

Exploring Body Language in Gestalt Counselling of Students at a Public University Using Hermeneutic Phenomenology

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how counsellors utilise body language Gestalt counselling techniques to assist students at a public university and to understand the experiences of counsellors and clients in this context. Based on a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the study used an expert purposive sampling method to select 4 counsellors at a public university and 16 students who had prior exposure to the body language counselling techniques for this study. The participants were interviewed using semi-structured interviews and document analysis based on a retrospective record review employed to collect data. The data from interviews was analysed using thematic analysis. The research findings demonstrated that body language played a crucial role in the interaction between counsellors and clients, influencing the effectiveness of the counselling process. Positive results indicated that both counsellors and clients benefitted from enhanced communication and gained additional insights beyond verbal expressions, leading to increased awareness. However, some participants experienced challenges and discomfort when their body language was pointed out by the counsellor. Additionally, the study found that body language techniques were most effective when complemented by other counselling methods. It was suggested that caution should be exercised when using body language techniques, as they could potentially lead the client to become defensive and hinder progress. Nonetheless, when used correctly, these techniques could help both the counsellor and client become more cognizant of their body language and utilize it to enrich their dialogue.

Keywords: Body language counselling technique, Gestalt Counselling, student Counselling,

INTRODUCTION

Body language is a form of non-verbal communication that is vital for counselling. It includes non-verbal language, where the movements and behaviours of the body are used instead of words to express and convey information. Abdulghafor and Ali (2022) posit that body language involves hand movements, facial expressions and hints, eye movements, tone of voice, body movements and positions, gestures, use of space, and the like. Body language informs individuals about their true feelings because it usually occurs unconsciously. Feelings are mostly expressed through body language. Non-verbal communication just like verbal communication is equally two ways as it involves sending and receiving of information. For counsellors, it even goes beyond just two-way communication to include far more than merely having a conversation with the client's vocalisations and nonverbals but responding to their interpretations, judgements, questions, and so on, as prompted by their inner voice (Paré and Lysack, 2004).

AIPC (2009) adds that language is mostly associated with spoken or written language and it is the unique ability that sets humans apart from other primates. To this effect, body language is supreme as it communicates volumes of messages. For instance, 93% of the communication is exchanged through non-verbal and of this, 65% to 90% is communicated through body language. However, as far as 2009, AIPC noted that body language was taken for granted as it occurs involuntarily or semi-voluntary but represents mental dispositions in many instances. Literature of this nature gives insights into the role that body language plays in communication. It becomes necessary to explore how the body language counselling technique advocated by

the Gestalt counselling theory was used to help students with peer relationship problems such as loss of contact with the environment, confluence, unfinished business and fragmentation at a public university. According to Hattie (2012), students who feel rejected by their peers may feel lonely and disconnected, which can lead to disengagement and lower achievement. Similarly, Maunder (2018), and Ndhlovu and Mwanza (2024) found that positive social interactions in school can improve students' overall experiences. Students who have strong connections with their peers tend to adjust better to university life, while those who struggle with peer relationships may have a harder time adjusting.

Afdal (2016) suggests that counsellor needs to understand clients' nonverbal expressions and develop skills to assist clients in giving meaning to their body language. Similarly, Ndhlovu, (2015) says the body of a client is a source of information for counselling while the body of the counsellor is a means of communication with a client. The body language of the counsellor and client is vital in a counselling session. On the contrary, Afdal (2016) observed that many counsellors only focus on what the clients say without paying attention to what is indicated by nonverbal behaviour mostly depicted by the body. For a Gestalt counsellor, the client needs to be allowed to feel the direct presence of the counselling session through the body language technique and give their meanings.

Attention to body language in counselling is a way to gain insights into the non-verbal expressions of clients in therapy. Aboh (2015) states that nonverbal communication is a tool used to express thoughts and ideas and forms a very important form of communication. Aboh further recommends that care be exercised in how individuals use nonverbal expressions like their body language, face, eye blinking, hands and other gestures as it may have several interpretations.

Palmer (2011) adds when applied to counselling, that body language is a subtle indicator of intense emotions. Nonverbal gestures like posture, body movements, and other expressions in a counselling session may be an opportunity to help the client communicate something. By so doing the client is helped to attach meaning to that behaviour, often, the client is asked to explain the meaning of the expression or feeling to gain awareness in the now moment. Langmaid and Begum (2024) add that if the Gestalt counsellor notices a client shifting in the seat or tapping a foot, he would mention his observation and may even ask the client to give the foot a voice and talk about it. Through such observations of nonverbal behaviour or body language, the clients are helped to recognize the interruption of contact and to be aware of the possible hindrances from gaining clarity through awareness. Peterson and Gough (2019) argue that techniques without meaning are not that important, but with meaning to the body language facilitate self-awareness in clients. The body language technique is, therefore, a tool used to bring about self-awareness in clients with peer relationship problems.

Similarly, Anake and Asor (2012) identified gestures as non-verbal cues, a type of body part movements that convey a certain meaning that counsellors can explore and utilize in a counselling relationship. The counsellor needs competence in interpreting the use of gestures by the client in counselling and how effectively to use such gestures to help clients. Despite available literature, the usage of body language from the Gestalt theory point of view to help students with peer relationship problems was not clearly articulated. Based on this background, there was a need to explore how counsellors utilised body language counselling techniques to assist students with peer relationship problems such as loss of contact with the environment, confluence, unfinished business and fragmentation.

Body language is a valuable indicator of the emotions experienced during counselling (Palmer, 2011). Similarly, Anake and Asor (2012) identified gestures as non-verbal cues that convey a certain meaning that counsellors can explore and utilise in a counselling relationship to help a client. However, how the body language technique advocated by the Gestalt theory of counselling helped students with peer relationship problems at one of the universities in Zambia remained unclear. The implication of not attending to such a knowledge gap was the perpetuation of loss of contact with the environment, confluence, unfinished business and or fragmentation in the students' lives. It therefore, became imperative to explore the benefits of the body language counselling technique to students with peer relationship problems at a public university in Zambia by understanding the experiences of counsellors and students in the process of using the body language counselling technique.

The objective of the study was to explore benefits of body language counselling technique to students with peer relationship problems such as loss of contact with the environment, confluence, unfinished business and fragmentation at a public university in Zambia.

METHODOLOGY

A constructivist paradigm was used to explore the lived experiences of counsellors and students who had been counselled using the body language counselling technique in resolving problems relating to peer relationships. In line with Badil et al., (2023), the study used an interpretative hermeneutic phenomenological design to understand, describe and interpret the experiences of students who had peer relationship problems and used body language counselling techniques to be helped. Manen (1997), suggested that interpretative hermeneutic phenomenology is guided by the following four life world existential of lived experiences: (a) Lived body - Corporeality (b) lived time - Temporality, (c) lived space – Spatiality, and (d) lived human relation - Relationality.

In relation to this study, lived body, lived time, lived space and lived relations were used as follows: students and their counsellors who experienced the empty chair and body language counselling techniques were the lived body. How the students and the counsellors felt during the counselling interactions was referred to as lived time, while the subjective experiences of the counselling techniques were referred to as lived space. The lived relations were the outcome of the counselling interactions between the students and their counsellors.

The sample size was 20 participants comprising four counsellors and 16 students who had been exposed to the body language counselling technique. The four (4) counsellors were selected using expert purposive sampling based on their qualifications and being practicing counsellors at the university. The 16 students were selected using criterion sampling as the selection was based on evidence from the records of counsellors to have been exposed to the body language counselling technique. The research employed semi-structured interviews and record reviews to gather data, which was subsequently analysed thematically.

The thematic analysis followed Peel's (2020) six-step process, which involved collecting, engaging with, coding, generating code categories, conceptualizing themes, and contextualizing and representing the findings. The trustworthiness of the study results was guaranteed by bracketing researchers' influence from influencing the study outcome. In addition, in line with Lincoln and Guba, (1985) credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and reflexivity were applied to ensure that the results of the study are trustworthy. To ensure credibility, participants validated the findings. As regard to transferability, the researchers advise that caution must be exercised in generalising qualitative results. However, despite the caution in generalising the results, the researchers assures that the results are dependable. This is on the basis that participants validated the results and has been argued with relevant literature that was reviewed. As regards to confirmability, since the interpretations were not figments of the inquirers' imagination but derived from the data confirmability is guaranteed. Reflexivity implies the process of critical self-reflection about oneself as a researcher (own biases, preferences, preconceptions), and the research relationship (relationship to the respondent, and how the relationship affects participant's answers to questions). Being professional counsellors and researchers, the biases were bracketed by restraining oneself from influencing or being judgemental in the process of the research.

FINDINGS

The study examined the benefits of body language counseling techniques for students experiencing peer relationship issues, such as disconnection from their environment, confluence, unfinished business, and fragmentation, at a public university. The demographic breakdown of participants included 4 males and 12 females. Students who faced challenges related to isolation, environmental disconnection, confluence, unfinished business, or fragmentation received support in various ways, including the following:

i). Enhanced Communication with the Counsellors

The experiences of majority of the participants showed that through the use of body language counselling techniques, there was enhanced communication. In support of this finding, one of the student participants said

that *“I was able to communicate effectively with my counsellor”* (PS4), while Participant #1 indicated that *“the counsellor and I, we were able to interact mutually”* (PS1).

ii). Students had increased self-awareness

The study established that a counsellor's ability to pick on the actions and help clients attach meanings contributed to clarifying the peer relationship problems and bringing about self-awareness. For instance, Participant #3 had this to say, *“I have gained increased self-awareness of my problems due to the attention given to body cues by the counsellor during the counselling sessions”* (PS3). Similarly, student participant # 11 expressed that, *“Feelings were laid out as to what I was feeling at the moment, and this helped me pinpoint the actual feeling I had which gave the counsellor direction on how to help me. So, I can say my concerns were very well met”* (PS11).

Some of the benefits that users of body language counselling techniques indicated included gaining additional insights beyond verbal expression. To this effect, student participant #3 said that; *“the counselling technique helped to get nonverbal information that verbal aspects could not”* (PS3). To verify this assertion, most counsellors including participant #4 said that, *“Body language counselling technique helps to explore the client's non-verbal concerns. I have been able to identify a client that is telling lies simply by observing their body language”* (PC4).

iii) Counsellors became aware of how students were feeling

In addition, it was found that body language reveals a lot of what goes on in the person's life during the counselling session. To this effect, some of the Counsellor Participants like #2 said that *“body language communicates a lot of cues about what goes on within the person. By studying them, it is possible to make close predictions of what someone is thinking or feeling even without them saying it”* (PC2).

iv). Students felt cared for

Most of the clients felt cared for, when they realised the counsellors were attentive and paid attention to their nonverbal cues. To this effect, one of the student participants said *“I feel cared for. Just to realise that the counsellor understands what my body is communicating.”* (PS3). In verifying this assertion, one of the counsellors said that *“observing the client's body language in counselling created confidence in the client as they felt someone was giving them full attention”* (PC1).

v) Counsellors also became aware of their body language

Counsellors also were self-aware of their body language an aspect known as self-listening. To this effect, most of the counsellor participants like #2 had this to say. *“Paying attention to my body language as a counsellor has helped me to communicate effectively, as I am mindful of my gestures and actions with clients...It gives meaning of my attitude or attention to a client.”* (PC2) Based on these findings, it can be concluded that there are numerous benefits associated with use of body language in counselling students with peer relationship problems. This practice can help counsellors become more aware of their actions, provide students with a sense of confidence in their counsellor's care, and add depth to the counselling process by allowing exploration of emotions and feelings that may not have been addressed with the verbal counselling technique.

Weakness of the body language counselling technique

In terms of weakness of the body language counselling technique, some clients felt that their issues were not fully addressed despite giving attention to their body language. For instance, student participant #13 stated that *“my needs were averagely met”* (PS13) and Participant #5; said *“my needs were not so much met”* (PS5). The body language technique was found to be particularly beneficial to students with peer relationship problems when used in conjunction with other counselling methods, as they provided additional insights into the emotions and issues that clients were experiencing. To this effect, student participant # 10 said *“it should be noted that some clients' needs may not be fully met by body language counselling alone and may require the integration of other techniques that encourage the release of emotions or concerns”* (PS10). Use words such as

“majority of the participants”, “*most of the participants*”, “*some of the participants when reporting the themes*”.

DISCUSSION

The study conducted an in-depth analysis of the participant's comprehension of body language counselling techniques. Body language, as commonly understood, encompasses the nonverbal cues that are conveyed intentionally or unintentionally that can be unconsciously by both the client and the counsellor during the counselling process. These cues, comprising gestures, facial expressions, posture, and tone of voice, can serve as a powerful tool to promote effective communication and understanding between the parties involved similar to the writing of Reena (2012) and AIPC (2009). From this literature and findings, body language is that part of communication that reveals masked feelings that words would not express. It can form a vital part of communication that both the counsellor and client can use to enhance their communication during counselling sessions.

From the study findings, it was also established that by paying close attention to the client's body language, counsellors could gain valuable insights into their emotional state, attitudes, and beliefs, which may otherwise remain hidden. This was emphasised by the writing Afdal (2016) that the non-verbal behaviour of both counsellors and clients in counselling sessions should help in assisting the client to feel the direct presence of the session through the techniques. The literature and findings of this study have demonstrated that body language if correctly used can prove valuable in helping the client overcome their challenges and achieve their goals. For instance, a client who appears defensive or guarded may be struggling with trust issues, while one who avoids eye contact may be feeling ashamed or guilty. By carefully observing such cues, counsellors can create a safe and supportive environment that encourages clients to open up and share their thoughts and feelings.

It was further established that the non-verbal expressions demonstrated by students play a pivotal role in creating self-awareness and rapport in the counselling process. Anake and Asor (2012) document that nonverbal clues and movements convey a meaning that counsellors can explore further with their clients to bring about understanding. The literature in this study confirms what was found about non-verbal clues playing a pivotal role in enhancing the meaning of body language. It is therefore necessary that counsellors are aware of how to utilise this tool in their practice to help clients fully.

The counsellors' ability to closely observe their clients' body language, gestures, and facial expressions has proven to be instrumental in offering guidance, support, and empathy, which in turn has helped clients gain deeper insights into their thoughts and emotions. The writing of Palmer (2011) recognises body language to be a subtle indicator of emotions. This understanding from this literature reveals more on what can relate to the findings that the counsellors' ability to observe and use these expressions to help offer support is instrumental. The counsellor needs to have the right skills to realise their expressions and that of their clients and use that to bring about support and awareness.

However, it is important to note that some findings show that some students expressed discomfort with being closely monitored and scrutinized for every reaction they made. Such uneasiness could potentially hinder the counselling process, and it is therefore important for counsellors to be mindful of their client's comfort levels and to establish an environment in which they feel safe and secure. The writing of Langmaid and Begum (2024) confirm a similar need for counsellors to correctly understand how to use body language techniques to avoid misinterpretation and cause uneasiness. Additionally, Peterson and Gough (2019) emphasized that techniques were not the main thing in Gestalt counselling but the process that facilitates the counselling to gain awareness. In addition, the study findings can be employed to enhance the effectiveness of body language counselling techniques and improve the overall experience for counsellors and clients.

This technique was found to be particularly effective when used in conjunction with other counselling methods such as empathy advocated by Rogerian counsellors, as it provided additional insights into the emotions and issues that clients were experiencing. Seligman and Reichenberg (2020) showed similar findings that Gestalt counselling had the strength of integrating other approaches to counselling such as cognitive behaviour

therapy, transactional and other person-centred approaches. However, the findings and literature help to note that some clients' needs may not be fully met by body language counselling alone and require the integration of other techniques that encourage the release of emotions or concerns.

Through the process of observing body language and expressions during counselling sessions, counsellors can pick up on valuable information that clients may not be explicitly talking about. This practice can lead to numerous benefits for both the client and the counsellor, such as providing a deeper understanding of the client's emotional state and allowing exploration of feelings and emotions that may not have been addressed otherwise in the counselling process. In line with this finding, Langmaid, and Begum (2024) speak of clients being helped to gain clarity of what they are expressing through the process of attaching meanings to what is being expressed nonverbally. A counsellor would notice a particular action and draw in to ask the client to verbally explain or attach words to the action. This brings about awareness of what the client is experiencing hence the client can deal with the emotions.

Additionally, counsellors who are more aware of their actions can provide clients with a greater sense of confidence in their care, leading to a more productive and successful counselling experience overall. The writing of Palmer (2011) and Ndhlovu (2015) resonates with this finding. By paying close attention to nonverbal cues, counsellors can create a safe and supportive environment for clients to explore their innermost thoughts and feelings, ultimately leading to greater personal growth and healing.

Implication to life-world dimensions

In relation to this study and in line with Manen (1997), lived body were the students who experienced body language techniques to help them. Lived time was the experience of body language counselling technique by the students who had peer relationship problems while lived space was how the students experienced body language counselling technique to help them. The good or bad experiences implied lived experiences in space. The lived human relations were the relationship with counsellors in terms of experiences. Good lived relationships with the counsellors implied the benefits of the body language counselling technique.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicated that the use of body language counselling techniques could be highly beneficial in addressing students' peer relationship problems such as loss of contact with the environment, confluence, unfished business and fragmentation. The body language Gestalt counselling technique revealed that the client's body is a powerful source of information expressed through feelings, intentions, attitudes, and myriad emotions. Further, the counsellor's body was a means of communication to the client. Counsellors and clients must be mindful of their body language, as it plays a crucial role in enhancing or hindering communication. Further, body language can help clients achieve a heightened level of self-awareness, a key objective in Gestalt counselling. Conversely, when a counsellor is not attuned to a client's state, this study found that overlooking the client's body language can create barriers in the counselling process.

RECOMMENDATION

The study recommends that when used correctly, body language technique can help counsellors and clients become more aware of the meanings attached to their body language and utilise them to solve peer relationship problems.

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