

# Exploring Relational Conflicts among University Students: The Limitations in Utilizing the Empty Chair Technique in Gestalt Counselling

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the limitations of the empty chair counselling techniques in addressing relational conflicts among university students, which significantly affect their overall experience at university. The empty chair counselling technique is recognized for its effectiveness in dealing with both internal and interpersonal conflicts. However, the specific challenges faced by counsellors and clients when using this technique to resolve relational conflicts between university students had not been fully explored before this research. By adopting a constructivist paradigm and a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the study engaged with 20 participants, consisting 16 students and 4 counsellors, chosen through expert purposive sampling. Data was collected using semi structured interview guide and were subsequently analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings revealed several limitations, such as fears of miscommunication, initial inertia when encountering the technique for the first time, perceptions of the method as unusual, difficulties with imagination and role play, as well as the impact of cultural background, individual client conditions, and general discomfort with the process. Overall, the study highlights that the limitations stem not only from the nature of the issues that clients bring to counselling but also from the counsellors' ability to collaborate effectively with clients and their overall skill set and knowledge. This study has demonstrated areas that counsellors intending to use the empty chair counselling technique need to improve on.

**Keywords:** Gestalt Counselling, Limitations of the Empty Chair counselling technique, Relational conflict, Student Social Life

## BACKGROUND

Relationship conflicts have a significant impact on students' university experiences (Maunde, 2016) and (Ndhlovu, 2015). Students with healthy social interactions tend to adapt more easily to university life, whereas those facing challenges in social relationships often struggle with this transition (Mwale et al., 2025). Gestalt counselling, as discussed by Orfanos (2021), offers a unique perspective on its approach, highlighting the core idea that every individual possesses inherent resources essential for personal growth. According to Gestalt philosophy, this growth is most effectively achieved within authentic and meaningful relationships that enable individuals to explore and express their true selves. As social beings, humans thrive on connections with others; without these, they may experience maladjustment (Ndhlovu and Mwanza, 2024). Students encountering relational conflicts may suffer from a lack of social interactions, leading to feelings of isolation, fragmentation, unfinished business, and confluence, which can hinder their ability to meet the demands of higher education effectively. This literature motivated the need to explore the limitations experienced by counsellors and clients using the empty chair, one of the Gestalt counselling techniques, in resolving relationship conflicts.

Various studies have shown the empty chair to be an effective Gestalt counselling technique for resolving university students' unmet issues (Ndhlovu and Mwanza, 2024). Others, including Trijayanti et al. (2019), have demonstrated the effectiveness of the empty chair counselling technique in overcoming guilt in adolescents, resolving emotional issues in inmates (Khairunnisa et al., 2019), and recognising the empty chair as effective in resolving deep-seated and unexpressed emotional challenges, enhancing growth and healing (Romadhon and Sanyata, 2019).

Scholars like Glass (2010) have indicated that in an example considering a client grappling with internal conflict, one part of themselves harbours high expectations for achievement while another part succumbs to procrastination and rationalisation. This internal dichotomy, which Perls famously referred to as the "top dog/under dog" dynamic, serves as an example of the complexity inherent in human psychology. In this scenario, the counsellor would guide the client to engage in a dialogue between these two opposing facets of their personality. The technique encourages the client to physically move back and forth between the two chairs, articulating their thoughts and feelings from each position alternately. This quality and active engagement of the client is what sets the empty chair technique apart as a profoundly impactful technique with versatility and transformative potential for emotional expression, thus distinguishing it from other traditional applications.

Flexibility is another hallmark of the Gestalt approach, which Orfanos (2024) stated employs a diverse range of techniques tailored to suit the unique needs of individuals. This adaptability makes it relevant for various counselling contexts, allowing practitioners to tailor their methods to the specific goals of counselling and the unique characteristics of individual clients. Moreover, the utility of the Gestalt approach is not limited by age, developmental stage, or cultural background; it applies to a wide demographic, emphasising the universal need for self-exploration and authentic expression (Orfanos, 2021). Knowledge of this nature drove the need to explore the limitations that the empty chair Gestalt counselling technique poses in its utilisation in helping students overcome relationship conflicts at an institution of higher learning.

Other scholars have also acknowledged the limitations that Gestalt techniques may pose, despite their noted effectiveness. Gulotta (2024) highlights that although Gestalt counselling techniques have many advantages, it is also important to recognise their drawbacks. The Gestalt techniques require preparedness and willingness to face and engage with one's emotions and thoughts. It is these expressive techniques that are liberating and lifechanging for clients; others might feel uncomfortable or overly exposed, which could impede their progress in therapy. It is against such literature that the need to explore the limitations of the empty chair Gestalt counselling technique in resolving relational conflicts in university students at an institution of higher learning was motivated.

Another limitation seen in the use of Gestalt counselling by Brennan (2021) is that it was found not helpful with the psychological effects of some behaviours that were hereditary. It was also found to be limited in helping with psychological factors not influenced by individual thoughts. Research by Glass (2010) highlights the "empty chair" technique as an effective technique in promoting self-awareness and facilitating group interactions. Although there is extensive literature on the effectiveness of this approach, the limitations of using the empty chair counselling technique with students experiencing relationship problems in Kitwe remain unclear. Investigating this issue could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of such techniques in educational settings and contribute to improved mental health support for students dealing with complex social dynamics.

A literature review has identified the strengths and weaknesses of Gestalt counselling techniques in addressing various individual challenges. However, the limitations of the empty chair technique, specifically in higher education institutions, in supporting students with relational conflicts, have not yet been explored. This extract from a Doctor of Philosophy thesis by Mwanza (2025) addresses this gap. The study endeavoured to explore the experiences of counsellors and clients in their subjective lived experiences with the empty chair Gestalt counselling technique. To achieve this, the researchers adhered to the life world existentials, entailing the lived body, lived space, lived time, and lived human relations (Carpenter, 2013). The counsellors are the experts with expert knowledge (lived body) and experiences on how they used the empty chair technique (lived space) during the counselling interaction (lived time) and to counsel the selected students (lived relations) at a university.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted within a constructivist paradigm, utilising a hermeneutic phenomenological design to look into the lived experiences of both clients and counsellors who employed the empty chair Gestalt counselling technique to address relational conflicts at a higher education institution. A sample of 20 participants was carefully selected to ensure a rich depth of data, consisting of 16 students and 4 counsellors who had utilized the empty chair method for conflict resolution. Participants were chosen through expert purposive sampling, as noted by Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024).

Primary data was gathered using structured interview guides and subsequently analyzed thematically, following Bryman's (2016) six-step process: familiarization with the data, coding based on thematic elements, identifying overarching themes within the coded data, reviewing the categories, naming these themes, and ultimately reporting the findings under relevant subheadings.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data management and interpretation, the researchers adhered to Amankwa's (2016) recommendations. They emphasised the importance of following precise protocols and procedures within the research design, focusing on criteria that establish the credibility, dependability, conformability, transferability, and authenticity of the findings (Nyimbili and Nyimbili, 2023).

## Findings

### Limitations of the Empty Chair and Body Language Counselling Techniques

The findings established limitations on the use of the empty chair Gestalt counselling techniques as experienced by the counsellors and the clients when used to resolve relationship challenges. Some of the established limitations that arose from the findings indicated fears of being misunderstood, inertia for first-time experiences, perceived the technique as strange, failure to use imagination and role play, as well as the influence of culture, the condition of the client and general discomfort to engage in it.

**Fears of being misunderstood;** The study established challenges encountered when using the empty chair counselling technique. Some of the findings noted clients' fear of being misunderstood when seen talking to an empty chair. Such fears made some clients hold back and not fully engage in the technique. Participant # 12 "*Fear of being misunderstood*" (PS 12)

**Inertia in engaging with the technique:** There was a lot of inertia to engage in the practice. Participant # 2 adds that;

*"For the first time, I did not open up because it was my first time going to a counselling office, so I felt so uncomfortable talking about my issue"* (PS 2)

Similarly Participant # 7 experienced inertia;

*"It took some time for the client to fully come to terms with what was required to work with the empty chair"* (PC 7)

**Strange Technique:** Some other findings showed that some of the clients saw the experience to be somewhat unusual and it made them less likely to freely open to the process. Participant # 2;

*"Some felt the technique was weird and would not work. Others wanted to know the technique and how it works in its entirety, which obscured information collection from the student as others concealed certain information"* (PC 2)

**The Condition of the Client;** Further findings pointed to the conditions that the clients were in that made them fail to fully engage in the technique and might have required other interventions. Leading to some clients being seen holding back and not fully immersed in disclosure, Participant # 4; "*The client not opening up on some issues*" (PC 4), and Participant # 1 "*Failure for clients to express themselves*" (PC 1)

**Failure to use Imagination and Role Play;** Some findings revealed that the clients, in some instances, were overwhelmed and somehow challenged, leading to failure to role-play and imagine themselves in the situation. Participant # 2 stated;

*“Some clients may be too challenged and fail to assume the role of a counsellor and a client at the same time”* (PC 2)

**Uncomfortable;** Other challenges included what Participant # 13 noted the process to be *“Uncomfortable for me at first glance”* (PC 13), and Participant # 14;

*“It did not work for everyone. I did not receive the emotional benefits I expected. It's possible the therapy could help one achieve peace, but in the process, one experiences a negative domino effect on family relationships”* (PS 14)

Further exploration indicated that some did not experience challenges with the empty chair counselling technique. The participants claimed that the empty chair met what was expected from the counselling. Participant # 8; *“I didn't experience any challenge because it provided what is needed in Counselling”* (PS 8), and Participant # 11: *“I have not experienced any challenges yet”* (PS 11)

**Culture Influences;** The study explored cultural issues that may impact the usage of the empty chair counselling technique among the clients who had prior experience with this technique. The results indicated the need for counsellors to be mindful of cultural diversity when introducing clients to such techniques. Participant # 2 argued that;

*“There seemed some uneasiness that could be attributed to cultural interference for someone to talk to an empty chair”* (PC 2).

Participant # 3;

*“Were clients believe that the technique is a replacement for dirties or even the elderly for problem resolution, it gets even more challenging to use the technique”* (PC 3)

Others, like Participant # 8 added that it was not a Zambian practice and that it was a foreign concept, *“Culturally uncomfortable. It's a Western concept”* (PC 8).

**Seen as un-Zambian,** Other Participants saw the empty chair to be less significant, noting the culture in the country was one that encouraged interpersonal and good relationships. The culture was already allowing its people to openly share and help one another. Participant # 10:

*“In the Zambian culture, interpersonal and community relationships hold significant importance in a person. The Zambian culture emphasises harmony and interdependence, so the empty chair method may be of less significance”* (PS 10)

Participant # 11 adds that:

*“Culture does not support the use of these techniques because culture perceives youths as children without problems, only adults have problems. So, culture does not support the use of this technique”* (PS 11)

The research findings indicate that during the application of the technique, some challenges were encountered by clients. These challenges included a fear of being misunderstood, hesitance to engage in the technique, perceiving the technique as being weird, culturally not aligned and a general sense of discomfort for some clients. Other clients were overwhelmed, leading to failure to role-play and imagine themselves or their significant other in the empty seat. However, it is worth noting that some clients found it easy to work with the technique. The findings suggest that those who use this technique should take advantage of this knowledge to better understand the challenges that may arise and seek ways to improve the application of the technique. This would enable them to offer a more effective and comfortable experience for clients.

## DISCUSSION

According to the research findings, it was found that while utilising the empty chair technique, some clients faced certain challenges that hindered their experience. These challenges included a fear of being misunderstood, hesitancy to engage in the technique, perceiving the technique as being weird and awkward, and a general sense of discomfort for some clients. This indicates that while the technique can be beneficial, it may not be suitable for everyone and may require specific modifications based on individual needs. Brennan (2021) notes that the techniques may not be beneficial for everyone, hence the importance of counsellors being mindful of which clients are introduced to this technique.

Another way to look at these findings would be to note the writings of Sicoli (1998) on the need for counsellors to ensure that clients understand and complete tasks, not just rush through activities, and caution counsellors not to try techniques on clients that they are not conversant with due to being overzealous. From these findings, different views could be raised, including inexperience in the techniques being applied, leading to clients being confused in the process, feeling awkward and seeing the process as wired. Additionally, Brennan (2021) speaks of Gestalt counselling having many advantages and requires a willingness to face and engage with emotions in the present.

However, it is important to note that some clients found it easy to work with the technique. The suggestion based on these findings is that those who are utilising the technique should take advantage of this information to better appreciate the limitations that may arise and find ways to improve the application of the technique. This could include providing additional support and guidance to clients who are hesitant or uncomfortable (Ndhlovu and Mwanza, 2024), offering modifications to make the technique more accessible, or adjusting the overall approach to better suit individual needs. Similarly to Seligman and Reichenberg (2020), who speak of Gestalt techniques' flexibility to integrate with other approaches to make the counselling experience effective. By doing so, it would be possible to offer clients a more effective and comfortable experience, leading to better outcomes and greater satisfaction.

The findings of this study indicate that certain aspects of Zambian culture may pose challenges to the utilisation of the empty chair counselling technique. Specifically, the study identified several key themes that highlight participants' reluctance to engage in dialogue with an empty chair, which stems from deep-seated cultural norms and beliefs surrounding interpersonal communication. Many participants expressed discomfort with the notion of speaking to an empty chair or space, viewing it as incongruent with their cultural values that prioritize direct and relational interactions. Supporting this finding, the work of Tanaka-Matsumi (2022) emphasises the importance of counsellors recognising the cultural influences that shape the counselling process. This insight underscores the necessity for counsellors to be aware of and sensitive to the cultural backgrounds of their clients. Furthermore, it suggests that the role of the counsellor should extend beyond that of simply guiding the client; instead, counsellors must adopt the role of a facilitator who actively engages with and respects the cultural context that the client brings into the session.

This perspective is particularly relevant within the framework of Gestalt therapy, which is fundamentally centred on the "here and now" experience of the client. To foster an effective counselling environment, counsellors need to adapt their approaches to fit the cultural narratives and communication styles of their clients, ensuring that the counselling process is both respectful and effective. By embracing the unique cultural experiences of clients, counsellors can create a more meaningful connection and enhance the overall counselling experience.

Additionally, there is potential for misunderstandings due to cultural variations in gestures and expressions, which could compromise the effectiveness of this approach. Tanaka-Matsumi (2022) speaks similarly, while emphasising that all behaviour is learnt and is displayed in specific contexts, that there is a need for counsellors to integrate culture-centred counselling as the core of culturally informed and sensitive interventions. It is clear from the findings and literature that counsellors need to have training in culturally sensitive practices and sensitivity to provide a service that should accommodate many diverse clients.

To overcome some of the experienced discomfort and cultural influences, users of the empty chair need to come to a realisation that Gestalt counsellors do not hold a view to impose on clients; rather, the client's views or truth

is respected and communicated. Brownell (2008) stated the need for counsellors to get the clients to express their worldview and be respected for it. The goal should be to help bring about awareness in the subjective world of the client. By helping recognise who they truly are in the moment, for change to happen, what will be dealt with in this awareness is the authentic person and not the phoney.

Moreover, participants expressed a belief that interpersonal issues are already addressed by cultural practices and that young people do not face significant challenges warranting such interventions. Such findings are similar to Kurniawan (2018), that it is common for individuals from a dominant culture to perceive their reality from their vantage point and assume it to be true for everyone else. These findings and literature underscore the importance of considering cultural factors when designing and implementing counselling interventions in diverse settings. Additionally, Mubita, Milupi and Kalimaposo (2023) speak to institutions of learning prioritizing safety and health as a crucial element in creating conducive environments for learning. Arising from such findings and literature, it can also be deduced that the counsellor and client have a role to play in bringing about a negotiated, culturally accepted mutual relationship that is critical to the counselling outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

The study has explored limitations of the empty chair Gestalt counselling techniques, specifically in the context of addressing relational conflicts among university students. Participants' lived experiences with the empty chair technique revealed several notable challenges. Many users expressed fears of being misunderstood, which created a barrier to open communication. Additionally, the inertia associated with first-time experiences often inhibited their willingness to fully engage. Users also described the technique as peculiar or strange, which further complicated their participation.

Moreover, some individuals struggled to tap into their imagination and effectively employ role play, essential components of the practice. Cultural influences played a significant role as well, with varying attitudes towards such techniques impacting students' willingness to participate. The emotional and psychological condition of the client also proved to be a significant factor, with many feeling a pervasive discomfort that hindered their engagement in the process.

These findings draw attention to areas that counsellors and researchers must address to facilitate more meaningful and transformative experiences for their clients. Some limitations stem not only from the nature of the challenges that clients bring but also from the counsellor's ability to work collaboratively with the client and the overall skills and knowledge that counsellors possess. This underscores the need for ongoing development in counselling practices and highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity and adaptability in therapeutic settings.

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