

Clients' Lived Experiences of Psychological Counseling During Major Personal Life Transitions: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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ABSTRACT: Major personal life transitions often present substantial psychological challenges affecting emotional well-being, daily functioning, and personal identity. Although psychological counseling is widely recognized as effective for emotional distress, limited qualitative research has explored clients' experiences of counseling during major life transitions. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of clients who underwent psychological counseling while navigating major life transitions and to understand how counseling contributed to their psychological adjustment and meaning reconstruction. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with adults who had experienced major life transitions—including bereavement, divorce, unemployment, chronic illness, relocation, retirement, career change, marriage, and parenthood—and who had participated in psychological counseling. Data were analyzed iteratively following IPA procedures to identify recurring patterns while preserving each participant's unique experience. The analysis generated six interconnected themes: emotional disruption during life transitions, disruption of daily functioning and identity, entering counseling, development of the therapeutic relationship, psychological change through counseling, and meaning reconstruction with renewed life direction. Counseling was experienced as a gradual, collaborative process in which empathy, trust, and psychological safety enabled participants to explore difficult emotions. Through the therapeutic relationship, participants developed greater emotional awareness, adaptive coping strategies, improved emotional regulation, reconstructed self-identities, and more coherent life narratives. This study concludes that psychological counseling is a transformative process extending beyond symptom reduction by fostering identity reconstruction, meaning-making, and resilience during major life transitions, offering practical implications for counselors through person-centered, meaning-oriented, relationship-focused interventions.

Keywords: Psychological Counseling, Life Transitions, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Lived Experiences, Identity Reconstruction, Meaning-Making, Psychological Resilience.



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INTRODUCTION

Personal life transitions are inevitable experiences across the human lifespan and represent an important component of individual development. Such transitions may arise through normative developmental processes, including entering higher education, beginning employment, marriage, parenthood, and retirement, or through unexpected events such as job loss, divorce, bereavement, chronic illness, relocation, and major career change. Although these experiences may provide opportunities for personal growth, they frequently require individuals to adjust to unfamiliar roles, responsibilities, relationships, and social environments. The adaptation process may involve uncertainty, emotional distress, and changes in self-perception, making major life transitions psychologically significant periods. Contemporary developmental research suggests that adjustment during adulthood depends not only on objective changes in social roles but also on how individuals subjectively interpret and incorporate those changes into their identities. In particular, subjective perceptions of adulthood and identity development appear to be more closely associated with psychological well-being than objective role transitions alone (Žukauskienė et al., 2020). This perspective indicates that the meanings individuals attribute to transitions are central to their emotional adjustment and subsequent psychological development.

The psychological consequences of major life transitions are diverse and may extend beyond temporary emotional reactions. Individuals undergoing significant changes commonly experience anxiety, sadness, grief, uncertainty, reduced self-efficacy, identity confusion, and diminished psychological well-being. The intensity and duration of these responses may vary according to the nature of the transition, the availability of social and material resources, previous experiences, and individual coping capacities. While some individuals gradually adapt without professional assistance, others experience persistent distress that interferes with daily functioning, interpersonal relationships, and occupational performance. Evidence concerning psychosocial intervention suggests that the early stages of adaptation may be particularly important because substantial changes in psychological distress can occur during the first sessions of treatment (Meier, 2023). These early improvements indicate that timely support may help clients interrupt escalating distress, develop more adaptive interpretations, and regain a sense of personal control. However, rapid improvement is not universal, and some individuals may require longer-term assistance because of complex interpersonal, social, or contextual difficulties.

Across different types of life transitions, several psychological challenges appear consistently. Although relocation, unemployment, divorce, parenthood, retirement, bereavement, chronic illness, and career change involve distinct circumstances, they may all generate emotional distress, depressive and anxious symptoms, uncertainty regarding future direction, reduced perceptions of control, and disturbances in social functioning. Life transitions may also create a discrepancy between previous identities and newly emerging roles. For example, individuals may continue to define themselves through a former occupation, relationship, physical capacity, or social position even after that role has changed or disappeared. Research on the transition to adulthood indicates that inconsistency between objective role changes and subjective identity can undermine psychological well-being, demonstrating that identity disruption is a recurring challenge during developmental transitions (Žukauskienė et al., 2020). Studies of counseling and psychosocial interventions also show that emotional regulation, a supportive treatment environment, and

collaborative goal setting influence adjustment during periods of heightened vulnerability (Dambi et al., 2023). In addition, individuals facing prolonged caregiving demands or chronic health-related transitions may experience substantial burden, while resource activation and a developing sense of mastery may contribute to reductions in that burden (Wrede et al., 2023).

Psychological counseling represents one of the principal professional interventions available to individuals experiencing significant life transitions. Counseling does not merely aim to reduce distressing symptoms; it may also provide a structured and supportive environment in which clients can examine emotional experiences, clarify personal meanings, reconsider disrupted identities, and develop adaptive coping strategies. Through collaborative therapeutic work, clients may begin to distinguish between aspects of a transition that cannot be changed and those over which they retain some influence. Counseling can therefore facilitate adaptation by supporting emotional regulation, problem solving, resource activation, and the reconstruction of meaningful life goals. Research indicates that psychological interventions may produce substantial early reductions in distress for some clients, suggesting that counseling can have an important stabilizing function during acute periods of transition (Meier, 2023). Counseling may also strengthen empowerment, mastery, and self-efficacy, particularly when clients experience the therapeutic relationship as collaborative and supportive (Murray et al., 2021).

A central mechanism underlying positive counseling outcomes is the therapeutic alliance established between counselor and client. The alliance is generally conceptualized as a collaborative relationship involving agreement on therapeutic goals, agreement on the tasks of counseling, and the development of a meaningful emotional bond. Rather than functioning as a secondary aspect of treatment, the alliance provides the interpersonal context through which clients can disclose painful experiences, examine difficult emotions, and experiment with new perspectives. Reviews and empirical studies consistently describe the therapeutic alliance as a robust predictor of psychotherapy outcomes across therapeutic orientations, client groups, and treatment formats (Fahlgren et al., 2020). Meta-analytic research commonly reports a moderate association between alliance quality and treatment outcome, supporting the view that alliance is one of the most reliable common factors in psychotherapy.

More detailed longitudinal research further indicates that the alliance may actively contribute to psychological change rather than simply reflect early symptom improvement. Session-by-session studies have shown that increases in alliance quality may precede reductions in subsequent psychological symptoms (Sun et al., 2021). Agreement between therapists and clients regarding the quality of the therapeutic relationship has also been associated with lower later symptom distress in longer-term therapy (Jennissen et al., 2020). Evidence from online and videoconferencing interventions suggests that meaningful alliances may also be established in digital counseling environments, although the strength of alliance–outcome relationships may vary according to modality, measurement timing, and the perspective of the evaluator (van Lotringen et al., 2021). These findings demonstrate that alliance is a complex, dynamic process shaped by both client and therapist contributions. It may also interact with hope, cultural humility, therapist characteristics, and clients' expectations in influencing therapeutic outcomes (Bartholomew et al., 2021).

Beyond measurable treatment outcomes, phenomenological and qualitative research emphasizes the importance of examining counseling from clients' own perspectives. Quantitative outcome measures can identify whether symptoms have decreased, but they offer more limited insight into how clients experience therapeutic conversations, how trust develops, or how counseling becomes meaningful within a broader life narrative. Phenomenological approaches address this limitation by exploring how individuals understand, interpret, and assign meaning to counseling experiences. Existing qualitative studies repeatedly identify empathy, trust, emotional safety, validation, collaboration, and practitioner responsiveness as central components of clients' lived experiences (Graf et al., 2022; Memmolo & Willis, 2023; Nagy et al., 2022). Clients often perceive counseling as beneficial when they feel genuinely heard, accepted without judgment, and supported in discussing concerns that are difficult to disclose elsewhere.

Cultural and contextual factors also shape how clients experience psychological counseling. Cross-cultural research suggests that therapeutic relationships are influenced by the practitioner's multicultural competence, cultural humility, and ability to recognize cultural differences without stereotyping or imposing external interpretations (Lee et al., 2021). Clients' perceptions may be negatively affected when counselors fail to address microaggressions, minimize culturally meaningful experiences, or overlook differences in values, communication, and social expectations (Pieterse et al., 2023). Consequently, therapeutic effectiveness cannot be understood solely through universal relational principles. Empathy, trust, and collaboration are experienced within particular cultural and interpersonal contexts. Qualitative process research therefore calls for greater attention to the micro-interactional processes through which alliances are negotiated and to the ways practitioners' reflexivity influences clients' experiences (Kramer & Timulák, 2020).

Counseling may also support adaptation by facilitating meaning-making and identity reconstruction. During significant life transitions, individuals frequently reassess personal values, redefine social roles, and reinterpret previous experiences. The loss of a familiar role may disturb continuity between the past, present, and anticipated future. Counseling can provide a reflective space in which clients construct more coherent narratives that connect these different phases of life. Through emotional processing and guided reflection, clients may come to view a transition not only as a disruption but also as an experience that can be integrated into a revised sense of self. This process may strengthen self-awareness, self-acceptance, resilience, and future orientation. Psychological counseling can therefore be understood as a transformative process that supports not only symptom reduction but also the development of new identities, meanings, and life directions.

Despite the growing international literature concerning counseling processes and therapeutic alliance, several important research gaps remain. Much of the existing evidence has been generated through quantitative methodologies that prioritize symptom reduction, treatment efficacy, client satisfaction, or standardized psychological outcomes. Although these studies provide valuable information about whether counseling is effective, they offer less insight into how clients themselves experience therapeutic processes during major life transitions. Cross-cultural reviews also indicate that counseling and psychotherapy research remains concentrated in high-income countries, while culturally situated qualitative studies from low- and middle-income contexts remain limited (Dambi et al., 2023). The supplied literature does not provide substantive primary

evidence concerning clients' lived experiences of psychological counseling in Indonesia or the broader Southeast Asian region.

This geographical and cultural gap is significant because clients' experiences of distress, help-seeking, family involvement, stigma, therapeutic authority, and emotional disclosure may be shaped by local social and cultural values. Findings derived primarily from Western clinical contexts cannot automatically be transferred to Indonesia without attention to cultural meanings and service structures. Research has therefore emphasized the need for culturally sensitive investigations that examine how therapeutic alliances are formed and experienced in underrepresented settings (Lee et al., 2021). Qualitative and phenomenological studies are particularly valuable in this regard because they permit clients to describe counseling in their own terms rather than restricting their experiences to predetermined categories.

Yogyakarta provides a relevant setting for such an investigation. The region contains a diverse population of university students, young professionals, families, migrants, individuals living with illness, and older adults experiencing retirement and other developmental changes. Psychological counseling is available through universities, hospitals, private practices, and community-based services, creating varied contexts in which individuals may seek professional support. Examining clients' experiences in this setting may provide insight into how therapeutic relationships, counseling techniques, family systems, social expectations, and cultural values influence adaptation during major life transitions.

Accordingly, the present study aims to explore the lived experiences of clients who received psychological counseling while undergoing major personal life transitions in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the study examines how participants experienced the counseling process, developed relationships with counselors, interpreted psychological changes, encountered facilitating and inhibiting factors, and reconstructed meaning following significant life events (Pyo et al., 2023). The study is distinctive in its focus on clients' subjective experiences within an Indonesian sociocultural context. It extends existing counseling research beyond standardized outcome evaluation by examining therapeutic processes, identity reconstruction, and meaning-making. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to qualitative counseling psychology and practically to the development of more culturally responsive, client-centered, and transition-sensitive psychological services.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore clients' lived experiences of psychological counseling during major personal life transitions. IPA was selected because it is specifically designed to examine how individuals interpret and make sense of significant life experiences. Grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, IPA enables researchers to investigate both the subjective meanings participants assign to their experiences and the interpretative processes through which those meanings are understood (Lenberg et al., 2023; N. Moyo et al., 2018).

The philosophical foundations of IPA closely align with counseling psychology, which emphasizes understanding clients' subjective realities, psychological meaning-making, and personal transformation. Rather than seeking objective explanations of behavior, IPA aims to understand how individuals construct meaning from significant experiences within their unique social and personal contexts. Consequently, the approach is particularly appropriate for examining counseling experiences during major life transitions, where emotional adaptation, identity reconstruction, and meaning-making represent central psychological processes (I. Moyo et al., 2022).

Unlike quantitative approaches that primarily evaluate counseling effectiveness through standardized outcome measures, IPA prioritizes participants' own interpretations of therapeutic experiences. This idiographic orientation allows each participant's experience to be examined in depth before identifying patterns across cases. Such an approach is especially appropriate when exploring diverse life transitions because it preserves individual complexity while allowing broader interpretative themes to emerge across participants (Lynch & Glass, 2020).

Furthermore, recent methodological literature emphasizes the importance of methodological congruence, whereby the philosophical assumptions, research questions, participant selection, data collection methods, and analytical procedures are conceptually aligned. Because the present study seeks to understand clients' lived experiences and subjective interpretations rather than measure treatment efficacy, IPA provides the most appropriate methodological framework (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

Research Setting

The study was conducted in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, a province recognized for its rapidly developing mental health services and diverse sociocultural population. Psychological counseling services are available through universities, hospitals, private psychology clinics, community mental health centers, and independent counseling practices.

Yogyakarta provides an appropriate context for this study because it accommodates individuals experiencing a wide variety of developmental and situational life transitions. University students adjusting to higher education, professionals facing career changes, individuals experiencing divorce or bereavement, retirees, and people managing chronic illness all represent populations commonly served by counseling practitioners in the region. This diversity allows exploration of counseling experiences across multiple forms of life transition while maintaining sensitivity to Indonesian cultural values, family structures, and community relationships.

Participants and Sampling Strategy

Participants were recruited using purposive maximum variation sampling, a strategy frequently recommended in qualitative counseling research to capture a broad range of experiences while maintaining focus on a shared phenomenon (Hays & McKibben, 2021).

Maximum variation sampling intentionally seeks participants who differ across theoretically meaningful characteristics so that common themes and unique variations can both be identified. Rather than achieving statistical representativeness, the objective is to obtain rich and diverse experiential accounts that enhance analytical depth and transferability (Hays & McKibben, 2021).

Variation within the sample was sought across several characteristics relevant to counseling during life transitions, including:

- type of life transition (e.g., relocation, divorce, bereavement, retirement, career transition, parenthood, chronic illness, and job loss);
- age;
- gender;
- occupation;
- marital status;
- socioeconomic background; and
- counseling history.

A total of ten participants were recruited. This sample size is consistent with recommendations for IPA studies, which emphasize detailed idiographic analysis rather than large participant numbers (Lenberg et al., 2023; I. Moyo et al., 2022).

Inclusion Criteria

Participants met the following criteria:

1. were at least 18 years old;
2. had experienced a major personal life transition within the previous three years;
3. had attended at least three professional psychological counseling sessions;
4. were willing to discuss their counseling experiences openly; and
5. voluntarily provided informed consent.

Individuals experiencing severe psychiatric crises or those unable to participate in an in-depth interview were excluded to ensure participants could comfortably reflect upon their experiences.

Data Collection

Data were collected using semi-structured, in-depth interviews, the primary data collection method recommended for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis because it facilitates rich exploration

of lived experience while allowing flexibility to investigate emerging meanings (Lenberg et al., 2023, 2023; I. Moyo et al., 2022).

An interview guide was developed based on the study objectives and previous counseling literature. Questions explored participants':

- experiences during major life transitions;
- emotional responses before counseling;
- motivations for seeking counseling;
- perceptions of the therapeutic relationship;
- experiences throughout counseling sessions;
- perceived psychological changes;
- barriers and facilitating factors; and
- meanings attributed to counseling within their life journeys.

Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was conducted in a private environment selected to maximize participant comfort and confidentiality. With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. During the interviews, the researcher also maintained field notes documenting contextual observations, emotional expressions, nonverbal behaviors, and preliminary analytical reflections.

Recognizing that interpretation is central to IPA, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process. Reflexive journaling enabled continuous examination of personal assumptions, methodological decisions, researcher positioning, and evolving interpretations, thereby strengthening analytical transparency and reflexivity (Lenberg et al., 2023).

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using the systematic procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, following contemporary methodological recommendations (Lenberg et al., 2023; I. Moyo et al., 2022).

The analytical process consisted of six iterative stages.

Stage 1. Familiarization

Each transcript was read repeatedly while simultaneously reviewing the corresponding audio recording. This stage enabled the researcher to become immersed in participants' narratives before formal coding began.

Stage 2. Initial Exploratory Coding

Exploratory comments were generated by examining descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual aspects of each transcript. Particular attention was given to participants' emotional experiences, interpretations of counseling, identity changes, and psychological adaptation.

Stage 3. Development of Emergent Themes

Related codes were synthesized into preliminary themes representing meaningful psychological experiences within each participant's narrative.

Stage 4. Idiographic Case Analysis

Each participant's account was analyzed independently before comparisons were made across participants. This idiographic commitment represents one of the defining characteristics of IPA and ensures that each lived experience is understood within its own context before broader interpretations are developed (I. Moyo et al., 2022).

Stage 5. Cross-Case Analysis

Themes from individual participants were systematically compared to identify convergent patterns, divergent experiences, and shared meanings across different life transitions.

Stage 6. Interpretative Synthesis

Finally, the emergent themes were integrated into an overarching interpretative framework describing clients' lived experiences of psychological counseling during major life transitions. Throughout this stage, analytic memos and reflexive notes were continuously maintained to document interpretative decisions and strengthen methodological transparency.

Trustworthiness

To ensure methodological rigor, the study adopted Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness framework, comprising credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, repeated reading of interview transcripts, member checking, and peer debriefing with researchers experienced in qualitative counseling research. These procedures helped ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected participants' intended meanings.

Transferability

Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of participants' backgrounds, counseling contexts, and life-transition experiences. Thick description enables readers to determine the applicability of the findings to other contexts and populations.

Dependability

Dependability was strengthened through comprehensive documentation of methodological decisions, interview procedures, coding development, and analytical processes within a systematic audit trail. This documentation enables external reviewers to understand how findings were generated.

Confirmability

Confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling, analytic memos, external review of coding decisions, and ongoing examination of researcher assumptions. These procedures reduced the influence of researcher bias while ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives.

In addition, methodological congruence was maintained throughout the research process by ensuring consistency among the philosophical orientation, research objectives, participant recruitment, data collection, and analytical procedures (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

To enhance reporting transparency, the study was prepared in accordance with internationally recognized qualitative reporting standards, including recommendations outlined in the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) and related methodological guidance (Hircock et al., 2023).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee before data collection commenced. All participants received written and verbal explanations regarding the purpose of the study, research procedures, confidentiality measures, potential risks, and their rights as research participants.

Written informed consent was obtained before every interview. Participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from interview transcripts and replaced with participant codes (P1–P10). Audio recordings, transcripts, field notes, and analytical documents were securely stored using password-protected electronic devices accessible only to the research team.

Given that discussions involved emotionally significant life experiences, participants were reminded that they could pause or terminate the interview whenever they wished. Where appropriate, participants were also provided with information regarding available psychological counseling services should additional emotional support be required following the interview.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overview of the Findings

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) identified six interconnected themes describing clients' lived experiences of psychological counseling during major personal life transitions: (1) emotional disruption during life transitions, (2) disruption of daily functioning and identity, (3) entering psychological counseling, (4) development of the therapeutic relationship, (5) psychological change through counseling, and (6) meaning reconstruction and renewed life direction.

Although participants experienced different transitions—including job loss, divorce, bereavement, relocation, chronic illness, retirement, marriage, career change, and parenthood—their narratives revealed similar psychological processes. Most participants initially experienced emotional instability, uncertainty, diminished control, and disruption of everyday functioning. Counseling was subsequently described as a gradual process that promoted emotional expression, strengthened coping abilities, facilitated identity reconstruction, and restored hope for the future.

Table 1. Summary of Emergent Themes

Theme	Central Meaning
Emotional disruption	Intense emotional reactions during life transitions
Functional and identity disruption	Changes in daily functioning and self-concept
Entering counseling	Hesitation followed by hope and willingness to seek help
Therapeutic relationship	Trust, empathy, and collaboration facilitate change
Psychological change	Improved emotional regulation, coping, and self-awareness
Meaning reconstruction	Acceptance, identity rebuilding, and future orientation

Emotional Disruption During Major Life Transitions

Participants consistently described major life transitions as emotionally overwhelming. Anxiety, sadness, fear, grief, loneliness, frustration, and uncertainty were the most frequently reported emotional responses. Although the source of transition differed across participants, they commonly described feeling that familiar routines, expectations, and personal identities had suddenly become unstable.

Participants experiencing unemployment emphasized financial insecurity and reduced self-worth, while those experiencing divorce or bereavement described profound emotional loss and uncertainty regarding the future. Individuals facing chronic illness expressed concerns about diminished independence and changing family roles. Across these experiences, emotional distress was accompanied by feelings of helplessness and uncertainty about whether life would eventually return to normal.

These findings are consistent with phenomenological studies demonstrating that major life transitions often involve anxiety, prolonged grief, emotional distress, and embodied psychological

experiences (Fieldsend & Smith, 2020; Ng et al., 2022). Participants similarly described emotional suffering through sleep disturbances, fatigue, crying, reduced motivation, and physical tension, indicating that emotional disruption extended beyond cognitive experiences into everyday physical functioning.

Despite predominantly negative emotions, several participants simultaneously described hope, relief, or curiosity regarding future possibilities. One participant explained that although changing careers created considerable fear, it also represented an opportunity to pursue a more meaningful future. Another participant viewed relocation as both emotionally difficult and personally transformative. Such accounts support previous phenomenological findings suggesting that significant transitions frequently involve both vulnerability and opportunities for personal growth.

Uncertainty represented a central psychological experience throughout participants' narratives. Individuals frequently questioned whether they would successfully adapt, whether previous identities could be restored, and how their futures would unfold. Similar themes of ambiguity, mistrust, and uncertainty have been reported in phenomenological studies examining chronic illness and prolonged health-related transitions (Collier & Garip, 2023).

Disruption of Daily Functioning and Identity

Participants reported that emotional distress substantially affected their daily functioning. Concentration, productivity, sleep, social participation, occupational performance, and family relationships were commonly disrupted. Several participants described losing established routines and experiencing reduced motivation to engage in previously meaningful activities.

Employment-related transitions frequently resulted in diminished confidence and reduced occupational functioning. Participants experiencing bereavement or divorce described withdrawing from social interactions because everyday communication became emotionally exhausting. Those relocating to unfamiliar environments reported loneliness, homesickness, and difficulty adapting to new academic or occupational responsibilities.

Identity disruption emerged as one of the most consistent findings across interviews. Participants repeatedly described uncertainty regarding who they had become following significant life changes. Individuals who lost employment questioned their competence and personal value, while those experiencing divorce struggled to redefine themselves outside previous relationships. Participants living with chronic illness described tension between former identities characterized by independence and current realities requiring greater support from others.

These findings correspond with previous qualitative evidence indicating that life transitions frequently disrupt routines, occupational roles, interpersonal relationships, and psychological well-being (Fieldsend & Smith, 2020). Likewise, longitudinal research suggests that sustained stress during developmental transitions predicts poorer psychological health and reduced relationship satisfaction later in adulthood.

Nevertheless, participants also described gradual adaptation. Several began developing new routines, seeking support from family and friends, and redefining personal success according to changing circumstances. This process represented the initial stage of identity reconstruction that later became more evident throughout counseling.

Entering Psychological Counseling

Most participants delayed seeking professional counseling despite experiencing considerable emotional distress. Initial hesitation reflected uncertainty regarding counseling, concerns about stigma, financial limitations, and fear of being judged. Some questioned whether their problems were sufficiently serious to justify professional assistance, while others believed they should manage difficulties independently.

Participants generally sought counseling when emotional distress began interfering with daily functioning, relationships, or occupational responsibilities. Family members, friends, healthcare providers, and colleagues frequently encouraged participants to seek professional support.

The first counseling sessions were commonly described as emotionally challenging because participants remained uncertain about whether counselors could be trusted. Trust gradually developed when counselors demonstrated empathy, attentive listening, emotional validation, and respect for participants' experiences. Rather than immediately providing solutions, counselors encouraged participants to explore emotions and personal meanings collaboratively.

Development of the Therapeutic Relationship

The therapeutic relationship emerged as the central mechanism supporting participants' continued engagement in counseling. Participants consistently emphasized empathy, acceptance, authenticity, and psychological safety as essential characteristics of effective counseling.

Trust developed progressively through repeated experiences of being heard without judgment. Participants reported becoming increasingly willing to disclose painful memories and emotionally significant experiences once they perceived counselors as reliable and genuinely interested in understanding their perspectives.

Participants also valued collaborative counseling relationships. Counselors who clearly explained therapeutic goals, respected clients' preferences, and adapted interventions to individual circumstances were perceived more positively than those adopting highly directive approaches.

These findings correspond closely with Person-Centered Counseling Theory, which emphasizes empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard as conditions facilitating psychological growth. They also align with phenomenological studies demonstrating that relational depth and emotional safety are central components of therapeutic change.

Psychological Change Through Counseling

Participants consistently described counseling as a gradual rather than immediate process. Although counseling did not eliminate distress entirely, participants reported improved emotional regulation, increased self-awareness, stronger coping skills, and greater confidence in managing future challenges.

Emotional regulation represented one of the earliest psychological changes. Participants learned to identify emotions more accurately, tolerate distress without avoidance, and respond more calmly to stressful situations. Several also reported recognizing previously unhelpful patterns of thinking, including excessive self-criticism and catastrophic expectations.

Counseling encouraged participants to develop practical coping strategies, including structured daily routines, journaling, relaxation techniques, problem-solving, and seeking social support.

These strategies increased participants' confidence and restored a sense of personal agency despite ongoing life challenges.

Participants also described significant changes in how they interpreted themselves. Rather than defining personal worth through employment, relationships, or physical health alone, they gradually developed more flexible and compassionate self-understandings. Such changes reflected broader processes of psychological adaptation rather than simple symptom reduction.

Meaning Reconstruction and Renewed Life Direction

The final theme concerned participants' reconstruction of meaning following counseling. Participants gradually integrated painful transitions into broader life narratives, allowing them to reinterpret adversity as part of personal development rather than permanent failure.

Acceptance did not imply approval of difficult experiences but reflected recognition that meaningful lives could continue despite loss or uncertainty. Participants increasingly focused on future possibilities instead of solely on previous identities. Several described renewed commitment to family relationships, education, careers, community involvement, or personal well-being.

Identity reconstruction was evident across different transitions. The unemployed participant no longer defined self-worth exclusively through occupation. The participant living with chronic illness developed a broader understanding of independence, while the retired participant identified new sources of meaning through family and community participation.

Overall, participants described counseling as facilitating movement from emotional disruption and identity instability toward greater self-understanding, adaptive coping, renewed purpose, and psychological resilience (Fauziah, 2024; Safariningsih et al., 2024). Although individual experiences differed according to personal circumstances, counseling consistently functioned as a supportive environment in which participants reconstructed meaning, restored hope, and developed greater confidence in navigating future life transitions.

This study explored clients' lived experiences of psychological counseling during major personal life transitions using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. The findings demonstrate that psychological counseling supports individuals in navigating emotionally challenging transitions by facilitating emotional regulation, strengthening coping strategies, promoting identity reconstruction, and fostering renewed meaning in life. Rather than functioning solely as a means of symptom reduction, counseling was experienced as a relational and reflective process that enabled participants to reinterpret disruptive life events and adapt to changing personal circumstances.

The first major finding concerns the profound emotional impact of life transitions. Participants consistently described transitions such as bereavement, divorce, unemployment, chronic illness, relocation, and retirement as periods characterized by uncertainty, grief, anxiety, and diminished psychological stability. These findings support previous phenomenological research demonstrating that major life transitions often challenge existing assumptions about identity, security, and future expectations (Fieldsend & Smith, 2020). Emotional distress extended beyond transient reactions and frequently disrupted sleep, concentration, interpersonal relationships, and occupational functioning. These findings suggest that psychological distress during transitions should be understood as a multidimensional experience affecting emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and social functioning simultaneously.

Participants also described significant disruption to their personal identities. Rather than merely responding to external life changes, individuals struggled to reconcile previous self-concepts with new personal realities. Job loss challenged perceptions of competence, divorce altered relational identities, while chronic illness and retirement required participants to redefine independence and personal purpose. These findings are consistent with identity transition theories suggesting that psychological adjustment depends on individuals' ability to reconstruct coherent self-narratives following significant life events (Collier & Garip, 2023). Identity reconstruction therefore emerged as a central psychological task throughout participants' counseling experiences.

Another important finding concerns participants' decisions to seek professional counseling. Many delayed help-seeking because of stigma, uncertainty regarding counseling, financial concerns, or beliefs that they should independently manage emotional difficulties. Counseling was typically sought only after emotional distress began interfering substantially with daily functioning. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that perceived stigma and limited mental health literacy remain significant barriers to psychological service utilization despite increasing public awareness of mental health issues (Filia et al., 2024). The findings highlight the continued importance of improving access to mental health services while promoting public understanding of counseling as a normal and constructive response to significant life stressors.

The therapeutic relationship emerged as the most influential factor facilitating positive counseling experiences. Participants consistently emphasized empathy, acceptance, trust, authenticity, and emotional safety as essential characteristics of effective counseling. Counselors who listened attentively, validated participants' experiences, and respected their autonomy were perceived as creating conditions that enabled deeper emotional exploration and personal growth. These findings strongly support Person-Centered Counseling Theory, which proposes that empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard constitute the primary conditions facilitating therapeutic change. The present findings also align with contemporary psychotherapy research emphasizing the therapeutic alliance as one of the strongest predictors of successful counseling outcomes regardless of theoretical orientation.

Beyond the therapeutic relationship, participants described counseling as promoting meaningful psychological change through increased emotional awareness, cognitive flexibility, and adaptive coping. Rather than eliminating distress completely, counseling enabled participants to understand emotional reactions more clearly, challenge maladaptive beliefs, and develop practical strategies for managing future stressors. These findings are consistent with cognitive-behavioral perspectives suggesting that psychological adaptation involves modifying interpretations of stressful experiences while strengthening effective coping behaviors. Likewise, participants' increasing willingness to accept difficult emotions without excessive avoidance reflects principles emphasized within Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which conceptualizes psychological flexibility as a core process underlying long-term well-being.

One of the most significant findings concerns participants' reconstruction of personal meaning. Following counseling, participants gradually integrated previously distressing experiences into broader life narratives characterized by acceptance, resilience, and renewed purpose. Rather than attempting to restore previous identities, participants described developing more flexible understandings of themselves that accommodated personal loss, change, and uncertainty. These findings correspond closely with theories of post-traumatic growth and meaning reconstruction, which suggest that adversity may stimulate deeper reflection regarding personal values, relationships, and life priorities when appropriate psychological support is available. Counseling therefore appeared to facilitate not only psychological recovery but also meaningful personal transformation.

The findings also reinforce the value of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis for investigating counseling experiences. IPA enabled detailed exploration of participants' subjective interpretations while acknowledging that meaning is actively constructed through lived experience. This methodological approach proved particularly valuable because psychological counseling is inherently relational and experiential, making quantitative symptom measures alone insufficient for understanding clients' perceptions of therapeutic change. Rich narrative accounts provided nuanced insights into how counseling processes unfolded across different stages of life transition and highlighted considerable individual variation despite common underlying themes.

Several practical implications emerge from this study. First, counselors should recognize that clients experiencing major life transitions frequently present with intertwined emotional, relational, and identity-related concerns rather than isolated psychological symptoms. Therapeutic interventions should therefore incorporate opportunities for emotional expression, identity exploration, and meaning reconstruction alongside symptom management. Second, strengthening the therapeutic alliance should remain a central clinical priority because participants consistently identified relational safety as the foundation for subsequent psychological change. Finally, mental health services should continue promoting early help-seeking by reducing stigma and increasing public awareness regarding the benefits of counseling during significant life transitions.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. The relatively small sample and qualitative design limit statistical generalization to broader populations. Participants represented diverse transition experiences, which enriched the phenomenological analysis but may also have obscured differences associated with specific transition types. Future research may therefore examine counseling experiences within more homogeneous populations or employ longitudinal qualitative designs to investigate how psychological adaptation evolves over time. Mixed-method studies integrating qualitative narratives with standardized psychological outcome measures would also provide a more comprehensive understanding of counseling effectiveness during life transitions.

Overall, this study demonstrates that psychological counseling supports individuals not only by reducing emotional distress but also by facilitating identity reconstruction, strengthening psychological flexibility, and enabling clients to develop renewed meaning following significant life transitions. These findings contribute to the growing body of phenomenological counseling research by illustrating counseling as a transformative process through which individuals reinterpret adversity, rebuild coherent identities, and cultivate resilience for future developmental challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study explored clients' lived experiences of psychological counseling during major personal life transitions using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. The findings demonstrate that life transitions—including bereavement, divorce, unemployment, chronic illness, relocation, retirement, career change, marriage, and parenthood—are often experienced as emotionally disruptive events that challenge individuals' psychological well-being, daily functioning, and personal identity. Across diverse transition experiences, participants consistently described feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, grief, and identity instability prior to seeking professional psychological support.

The study further shows that psychological counseling was experienced as a gradual and transformative process rather than an immediate solution to emotional distress. Participants

emphasized that the development of a trusting therapeutic relationship characterized by empathy, acceptance, authenticity, and psychological safety enabled them to express difficult emotions openly and explore their experiences without fear of judgment. Through this collaborative process, participants developed greater emotional awareness, strengthened adaptive coping strategies, reconstructed disrupted self-identities, and gradually regained confidence in managing future challenges.

A central contribution of this study is the identification of meaning reconstruction as the culmination of the counseling process. Rather than simply reducing psychological symptoms, counseling enabled participants to reinterpret significant life transitions as meaningful experiences that contributed to personal growth and resilience. Participants increasingly accepted changes that could not be reversed, integrated challenging experiences into coherent life narratives, and developed renewed purpose and optimism for the future. These findings suggest that successful counseling during life transitions extends beyond symptom management by facilitating long-term psychological adaptation and identity development.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support Person-Centered Counseling Theory by highlighting the fundamental importance of empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard in promoting therapeutic change. The results also reinforce phenomenological perspectives that emphasize the subjective interpretation of lived experience and demonstrate the usefulness of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis for understanding how individuals construct meaning throughout counseling. By integrating these perspectives, the study contributes to the growing body of qualitative counseling research that conceptualizes counseling as a relational, developmental, and meaning-centered process.

The study also offers several practical implications. Mental health professionals should recognize that clients experiencing major life transitions frequently present with interconnected emotional, cognitive, relational, and identity-related concerns. Accordingly, counseling interventions should provide opportunities not only for emotional regulation but also for identity exploration, meaning reconstruction, and the development of sustainable coping resources. Furthermore, efforts to reduce stigma and improve access to counseling services may encourage individuals to seek professional support earlier, before emotional difficulties substantially impair daily functioning.

Despite these contributions, several limitations should be acknowledged. The qualitative design and relatively small sample size limit the transferability of findings to wider populations. In addition, participants represented various types of life transitions, which enriched the analysis but may have reduced the depth of understanding for any single transition category. Future studies are encouraged to investigate specific transition experiences using larger or more homogeneous samples, employ longitudinal qualitative designs to examine changes over time, and integrate qualitative findings with quantitative outcome measures to strengthen the evidence base for counseling effectiveness.

Overall, this study demonstrates that psychological counseling plays a significant role in helping individuals navigate major personal life transitions by fostering emotional resilience, adaptive coping, identity reconstruction, and renewed meaning in life. These findings contribute to counseling psychology by providing a deeper understanding of clients' lived experiences and by

highlighting counseling as a transformative process that supports long-term psychological adjustment during periods of significant personal change.

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