

Original Article

“Beyond the Badge, Beyond the Hurt”: Counseling Experiences of Police Officers in a Restorative Intervention Program

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Abstract. This study explores the counseling experiences of uniformed personnel reintegrated after grave administrative offenses as part of a behavior-focused restorative intervention. While counseling is crucial to holistic healing, current practices lack standardization, which may hinder officers' full recovery. Using a qualitative phenomenological research approach, this study interviewed eight male police officers from the Police Regional Office 5. Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Findings revealed initial fear and resistance to counseling, which were overcome by the establishment of a supportive, nonjudgmental, and informed space. Participants reported profound self-reflection, emotional reconstruction, and restored self-efficacy through the therapeutic process, fostering trust and connection beyond rank. The study concludes that professional counseling, marked by empathy and a strong therapeutic alliance, effectively addresses barriers within law enforcement culture, leading to significant personal transformation and successful reintegration. These insights highlight the need for standardized, responsive counseling guidelines within uniformed services to enhance police mental health and operational effectiveness.

Keywords: Counseling; Police officers; Reintegration; Restorative intervention; Uniformed personnel.

The demanding nature of law enforcement is globally acknowledged, with police officers often facing unique occupational stressors such as high-risk patrol duties, unpredictable schedules, and exposure to traumatic events (Maran et al., 2018; Raju et al., 2020). In the Philippines, the Philippine National Police (PNP) is tasked with maintaining peace, order, and public safety. However, this mandate is increasingly challenged by persistent internal problems, particularly misconduct, which erode institutional integrity and undermine public trust. In response, the PNP has recognized the need to address officer wellness by institutionalizing the “Bantay Kaisipan” Mental Health Program (PNP Memorandum Circular 2021-115), which aims to promote psychological well-being, prevent burnout, and address the mental health impact of misconduct across the force.

Despite such proactive measures, misconduct remains a pressing concern. Reports continue to highlight incidents of unwarranted use of force, corruption, and other transgressions, further eroding community confidence in law enforcement (Law, 2023). Internationally, the provision of restorative mental health services—such as those delivered through counseling programs—to law enforcement personnel demonstrates their necessity and perceived efficacy in addressing occupational stress. This is evidenced by case studies, including research

conducted in Lesotho (Sefotho & Seema, 2020) and Zimbabwe (Nyathi et al., 2024). However, in the Philippine context, there is limited research on the counseling experiences of officers facing administrative cases, creating a gap in knowledge on how rehabilitation programs specifically support psychological recovery and reintegration. Administrative cases in the PNP vary in gravity, and understanding these classifications is crucial for effective intervention. Light offenses include simple neglect of duty, while less grave offenses may involve failure to act against subordinates or engaging in unauthorized outside activities. Grave crimes, however, involve serious intentional wrongdoing, corruption, abuse of authority, or participation in criminal activities. These are defined in official directives such as NAPOLCOM MC No. 93-024 and NAPOLCOM MC No. 2016-002, and may include extortion, bribery, illegal drug involvement, torture, unjustified homicide, falsification of documents, and other abuses of authority.

A study conducted by the Police Regional Office 5 (PRO5) found that neglect of duty (nonfeasance) and misconduct (malfeasance) were the most common offenses, often linked to negligence, incompetence, anger management issues, or sexual misconduct. It concluded that psycho-social intervention programs are needed to address these challenges (Bonaobra & Macabeo, 2022). At the national level, internal records illustrate the scale of the problem. Between April 2024 and April 2025, the PNP resolved 3,455 administrative cases, with outcomes including 1,164 dismissals, 166 demotions, and 1,360 suspensions and other sanctions (Crewe, 2025). Officers who have served their penalties are referred for rehabilitation, which is more than a procedural requirement—it is an essential step to ensure they are psychologically stable and ethically prepared to rebuild public trust. In PRO5, from January 2021 to January 2025, 256 officers were referred for rehabilitation, spanning cases from neglect of duty to grave misconduct.

However, available records did not consistently document the number of counseling sessions per officer, making it difficult to evaluate the depth and consistency of interventions. To address misconduct and promote rehabilitation, the PNP introduced Behavioral-Focused Restorative Intervention (BFRI) under its revised Internal Disciplinary Mechanism (PNP Memorandum Circular 2020-020). This framework combines preventive, punitive, and restorative measures, with counseling central to the reintegration process. Counseling is intended to provide a safe psychological space where officers can confront internal struggles, address feelings of guilt or shame, and prepare for reintegration. However, inconsistencies in counseling—such as unclear session frequency and the absence of standardized protocols—limit its effectiveness, especially since different offenses may require distinct therapeutic approaches. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of police officers in PRO5 who have undergone mandatory counseling as part of their rehabilitation and reintegration from May 2024 to May 2025. It seeks to capture officers' perspectives on the effectiveness of counseling within the BFRI framework, shedding light on their psychological journey during reintegration. By doing so, the study provides evidence-based insights to strengthen counseling protocols, ensuring they are systematic, responsive, and rehabilitative. Beyond its contribution to clinical psychology, this research also supports Sustainable Development Goals 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by promoting mental wellness, ethical conduct, and institutional accountability within the police force.

Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research approach, aiming to understand research problems through the direct responses and experiences of the co-researchers (participants) (Neubauer et al., 2019). This approach enables a rich, in-depth exploration of the phenomena under investigation—in this case, counseling experiences related to behavior-focused intervention among redeemable personnel of PRO 5 who were sanctioned for grave offenses. Approval from the organization was granted in 2024, and data collection took place in the first quarter of 2025, spanning from February to June. Specifically, the study involved active uniformed PNP personnel in PRO 5 who had been charged with a grave offense, had received the imposed sanction, and had undergone counseling as part of a behavior-focused restorative intervention. These criteria ensured that participants had relevant experience related to the research problem. By employing a qualitative phenomenological approach and applying specific inclusion criteria, the study gathered valuable insights and perspectives from the target group of participants, thereby exploring their experiences with counseling sessions in a behavior-focused restorative intervention.

Participants and Sampling

The study used a purposive sample of eight police officers from the Neuro-Psychiatry Section of the Regional

Health Service, Police Regional Office 5, all of whom had undergone counseling for a behavior-focused restorative intervention during CY 2024–2025. Phenomenological research typically employs in-depth interviews with 6 to 10 participants to capture the essence of shared experiences, thereby making the sample size appropriate (Creswell, 2013; Neubauer et al., 2019). Out of 36 officers with grave administrative cases recorded between May 2024 and May 2025, comprising 32 males and four females, including one commissioned and 35 non-commissioned officers, eight were selected based on their qualifications and willingness to participate. This purposive sampling method ensured that only officers who met the study's criteria and had undergone restorative counseling were included. The research was conducted within the Philippine National Police Regional Office 5, focusing on redeemable officers charged with grave offenses but not subject to dismissal. Qualifications included being active-duty personnel with a Certificate of Duty Status, having served the sanction for their offense, and having received counseling at the RMDU 5 Neuro-Psychiatry Section. All eight participants were male non-commissioned officers, holding ranks from Police Chief Master Sergeant to Patrolman, with service lengths ranging from 8 to 19 years. Their assignments included patrol duties, investigations, intelligence, and logistics, and their offenses covered ethical violations, physical harm, public order disruptions, breaches of accountability, and absence without leave. Data collection took place from February to June 2025, and participants' experiences offered valuable insights into restorative counseling as a reintegration process. This demographic highlights the study's transferability for researchers seeking to apply findings in law enforcement settings.

Research Instrument

The researcher formulated the interview questions, which were subsequently validated by a qualitative researcher and a psychometrician. A semi-structured qualitative interview was utilized to gather data. Background information on the participants was obtained, including factors contributing to their offenses, the rationale for referral, and their understanding of the referral. Questions also addressed access to the facility, issues discussed during counseling sessions, and participants' perceptions of the counseling process. Inquiries about the influences and outcomes of the counseling sessions were included. After the interview, participants were allowed to share observations and final remarks regarding other aspects of the counseling process.

Data Gathering Procedure

Before conducting the interviews, the researcher explained the study's purpose, nature, scope, and data collection process to participants, emphasizing confidentiality and strict adherence to ethical guidelines to protect their privacy. Clear objectives were communicated at the outset to avoid confusion during data collection. Permission for data collection was secured through a formal request letter submitted to PRO 5 via the Regional Medical and Dental Unit 5, Neuro-Psychiatry Section, with approval granted in hard copy. From the authorized database, participants who had undergone counseling for the specified intervention between 2024 and 2025 were identified, and invitations to participate were sent. Eight officers consented, with six opting for online interviews and two for face-to-face sessions, each lasting 30 minutes to an hour. A semi-structured format was used, asking the same set of questions of all participants.

After the interviews, the responses were transcribed immediately to ensure data accuracy and consistency. Transcription involved converting audio and written interview materials into a structured text format for analysis. The data were then examined using a phenomenological framework that focused on identifying emerging themes, patterns, and meanings in participants' accounts. This systematic analysis enabled the researcher to interpret the lived experiences of police officers undergoing behavioral-focused restorative counseling and to uncover insights central to the research objectives.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The analysis commenced immediately after the interviews, with the audio and written materials being transcribed into a structured text format to ensure data accuracy. The study employed the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, drawing on foundational phenomenological principles (Moustakas, 1994) and contemporary guidelines (Neubauer et al., 2019). This phenomenological framework systematically examined the data to identify emerging themes, patterns, and meanings in participants' accounts, enabling the researcher to interpret lived experiences and uncover insights central to the research objectives. The core IPA process involved: bracketing subjectivity (*epoché*); phenomenological reduction, which eliminated redundant data, reduced experiences into meaningful categories, and identified key themes, or invariants; imaginative variation, which further examined the underlying structures of the phenomenon for comprehensive understanding; and finally, the synthesis of essence, which combined individual narratives into a cohesive representation of group

experiences, capturing the phenomenon's overall meaning.

The trustworthiness and methodological rigor of this phenomenological study were ensured through adherence to the four criteria for qualitative research established by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility, which demonstrates the truth value of the findings, was achieved through multiple strategies: member checks, where interpretations were confirmed with participants to ensure accurate representation of their experiences; peer debriefing via peer reviews during horizontalization to ensure balanced treatment of responses; and expert validation by a police psychologist and a psychologist from the National Bureau of Investigation, which strengthened the conceptualization of the data. Dependability was addressed by maintaining a clear audit trail that documented the data analysis, thereby making the research process fully traceable and verifiable. Transferability was established by providing a rich, thick description of the setting and participants (as detailed in 2.2 Participants and Sampling), allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar law enforcement contexts. Finally, Confirmability was ensured through the practice of researcher reflexivity and the core phenomenological assumption of epoché (bracketing). This required the researcher to set aside preconceptions and to clarify personal biases, a process supported by a dedicated subjectivity statement written before analysis. These rigorous procedures collectively ensured the study's soundness.

Ethical Considerations

This phenomenological research adhered strictly to ethical guidelines to safeguard the rights and welfare of all co-researchers, who are active uniformed personnel. Formal approval for the study was secured through a letter of request submitted to the Police Regional Office 5 (PRO 5) via the Regional Medical and Dental Unit 5. All participants provided written informed consent before participating, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their unrestricted right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Given the sensitive nature of participants' experiences with grave offenses and the mandatory counseling, strict measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity: participants were assigned pseudonyms or numerical codes in all transcripts and reports, and all collected data were stored securely in password-protected files accessible only to the primary researcher. The researcher maintained professional integrity and non-disclosure of the specific details of the offenses, prioritizing participants' privacy over institutional reporting requirements throughout the research process.

Results and Discussion

Overview of Themes

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the eight participants' counseling experiences yielded five major themes and ten corresponding subthemes, which capture the essence of their self-restoration journey within the intervention framework. These themes are summarized in Table 1 and serve as the framework for the discussion of the findings.

Table 1. *Overview of Themes*

Major Theme	Subtheme
Theme 1: The Vulnerability of Opening Up	1.1 Fear and Resistance to Counseling 1.2 Pushing Through Emotional Walls
Theme 2: Feeling Seen and Heard in a Uniformed Space	2.1 Empathy and Understanding from Counselors 2.2 Confidentiality and Emotional Safety
Theme 3: Restoring Self Through Guided Reflection	3.1 Counseling as a Mirror for the Self 3.2 Emotional Regulation and Mental Clarity
Theme 4: Building Trust and Connection Beyond the Badge	4.1 Therapeutic Alliance and Mutual Respect 4.2 The Power of Sharing and Validation
Theme 5: Lasting Impact of the Counseling Experience	5.1 Internalized Growth and Emotional Maturity 5.2 Counseling as a Turning Point

The Vulnerability of Opening Up

Fear and Resistance to Counseling

Fear and self-consciousness were strongly evident in the participants' accounts, rooted in concerns about misinterpretation, shame, and guilt connected to their past actions. The narratives revealed that the institutional climate surrounding restorative counseling shaped their perceptions of the process as punitive rather than therapeutic, creating resistance and reluctance.

Officer Sean stated that: "*Takot ako na magfail sa mga sasabihin ko*" [I'm afraid I'll fail in what I say]. He further

admitted: *"No ang sagot ko pero yes talaga. Alam ko sa puso ko na kailangan kong mag-lie. Naghinder saakin na baka hindi ako mabigyan din ng certificate"* [I answered no, but really yes. I knew in my heart that I had to lie. I was hindered by the thought that I might not be given a certificate].

Officer Oscar stated that: *"Siguro punishment ito sa'akin"* [Maybe this is a punishment for me].

These statements provide a clear picture of how fear of failure and anxiety over possible punishment shaped the participants' engagement. Officer Sean's admissions highlight impression management, where he attempted to present a socially acceptable image, while Officer Oscar's belief that counseling was a form of punishment reinforced reluctance. Collectively, these responses illustrate how institutional expectations and personal shame worked together to prevent openness, causing officers to perceive counseling as another "test" rather than a path to healing.

The findings align strongly with existing literature that documents how mental health stigma is deeply ingrained in police culture. Scholars have observed that officers are less likely to seek therapy because of fears of negative career consequences, including being perceived as weak (Drew & Martin, 2021; Burns & Buchanan, 2020; Bell et al., 2021). As Burns and Buchanan (2020) emphasize, officers often anticipate discrimination when acknowledging their struggles. Extending these insights, this research reveals another crucial dimension: the internalized shame and guilt of sanctioned police officers. These internal struggles, combined with external pressures such as the institutional perception of counseling as disciplinary, pose significant barriers to authentic participation and are integral to understanding the complex process of self-restoration.

Taken together, the initial experience of counseling is profoundly shaped by the fear and institutional stigma ingrained in police culture, confirming a significant drawback of the behavior-focused intervention's current implementation. This finding is crucial, as it highlights the primary barrier to the intervention's effectiveness and directly addresses the study's objective of identifying potential drawbacks, ensuring future protocols prioritize de-stigmatizing the mandatory referral process itself.

Pushing Through Emotional Walls

A significant subtheme emerged: participants actively pushed through their emotional barriers during counseling. At the heart of this process was the difficulty of confronting painful memories, which elicited deep emotional strain.

Officer Art revealed the burden of recalling his experiences: *"Mabigat alalahanin yung dati, pinipigilan kong umiyak"* [It is heavy to remember the past, I am holding back tears]. The disclosure underscores the intense internal struggle to regulate emotions when revisiting traumatic or difficult experiences, reflecting the broader professional requirement for police officers to manage and suppress strong emotions constantly. This boundary-pushing often required a facilitator.

Officer Sean described a gradual yet transformative experience of validation: *"Unit-unti, sinasabi niya mismo yung nararamdaman ko"* [Little by little, they were expressing exactly what I was feeling]. These findings demonstrate that the counselor created a safe environment, enabling participants to express emotions they had difficulty identifying or accepting. This transformation was critical enabto allowing the officers to move beyond their initial emotional suppression and resistance.

This struggle aligns with existing studies showing that individuals in high-stress professions often develop ways to compartmentalize or suppress difficult emotions to remain effective in their duties (Drew & Williamson, 2024). Furthermore, Officer Sean's experience resonates with foundational therapeutic principles emphasizing the deep alliance and resonance between client and counselor, which are recognized as a crucial "common factor" in effective treatment (Cuijpers et al., 2019). This process of carefully articulating the client's feelings is vital, as it allows clients to disclose their struggles more openly and acknowledge their underlying emotions (Guindon, 2019). These therapeutic techniques became a counter-structure to the ingrained stigma about mental health within police culture, which often compels officers to conceal their vulnerabilities (Drew & Martin, 2021). By fostering a supportive and empathic therapeutic environment, the experience was transformed from one of resistance into one of gradual openness and restoration.

To conclude this theme, the process of pushing through emotional walls is a core component of the intervention's perceived benefit, directly facilitating the officer's movement from resistance toward emotional regulation. This finding directly informs the objective regarding intervention mechanisms, showing that the counselor's empathetic role is paramount in breaking down internal barriers and fostering the vulnerability necessary for genuine self-restoration.

Feeling Seen and Heard in a Uniformed Space

Empathy and Understanding from Counselors

Under this theme emerged the participants' direct perception of a non-judgmental and validating presence during counseling. Despite their past wrongdoings, the officers experienced relief at being understood without criticism. This counters their prevalent fear of judgment, which is deeply tied to the stigma surrounding administrative offenses within the police force. Such stigma is not only organizational but also social, as research in the Philippines shows that administrative cases—often related to neglect of duty or misconduct—can affect officers' social relationships and family dynamics, while some officers report minimal effects on organizational or economic aspects (Bonaobra & Macabeo, 2022; Logronio et al., 2024).

Officer Sean stated that: "*The way niya i-assess yung past ko, alam niya kung paano. No judgment*" [The way they assess my past, they know how. No judgment]. His statement demonstrates how therapeutic empathy and acceptance provided by the counselor dismantled the defensive structures shaped by police norms. This validating approach created a safe environment where fear of criticism was reduced, enabling participants to feel seen and heard. Another officer's account further emphasized the sense of comfort.

Officer Ed stated that: "*Ang sarap sa pakiramdam na makarinig na, nandito lang kami*" [It feels good to hear that, 'we are just here for you']. This simple yet powerful assurance reflects the counselor's role in creating a supportive therapeutic environment, a structural element foundational to effective counseling. Such gestures align directly with Rogerian client-centered therapy principles, which emphasize empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence as essential conditions for personal growth and healing (Bayliss-Conway et al., 2020). Within a hierarchical and emotionally suppressive police culture, the counselor's ability to empathize and deeply understand allowed participants to move beyond emotional defenses toward a more authentic and restorative process. This shift not only supported their professional identity but also addressed their personal need for guidance and support.

Although direct evidence of client-centered therapy's core conditions within the police context is limited, broader literature affirms the significance of empathetic, culturally sensitive, and supportive therapeutic relationships for officers' mental health. Studies indicate that empathy and understanding are key to reducing stigma and fostering openness in therapy (Biggs et al., 2021; Collazo, 2020). These findings underscore that the presence of non-judgment and validation can serve as powerful tools in countering the barriers imposed by police culture, thereby enabling counseling to become a space of authentic self-expression and healing. Collectively, this theme demonstrates that the experience of empathy and understanding is a critical benefit and structural component of the intervention, directly meeting the study's objective of identifying perceived benefits. The counselor's nonjudgmental stance is pivotal in countering both organizational and social stigma, thereby promoting a shift toward authentic engagement and personal healing necessary for professional reintegration.

Confidentiality and Emotional Safety

Following the recognition of the counselor's essential role in the therapeutic process, the subtheme of Confidentiality and Emotional Safety emerged as vital, allowing participants to engage securely. This profound experience of safety, rooted in the participants' trust and freedom to share, emanated directly from Officer Ed's statement: "*Nandyan yan sa harapan ko, nakauniporme, tiwala ka na kakampi mo*" [They are right there in front of me, in uniform, you trust that they are your ally]. This underscores the client's deep connection. The quote highlights the distinctive perspective in which the counselor, when viewed in a "uniform," is regarded as a supportive ally rather than an authoritative figure.

Officer Noe's statement further reinforced this alliance: "*Malaya kong nasabi yung totoong nangyari*" [I was freely able to say what truly happened]. His reflection demonstrates the establishment of psychological safety that encourages the open sharing of personal thoughts, an essential foundation for effective counseling. Structurally, this subtheme highlights the establishment of a secure, non-judgmental space through the interplay of the typical

barriers in the uniformed space. Consistently, literature, culture, and organizational expectations within police forces often promote emotional detachment and depersonalization as coping mechanisms, which in turn encourage officers to hide their true feelings not only at work but also in their personal lives (Lennie et al., 2020). In a culture where expressing vulnerability can be deemed weak, the restorative counseling space offers a fresh breath of air to its clients—especially since the counselor in uniform was perceived as an “ally” (as Officer Ed noted). This can serve as a stepping stone toward establishing a positive therapeutic relationship. While there is no clear evidence yet on police officers’ perceptions of submitting to uniformed counselors, broader systematic evidence on first responder mental health indicates that interventions must be accessible and delivered within a trusted, supportive organizational climate to increase help-seeking (Vogt et al., 2019). From the findings, in the behavior-focused restorative intervention, counseling sessions facilitated by uniformed counselors enabled officers to draw “support” from someone who shared their professional identity, as evidenced by Officer Ed’s response.

This finding also provided counterevidence to the results of Musita et al. (2021), who argued that “peer counseling is ineffective in fostering self-efficacy.” While the present context focused on professional counseling rather than peer counseling, the strong theme of “Feeling Seen and Heard in a Uniformed Space” with uniformed counselors suggests that shared identity and the establishment of trust are highly effective in fostering emotional safety, validation, and ultimately, elements of self-efficacy. The positive perception of the uniformed counselor as an “ally” (Officer Ed) indicates that the “uniformed space” can provide perceived support and understanding. This, in turn, may implicitly enhance self-efficacy, contradicting the blanket “ineffectiveness” of peer-like support. Given that a uniformed counselor may share a cultural background with the officers, the results suggest that the counselor’s qualities (e.g., empathy, trust-building) and the environment (safe, nonjudgmental) are more critical than adherence to a strict “peer” definition.

Accentuating the “freedom” Officer Noe experienced encouraged him to express what truly happened, countering institutional pressures within an intimate counseling space with a trusted ally. The importance of therapeutic alliance has long been recognized in the literature as a central concept in psychotherapy, referring to the collaborative and trusting relationship between a clinician and a patient—a crucial factor in the success of therapy (Wampold & Flückiger, 2023). The work of Darazsdi & Bialka (2023) demonstrates how a positive, cooperative therapy relationship may help clients rebuild their self-esteem, build trust, and provide a safe place to confront and combat internalized stigma. Furthermore, therapists who are aware of their own biases and intentionally develop agreement, shared meaning, and empathy with their clients may also help reduce the adverse effects of stigma. In this context, the therapist’s role of creating a secure space transformed what could have been an intimidating dynamic into a genuinely therapeutic one.

Ultimately, establishing confidentiality and emotional safety is a foundational benefit that supports the study’s objective of understanding effective mechanisms. The perception of the uniformed counselor as an “ally” transforms the therapeutic space from an intimidating, hierarchical dynamic into a truly therapeutic one, enabling officers to express themselves freely and facilitating the rebuilding of self-esteem and trust, which are critical to their personal restoration.

Restoring Self Through Guided Reflection

Counseling as a Mirror for the Self

Counseling, according to the participants, was described as a contemplative process that enabled them to explore new perspectives about their inner emotions and beliefs. Officer Andy stated that: “*Kinokontra niya yung emosyon ko, yung nasa loob ko, pero nakatulong iyon*” [They opposed my emotion, what was within me, but it helped]. This deep reflection was also evident in Officer Sean’s experience: “*Habang nagkkwento ako, napapaisip din ako*” [While I was telling my story, I was also thinking]. Beyond self-reflection, the counselor also helped counter negative self-perception. Officer Andy stated that: “*Pinakita niya kung ano pang natirang mabuti sa’akin*” [They showed me what good was still left in me].

These accounts illustrate how counselors effectively connected with officers’ internal struggles, thereby facilitating deeper self-awareness and emotional reconstruction. Narrating past experiences fosters introspection and enables participants to confront and process the dynamics of their past actions. The counselor’s role in affirming positive attributes helps balance officers’ self-perceptions after facing administrative offenses, countering feelings of shame and isolation.

"Literature widely emphasizes that counseling strategies must allow police officers to confront and work through negative emotions, which play a significant role in preventing mental health issues and building resilience (Krishnan et al., 2020; Carlson-Johnson et al., 2020). Officer Sean's narrative aligns with the principles of insight-oriented therapy, which emphasize self-reflection and the recognition of recurring dysfunctional patterns (Wells, 2019). Furthermore, the counselor's affirmation addresses the internalized stigma that officers struggle with (Chatterjee & Ryan, 2020; Gau et al., 2022). Research affirms that affirmations contribute to emotional recovery and therapeutic success (Yang et al., 2024), positioning individuals not as prisoners of past mistakes but as resilient persons with potential for change.

To recap, Counseling as a Mirror for the Self is identified as a vital benefit that addresses the study's objective of identifying restorative intervention mechanisms. The counselor's ability to facilitate introspection, affirm positive qualities, and counter the punitive perception of the space is critical to restoring the officer's self-esteem and professional identity, both essential steps toward reintegration.

Emotional Regulation and Mental Clarity

The participants demonstrated significant progress in their Emotional Regulation and Mental Clarity through counseling, particularly in their improved self-awareness and understanding of emotions. Officer Oscar stated that: "*Nagkaroon ako ng malalim na pangunawa sa nangyari sa akin*" [I gained a deep understanding of what happened to me]. He further shared: "*Aware na ako sa mga weaknesses ko*" [I am now aware of my weaknesses]. This process was echoed by Officer Ed, who revealed a crucial insight: "*Kailangan pala talagang ramdamin yung mga negative emotions para magheal*" [It turns out you need to feel negative emotions to heal]. These statements mark a crucial transition from emotional suppression to genuine processing. Officer Oscar's deeper understanding of weaknesses demonstrates mental clarity. At the same time, Officer Ed's breakthrough illustrates how counseling created a safe environment where officers could release long-held emotions and recognize that embracing negative emotions is necessary for healing.

For many police officers, embracing and acknowledging negative emotions runs counter to their professional culture, which socializes officers to maintain control and may lead to fear of being perceived as weak (Gavin & Porter, 2024). However, within the therapeutic sessions, they found a rare space to let go of these restrictions, demonstrating how counseling fosters critical insights and enables healthier emotional responses. This reshaping of internal coping strategies mirrors approaches such as affect regulation therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which emphasize recognizing and responding adaptively to emotions (Muñoz-Navarro et al., 2022). Such clarity and constructive emotional processing are vital for long-term psychological health and successful reintegration, helping officers move from reactive coping to more resilient and adaptive patterns in the aftermath of administrative offenses.

The core insight is that achieving Emotional Regulation and Mental Clarity is a key benefit of the restorative intervention, directly addressing the objective of determining positive outcomes. The findings demonstrate that counseling effectively counters professional norms of emotional suppression, facilitating deep self-awareness that is crucial for sustained psychological health and successful professional and personal reintegration.

Building Trust and Connection Beyond the Badge

Therapeutic Alliance and Mutual Respect

A subtheme of therapeutic alliance and mutual respect emerged as fundamental to the counseling experience, transcending the inherent power dynamics of the profession. Officer Oscar stated that: "*May agwat sa ranggo, pero ramdam ko yung husay at respeto*" [There is a rank difference, but I felt the skill and respect]. This was echoed by Officer Ed, who stated that: "*Naramdaman kong naiintindihan ako*" [I felt understood]. Officer Ed also added that: "*Nakakahiya lang na bilang senior, maging bad example ako. Kapag nakasuhan ka, iba na rin yung tingin sa'yo ng ibang tao*" [It's embarrassing as a senior to be a bad example. Once you are charged, people look at you differently]. These reflections underscore that feeling valued, respected, and understood formed the groundwork for deeper engagement. The counselor's skill in cultivating a non-discriminatory space bridged the power dynamics, ensuring that the "agwat sa ranggo" (rank difference), as recognized by Officer Oscar, did not become an obstacle. Officer Ed's experience highlights the weight of both self-stigma and societal stigma, intensified by sanctioning.

The success of the counseling sessions in challenging the police culture's reliance on "command and control" is

notable (Lennie et al., 2020), as the environment fostered competence and respect, allowing officers to feel safe in expressing themselves. While specific studies on therapeutic alliance in police settings are limited, related literature emphasizes that trust, teamwork, and mutual respect are crucial for effective counseling, especially in overcoming barriers of confidentiality, stigma, and stoicism. The culturally specific experiences of shame and stigma tied to administrative offenses in the Philippines (Bonaobra & Macabeo, 2022; Logronio et al., 2024) provide a necessary local context for these findings. This context highlights that the counselor's skill in establishing respect and dissolving rank barriers is foundational to trust and openness in the Filipino law enforcement setting.

Crucially, this theme highlights the development of Therapeutic Alliance and Mutual Respect as vital benefits that address the study's objective of understanding effective intervention mechanisms. By successfully dissolving rank barriers and addressing the officers' internalized shame, the counselor laid the essential foundation for trust and vulnerability, enabling the subsequent process of emotional release and self-restoration.

The Power of Sharing and Validation

The trust and connection built are strongly validated by participants' experiences of The Power of Sharing and Validation during their counseling sessions. Officer Noe stated that: "*Pakiramdam ko, nadepensahan ko yung sarili ko*" [I felt like I was able to defend myself]. Officer Ino further illustrated the relief derived from sharing by stating that: "*Gumaan yung kabigatan na dala ko*" [The heaviness I was carrying became lighter]. These statements reflect an internal shift of reclaiming dignity and perspective, a critical process for officers who have faced public scrutiny. The expressions underscore the cathartic effect of narrating one's story in a safe, nonjudgmental space, demonstrating the empowerment and emotional liberation that come from articulating personal experiences without fear of disciplinary repercussions.

For officers undergoing reintegration after serious administrative offenses, cultural norms emphasizing stoicism, silence, and fear of judgment often create structural barriers to open self-expression (Drew & Martin, 2021). The counseling sessions countered this structural barrier by fostering psychological safety. Honest, validated sharing transforms the "*kabigatan*" (heaviness) of their experiences into something manageable, aligning with the concept of validation in therapy, which affirms clients' experiences, builds trust, and encourages emotional openness—crucial for populations like police officers (Okamoto et al., 2019). By creating a space for officers to "defend" themselves and release emotional burdens, counselors provide a structural mechanism for processing traumatic narratives and facilitating self-acceptance.

Collectively, The Power of Sharing and Validation is a key benefit that addresses the study's objective of identifying positive outcomes. This finding demonstrates how the intervention facilitates emotional liberation and dignity reclamation, which are central to accelerating self-acceptance and supporting the officer's personal restoration beyond past difficulties.

Lasting Impact of the Counseling Experience

Internalized Growth and Emotional Maturity

The participants' growth is evident in their ability to reframe past adversity, resulting in a clearer sense of purpose and greater resilience to internal stigma. Officer Oscar stated that: "*Ngayon kaya ko nalang tawanan*" [Now I can laugh at it]. This reflects a shift from shame and perceived brokenness ("*Broken-arrow ka na, may lamat ka na*") to a more accepting perspective. Officer Mon further expressed this internal transformation, stating that: "*Yung pananaw ko ngayon sa buhay, mas may direksyon na. Mas may focus na*" [My perspective on life now has more direction. It has more focus]. These reflections highlight the tangible outcomes of the counseling sessions, in which officers engaged in self-evaluation and addressed challenges constructively. Officer Oscar's ability to "laugh" at past labels illustrates successful cognitive restructuring, while Officer Mon's regained "direction" and "focus" exemplify the restoration of self-efficacy and purpose.

Police culture, especially in the context of administrative offenses, often imposes rigid structures of blame and stigma that perpetuate psychological "*lamat*" or flaws (Farrow, 2024). The counseling process facilitated adaptive coping strategies through cognitive restructuring, a central component of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which aims to challenge maladaptive thought patterns (Mottram, 2021). CBT techniques are increasingly recognized in police support programs for managing stress and improving decision-making (Dube et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2020). Officer Mon's outcome aligns with the restoration of self-efficacy, often diminished by trauma or moral injury (Kvitsiani et al., 2023). Overall, these findings underscore how counseling provided a structured

environment for reflection and reframing, enabling officers to overcome personal and professional shame.

To conclude this theme, the attainment of Internalized Growth and Emotional Maturity is a key benefit that addresses the study's objective of determining positive outcomes. By fostering resilience and facilitating cognitive restructuring, the intervention prepares officers for continued service and personal well-being, directly contributing to their successful psychological reintegration.

Counseling as a Turning Point

The participants described counseling as a pivotal turning point in their lives, significantly impacting both professional confidence and personal acceptance. Officer Ed stated that: "*Yung kumpanyansa na kailangan ko bilang imbestigador, mas nadagdagan*" [The confidence I need as an investigator, it increased]. Officer Ino emphasized the intervention's influence on his healing, stating that: "*Kung wala iyon, hindi siguro magiging ganito kabilis yung pagtanggap ko*" [If it were not for that, my acceptance would not have been this fast]. These experiences illustrate how counseling facilitated an immediate shift from prior uncertainty or prolonged emotional struggle to a greater sense of competence and emotional calm. The behavioral-focused restorative intervention provided a structured framework for officers to rebuild self-trust and restore professional efficacy. At the same time, the expedited acceptance process ("pagtanggap") highlights counseling's role in mitigating self-blame.

The tangible improvement in professional functioning and confidence aligns with research on self-efficacy, which indicates that overcoming challenges and receiving support can significantly increase belief in one's abilities (Songze et al., 2024). Interventions targeting self-efficacy are significant for police officers exposed to high stress and trauma (Aremu, 2021; Eikenhout et al., 2022). Furthermore, the transformative process, as Officer Ino noted, directly counters prolonged healing caused by self-blame and societal judgment (Farrow, 2024). While countering the study by Musita et al. (2021) on the efficacy of "peer-like" support, this finding underscores that the supportive, empathetic qualities of the uniformed counselor are more critical than a strict definition of peer in fostering psychological growth and confidence.

Notably, this theme confirms that Counseling as a Turning Point is a critical benefit, addressing the objective of understanding lasting impacts. The intervention accelerates emotional processing and acceptance, thereby enhancing professional competence and self-efficacy, positioning the officer for empowered engagement in their duties and the completion of the restoration process.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study established that restorative counseling is a transformative process critical to the rehabilitation and reintegration of police officers, contingent upon the establishment of a trusted, non-judgmental therapeutic alliance. By successfully overcoming initial vulnerability and institutional stigma, officers achieved emotional maturity, restored confidence, and renewed professional purpose, confirming counseling's value as a path toward true self-restoration rather than mere punishment. The findings compel specific actions to optimize the Behavioral-Focused Restorative Intervention (BFRI) framework, highlighting the urgent need for standardized counseling protocols that mandate empathy, confidentiality, and trauma-informed approaches. The study's primary contribution is to underscore that organizational systematization is necessary to ensure consistent program effectiveness, thereby supporting officer wellness, restoring public trust, and strengthening institutional integrity, aligning with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3 and 16. To generalize these findings, future research should investigate the experiences of female police officers undergoing the BFRI, and comparative studies across different Police Regional Offices could identify regional variables that influence the therapeutic alliance and successful reintegration.

Contributions of Authors

The author is the sole author of this work.

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Conflict of Interests

The Principal Investigator, Hillary N. Balderas, is a member of the Philippine National Police, the site from which the research sample was collected, and the primary beneficiary of the findings. This presents a potential non-financial conflict of interest. However, the researcher affirms that this study was undertaken solely to address a critical operational problem within the institution and is driven by a commitment to evidence-based improvement and professional integrity, not personal gain. The entire protocol was reviewed and approved by the

Polytechnic University of the Philippines-Graduate School. Furthermore, the researcher maintained continuous epoché (bracketing) to set aside personal preconceptions; all data analysis was conducted independently by other psychologists in law enforcement to ensure strict objectivity; and the results were reported fully and transparently, regardless of outcome.

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