very challenging. It is multidisciplinary and involves all aspects of life. A field that needs us to always self-improve to effectively help others. It is a good thing, though" (P2). Additionally, there were also some participants argued that their job as a counsellor was a real eye-opener. They believed that listening to other people's struggles could make them appreciate their lives more. A participant, for instance, stated: "Although our job is challenging, I still love the fact that it teaches me to be thankful. Knowing that there are other people out there struggling a lot in their lives makes all my problems seem smaller" (P23).

In essence, while challenge demands are often considered positive job demands (Idris & Dollard, 2014; Podsakoff et al., 2007; Yulita et al., 2014), in this study, however, may not necessarily be the case. It appears that the challenges of working as a counsellor have considerably put the participants on the edge of emotional anguish, which may bring negative consequences to their working performance. Having said that, most participants revealed that they had coping mechanisms to help them maintain their emotional wellness (Table 2).

Table 2
The counsellors' coping mechanism in dealing with work challenges

Challenges management	Illustrative quotes
Emotional, physical and mental readiness	As a counsellor, I always try hard to be emotionally ready and aware of all circumstances. (P1) To be someone that is capable to cope with any challenges, we must be mentally and physically ready. (P15)
Counselling awareness	I am trying very hard to change the social stigma. Not everyone that seeks counselling sessions is problematic. Providing the public with the right information about counselling is one the best ways (to overcome the social stigma). (P38) I am passionate and work very hard to make new perspectives in my office and myself as a skilful counsellor, as well as in making sure my client will come to a counselling session without a negative stigma. (P21)
Responsible	Sometimes, with all the challenges, we may feel like giving up on being a counsellor. But we must remember, this is our responsibility that we must uphold. (P40) In facing various types of clients with various personalities, it's a big challenge for me, but I took this as a responsibility and worked very hard for it. (P22)
Positive	We must always be positive and passionate in handling a session with the client until there is a change in themselves. (P8)
Good attitude and personality	To face challenges, we must always keep a positive attitude, not only at work but also with society. (P12)
Good and extra knowledge	We really need to have good knowledge about our field. For example, I am in the health field. So, I have to be well-informed about my patients' health conditions and what to do to help them. (P33)

Counsellors' Emotions at Work

Two themes were associated with the counsellors' emotions at work extracted from the interview data: (1) positive and (2) negative emotions among the counsellors. The details are presented in the following subsections.

Positive Emotions Among the Counsellors. The findings unveiled that happiness was the subtheme and dominating feeling experienced by most of the counsellors in the study. This feeling of contentment and joy was found both internally and externally driven. The internal elements entailed the counsellor-participants' constituents, whereas the external elements implied the client-related factors (Table 3).

Table 3 demonstrates that counsellors' happiness was the intrinsic circumstance that facilitated the formation of positive feelings in the participants. One of the counsellors, for example, commented,

I am passionate, and I work very hard to become a skilful counsellor. I also want to change people's false perceptions about counselling. I want people to know that coming to a counsellor does not mean you are problematic. I want to change that stigma. It makes me feel so happy to see clients come to me with a positive mindset. (P5)

Table 3
Positive emotion among counsellors

Theme	Subtheme	Illustrative quotes
Positive emotion among counsellors	Happiness	
	Internal Impact:	
	Counsellors' happiness	I am struggling to be a good counsellor with various skills. I need that (skills) to help my clients effectively. So, I am willing to further my studies or perhaps attend a course to learn more about the counselling field. It will be a great pleasure for me to be able to brighten up my clients' life. (P6) I am very happy in school as a counsellor since most of the time, all give participation, including my top management and my clients as well. (P30)
	External Impact:	
	Clients' changes	As a counsellor, when my clients have successfully developed themselves and can function independently without the help of others after having counselling sessions, it will be the best and a happy moment for me. (P16)
	Clients' happiness	The most important part of the counselling session is when the client is happy with us, and he/she even looks forward to attending the next session. That is the best moment. (P13)
	Clients' satisfaction	When my client gets insight and satisfaction from his/her problem, I am the happiest person to end the session successfully. (P37)

Another participant also expressed: "I feel so happy when I can help my clients, but sometimes, when I can't see any changes in my clients, it makes me feel so down" (P6).

In addition, the extrinsic factors, especially the ones related to clients, also largely contributed to the positive emotions among the counsellors. According to the participants, any changes made by their patients after they went through a considerable proportion of treatment brought them so much happiness. One reported: "The happiest moment is when my client comes to me and proudly says that he/she has found ways to solve their problems" (P1). Some participants also claimed that their clients' happy and cheerful disposition was also helpful in brightening up their day and making them feel better. A participant mentioned:

I am very happy when my clients come and see me after they have completed their treatment, expressing that they are now happy with their new life. Really, it makes me feel so happy because I have successfully helped another person in my life. (P6)

Furthermore, clients' satisfaction was also among the external forces that prompted the sense of pleasure in the counsellor-participants. It is well illustrated in the following excerpts: "I feel blessed

and happy when my client is satisfied with my counselling service" (P38) and "I feel so glad when my client accepts me as their counsellor; you know, just like the way I accept them, and it is also good to know when they always look forward to attending the next session (of counselling)" (P13).

Job Resources as Factors Linked to Positive Work-Related Emotions Among Counsellors. The analysis of the interviews identified a broad theme comprising job resources as the instrumental factors inducing positive emotions at work among the counsellors in the study. Two kinds of job resources helped reduce work stress in the participating counsellors and consequently caused them to be more productive and efficient (Table 4). These were: 1) emotional support and 2) professional growth.

The findings disclosed that emotional support from employers was necessary to promote the counsellors' physical, social, and mental growth and development. Some participants, for example, claimed that the support they received from their superiors had somehow lifted their work motivation. They reported: "When my top management approved my applications to attend courses related to my professional skills and knowledge, I felt so excited and motivated" (P5); and "We always conduct a retreat programme in our department. It is an initiative taken to allow the counsellors in the department to sit together and exchange thoughts. I like it (the programme); it is inspiring" (P24). Meanwhile, other counsellor participants also contended that they felt valued and respected when their employers showed some concern for them, especially when they were having a hard time. To illustrate: "Our boss is always concerned about us. Sometimes when he noticed that something was wrong, he would immediately ask us about it. He makes us feel appreciated" (P30).

Other than that, acceptance or the sense of acknowledgement given by the employers to the counsellors was also crucial in developing their emotional intelligence in the workplace. It was apparent in the case of one of the participants who argued that he felt comfortable and confident to work when his boss acknowledged his performance and

Table 4

Job resources among Malaysian counsellors

Theme	Subthemes	Illustrative quotes
JOB RESOURCES		
Emotional Support	Support Concern Acceptance Discussion	The headmaster is concerned about us. Sometimes he will talk to us when he sees us not in a good mood. He even asks if we have personal problems. (P30)
Professional Growth	Career development (skill, knowledge and expertise) Career development (promotion) Teamwork	My boss approved all my applications to attend any course regarding my professional skills and career development. (P41)

embraced his flaws and imperfections to improve. He said: "I am truly happy when my boss appreciates me as his/her staff, accepts my weaknesses and takes them as a challenge to develop my strengths" (P15). Besides, discussing or reviewing an issue, especially to explore solutions, also precipitated positive emotions in the counsellors. As argued by a counsellor in the study,

> *I see my boss as a good listener. He always listens to our problems, and whenever we have problems at work, he will talk to us and help us sort things out instead of bawling us out. He helps us to stay positive at work.* (P34)

Apart from that, professional growth factors such as the involvement of the counsellors in career development programmes and activities were also found to provide resources to instil interest among them and thus encourage their motivation and engagement. Some participants, for instance, commented,

> *Our manager always encourages us to join any training or courses that help us manage our emotional and psychological well-being as a counsellor. I think it (attending the training and courses) is helpful. I mean in a sense that it motivates us to become more capable counsellors.* (P18)

> *One thing that I love about my top management is that they always approve our application to attend any courses to upgrade our knowledge and skills. They are very supportive. I believe they always want us (counsellors) to improve our work performance.* (P37)

A few participants also expressed the view that a job promotion had a positive and significant effect on their mood and work productivity. A counsellor, for example, stated: "I am so happy working in the government sector (as a counsellor). The promotion is performance and time-based. Once we reach the target, we will be automatically promoted to the next grade. So, it pushes us forward" (P33). Additionally, teamwork or aligning and blending the strengths of individuals to achieve a common goal also played a role in stimulating favourable emotions among the counsellors in this study. As reported by a participant: "Without teamwork, we (counsellors) may not be able to tolerate each other. So, I am so grateful to have a very supportive team member" (P20). The sense of gratitude portrayed by the participant shows that the collaborative working environment positively inspired him.

Negative Emotions Among the Counsellors. The data from the interviews revealed that negative emotional states also occurred in the counsellor-participants in the study. Emotions such as anxiety, depression, hopelessness and sadness were among the subthemes that emerged from the data analysis (Table 5).

Moreover, role stressors or role overload were also found to be the main contributors to detrimental emotional outcomes among the investigated counsellors. One of them, for instance, asserted,

I am very stressed with my workload: it is too much, and it really burdens me. I am trying to *handle it well, but normally I just tell it off to the management. I don't think it is good to suppress our feelings. Just because we are counsellors, so people expect us to be patient all the time.* (P15)

Several types of role stressors were found in the study (Table 6).

Table 5

Negative emotion among Malaysian counsellors

Theme	Subthemes	Illustrative quotes
Negative emotions among counsellors	Anxiety	I always worry and feel that I can't handle my client wisely, but when I meet them, everything turns out well. (P30)
	Depressed	In the early stages of my profession as a counsellor, I used to have sessions with three, four or five persons per day. It would definitely distract me and affect my emotions. I was not in the mood to communicate with anyone, including my family. I felt so burdened. (P25)
	Hopeless	Being in this profession as a counsellor is very challenging. Sometimes the challenges made me want to give up and surrender. (P40)
	Sadness	As a counsellor in the hospital, I am surrounded by many children with chronic illnesses. Seeing them in that condition makes me feel so upset. (P10)

Table 6

Role stressors among Malaysian counsellors

Stressors (role overload)	Illustrative quotes
Too many agencies to serve	I was very stressed because, in my early service, I had to serve nearly six agencies under the ministry. They did not have their counsellor in the agencies. My boss asked me to handle it. (P14)
Lack of other counsellors	In the child centre, the lack of counsellors sometimes makes me feel so depressed because my mind never stops thinking about how I can help these children. (P6)
	In the hospital, we have various patients with various demographics and disease cases. We take five clients a day, and that is the minimum. Priority is given to ad hoc cases. We cannot take more than that due to time constraints. But sometimes, we have no choice but to take extra clients, like up to six or seven clients in a day. As a normal human being, this is beyond my capacity. (P36)
Too much non-counselling work	At my workplace, there is so much work that is not related to counselling. I am very upset with this whole situation. Well, it is acceptable if we were asked to do this (non-counselling work) occasionally. But to focus on this daily is so burdening. (P2)

Job Demands as Factors Linked to Negative Work-Related Emotions Among Counsellors. The negative emotions experienced by many of the counsellors in the present study were found to be relatively attributable to their job demands. The data analysis revealed different themes concerning job demands: emotional, psychological, role, and working conditions. These included subthemes such as challenges, job scopes, skills and proficiencies and workloads. Table 7 provides an illustrative description of job demands among Malaysian counsellors.

Working conditions were the most recurring theme in the study, with workloads being the major factor that influenced the job demands (Table 7). The findings also suggest that counsellors who deal with excessive job demands without having sufficient physical, emotional, and cognitive resources can simply result in burnout. It is apparent in comments made by a participant,

> *In the hospital, we have various patients with various demographic backgrounds and disease cases. We take five clients a day, and that is the minimum. Priority is given to ad hoc cases. We cannot take more than that due to time constraints. But sometimes, we have no choice but to take extra patients, like up to six or seven clients in a day. As a normal human being, this is beyond my capacity.* (P36)

Emotional Dynamics Among the Counsellors. Overall, it was found that the emotional constructs of the counsellors in the present study were highly dynamic as they changed over time and fluctuated within a person. The analysis of the interview data identified numerous themes comprising the dynamic and complex nature of the counsellors' emotions (Table 8).

Table 8 denotes the interplay of individual and social-environmental factors in the counsellor-participants' emotional development. As a matter of illustration, one participant mentioned: "Of course, my

Table 7
Job demands among Malaysian counsellors

Theme	Subthemes	Illustrative quotes
JOB DEMANDS		In a child centre, the lack of counsellors sometimes makes me feel so depressed because I always think about how I can help and focus on these problematic children. (P6)
Emotional	Challenges	
Psychological	Job scopes	
Role	Skills and proficiencies	
Working conditions	Workloads	In hospitals (health settings), even though there is so much workload to deal with (cases), in terms of staff welfare and promotion, it is well taken care of. We can get promoted after a certain time (time-based promotion). (P34)
		Minimally, I see 3, 4 or 5 clients per day, but in some cases, there will be more numbers. As a person, you will feel tired and have some kind of mood disorder after going back home. (P25)

Table 8
Counsellors' emotional dynamics

Theme	Illustrative quotes
Involving emotional dynamics	
Counsellor as a human being	Of course, my emotions as a counsellor tend to change. A counsellor is also a human being, and to me, a counsellor has a unique personality because we have the knowledge to understand other people. (P16)
Depending on the case and situation	Once in a while, when I've got a serious case, it affects my whole emotions. I still think of it (the case) even when I'm at home. (P21)
Interaction between a client and counsellor	When a client brings up a certain issue that is relatable to me, it sometimes influences my emotions. (P25)
External factors	Emotional changes happen not because of the clients but when I think too much about my family and work environment. (P11)
Hoping for client changes	Sometimes, when my client does not want to move on, I feel so disturbed. (P23)
Not involving emotional changes	
Being professional	I am not influenced by my clients' emotions at all. (P12)
Positive	To me, a counsellor is a person who is always positive and even with many sessions to handle, I am still very happy. (P1

emotions as a counsellor tend to change. A counsellor is also a human being, and to me, a counsellor has a unique personality because we have the knowledge to understand other people" (P16). These comments might indicate the portrayal of self-acceptance in the counsellor, who is, like every other individual, emotional. Apart from the personal aspect, the counsellors' emotions in the study were also found to be susceptible to many other factors in the outside world. Some participants, for example, argued that they were easily affected by extreme cases and situations of the clients. One of them said: "Once in a while when I've got a serious case, it affects my whole emotions. I will think of it (the case) even when I'm at home" (P21).

In some instances, the interactions with clients also modified the counsellors' moods and overall dispositions. It was accurate when the counsellors had to entertain clients with issues that were relatable to them. A counsellor expressed: "When a client brings a certain issue that is relatable to me, it sometimes influences my emotions" (P25). For some counsellors, factors in the external environment, such as family and work, were also responsible for their emotional changes. It was possible that their life events (be it family-related or work-related) might sometimes go against their will and consequently cause them a significant amount of stress. One of the participants, for example, said: "Emotional changes happen not because of the clients, but when I think too much about my family and work environment" (P11). Similarly, when counsellors put too much hope on their clients' recovery, they are more likely to feel overwhelmed and thus have little control over the situation, especially when

things do not go as expected. One of the counsellors revealed: "Sometimes when my client does not want to move on, I feel so disturbed" (P23).

Notwithstanding the foregoing, the analysis discovered that a few counsellors in the study appeared not to be emotionally driven. Their ability to stay professional and positive was found helpful in putting their worries into perspective, thus being more efficient at work. They affirmed: "I am not influenced by my clients' emotions at all" (P12), and "To me, a counsellor is a person who is always positive and, even with many sessions to handle, I am still very happy" (P13).

DISCUSSION

This study has examined how working conditions influenced counsellors' emotions at work. Valuable insights have been contributed on four areas comprising: (1) how counsellors perceived their profession; (2) types of work emotions, either positive or negative; (3) the main job demands and job resources among the counsellors and, finally, (4) the emotional dynamics in counsellors.

In the first area of the study, most counsellors perceived their profession as challenging. The main theme revealed that the profession strengthens the statements about why their profession is perceived as challenging. This finding is consistent with previous research by Di Mattia and Grant (2016), which identified the definition and description of the scopes of practice of counsellors and counsellors'

characteristics as challenges encountered in their practice. In addition, Paisley and McMahon (2001), in their study among school teachers, highlighted that school counsellors often received high expectations from their communities when they organised school programs for students and these communities. These expectations were perceived as positive challenges through which counsellors had an opportunity to serve their clients best and to strengthen the professional speciality of the counsellor itself. At the same time, several solutions were identified for how counsellors could manage the challenges. Challenge management includes emotional, physical and mental readiness, counselling awareness, being responsible, being positive, having a good attitude and personality, and having a good level of knowledge.

The current study discovered that most participants experienced positive and negative emotion themes, in which positive emotions were revealed more often than negative emotions among counsellors. Internal and external factors impact the feeling of the counsellors that their job was filled with positive emotions, with the counsellors' happiness as an internal impact. In contrast, clients' behavioural changes, happiness and satisfaction were external impacts. In terms of internal impact, the counsellors appeared to feel happy and to experience a deep sense of passion when dealing with their clients: from a theoretical viewpoint, they realised that their particular work and counselling sessions addressed many meanings, as

well as a sense of dedication and personal involvement (Dik & Duffy, 2009; Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011; Elangovan et al., 2010). This scenario can be explained by using the presence of a "calling" approach (Hirschi, 2012). The word "*calling*" refers to "whether the work is perceived as one's purpose in life" (Hirschi, 2012, p. 480). The concept of having a calling is a way of understanding why individuals are passionate about their work (Hirschi, 2012; May et al., 2004). Research on having a "calling" has become a topic of interest among scholars seeking to understand better how people become passionate about their work and how they perceive it as meaningful in their lives (Clinton et al., 2017; Duffy et al., 2014; Haney-Loehlein et al., 2015). Findings from previous studies have focused on the intensity of the calling and work meaningfulness rather than on how it may relate to proximal work emotion.

In terms of external impact, the counsellors' happiness, derived from their clients, was the source of satisfaction and meaningfulness in their respective jobs. Work meaningfulness is associated with several positive antecedents, especially factors related to the job itself. It also depends on certain counsellors' job characteristics that make counsellors loyal to their job, even when, at times, their profession exposes them to traumatic events (Ling et al., 2014). In the 1970s, scholars defined work meaningfulness as "the degree to which the employee experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile" (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, p.

162): this definition, work meaningfulness is also defined as employees' passion for doing their job that gives meaning to their lives (Ashmos & Duchon, 2000). Moreover, both meaningfulness and 'having a calling' have been found to be closely related to several work outcomes, including health, job satisfaction, work engagement and job commitment. One prior cross-sectional study, for example, confirmed that the presence of a calling predicts meaningful work (Duffy et al., 2012).

Emotional support and professional growth were identified as the main job resources and important themes among the counsellors, with both factors also linked to their positive emotions, as mentioned in the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). This finding is consistent with the statement by previous scholars who defined a counsellor as an individual "for whom mental and physical health is essential to maintaining competence as much or more than knowledge and skills" (Lawson et al., 2007, p. 7). Bakker and Demerouti (2007) highlighted that working conditions triggered positive and negative emotions. In this current study, the major job demand of workload was the factor contributing to negative emotions among counsellors. Role stressors, particularly role overload, were a major factor associated with negative emotions among counsellors. It corresponds to the study findings of Walsh and Walsh (2002), which revealed that the impact of a too-large caseload on community counsellors'

mental health could cause a particular boost to their negative emotions, leaving them under the weight of despair.

The final area of the current study explored the counsellors' emotional dynamics. Participants identified that the following five themes indicated the tendency for emotional dynamics to occur. Their emotions tended to change: (1) because they were also human beings; (2) depending on the cases and situations they were handling; (3) as a result of the interaction between them and the clients;(4) due to external factors; and (5) because they were hoping for their clients to change. For example, in their study, Richards et al. (2010) discovered that the professionals involved in the session tended to boost their powerful emotions, which could lead to their self-development in a positive way.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative research provides rich data well suited to our goal of exploring the emotions of counsellors. Two main themes were identified in answering the first research question (how do counsellors perceive their profession?): (1) the nature of the job itself, and (2) the clients revealed that counsellors perceived their profession as a challenging occupation. For the second research question (how do their work emotions come about when dealing with clients?), two themes emerged associated with the counsellors' emotions at work, which were positive and negative emotions. The finding for the third research question (what are the main job demands

and resources among the counsellors?) showed that working conditions were the most recurring theme influencing the job demands. In contrast, emotional support and professional growth were themes under job resources that helped reduce work stress among the counsellors. This study's unique contribution lies in the use of the job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) to frame this research on the working conditions of counsellors that trigger positive as well as negative emotions. These findings reinforce the view of counsellors as a professional group that appraisal of job demands and job resources has an impact on the emotions experienced by counsellors. Hopefully, these results underscore the viability of using the JD-R model in future research on counsellors' well-being. This study also provides practical implications for local public agencies such as The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, The Ministry of Education, and The Ministry of Urban Well-being, Housing and Local Government, especially their higher management, to provide a helpful working environment and communicate the values of health, and psychological well-being to counsellors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

research. I came to know about so many new methodologies I am thankful to him. Secondly, I would also like to thank my editor of the paper, who helped me a lot in finalising this project within the limited time frame.

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