

Use of the Empty Chair Gestalt Counselling Technique in Helping University Students with Peer Relationship Challenges: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to explore the use of the empty chair Gestalt counselling technique in helping students with peer relationship challenges by using the hermeneutic phenomenological approach. An expert purposive sampling method was used to select all 4 counsellors currently working at a public university and 16 students who had been counselled using the empty chair Gestalt counselling technique to inform this study. Semi-structured interviews and retrospective record reviews were used to collect data there after the data was analysed thematically. The findings indicated that most of the clients reported progress and were helped to resolve their relationship challenges while a few showed difficulties in engaging with the technique. Factors that positively contributed to the success of the empty chair technique included counsellor skills, the client's ability to use their imagination, client's willingness to engage in the empty chair technique. Where the technique did not work well, it was mainly in circumstances where clients felt some discomfort with the technique. The notable cases where the empty chair counselling technique was mostly used were rejection, unresolved relationship challenges, need for emoting, and intra and inter-personal conflicts. The study recommends that counsellors who use the empty chair technique need to have adequate training in its application to offer a more effective and comfortable experience for clients.

Keywords: Empty chair counselling technique, Gestalt Counselling, student Counselling, peer relationships

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to explore the use of the empty chair Gestalt counselling technique in helping students with peer relationship challenges at a public university in Kitwe, Zambia. The relationship challenges included lack of contact with peers, confluence, unfinished business, and fragmentation. According to Ndhlovu (2015), when students lose contact with their environment, they may isolate themselves and miss out on interactions with others and the resources available to them. This highlights the importance of social interactions for all individuals, regardless of status. Failure to establish meaningful social interactions can lead to neurosis, as humans are social beings. Ndhlovu (2015) also discusses confluence, which occurs when an individual over-trusts others to the point where they lose control of their life and ability to make personal decisions or be aware of their identity. This can lead to challenges in peer relationships, as individuals may struggle to distinguish between their personal needs and those of others. In terms of unfinished business, it refers to unmet or unfulfilled needs that are important to an individual. In learning institutions, students need social interactions with others to fulfil their need for belonging. When this need is not met, it can lead to neurosis. Students may experience broken relationships due to an unmet

need for belonging. Ndhlovu, (2015) also explains that fragmentation occurs when individuals attempt to do too many things at once and fail to achieve the desired results, leading to dissatisfaction or poor results.

It, therefore, became important to study how the empty chair counselling technique helped students with peer relationship problems, as these problems can negatively impact their university experiences. Counselling theories such as Gestalt which advocates for the empty chair counselling technique are crucial in guiding counsellors and ensuring effective practice (Lofrisco, 2013). By providing a framework for interpretation and techniques, theories help counsellors to categorize phenomena, anticipate outcomes and understand clients' thoughts, actions, and emotions (Palmer, 2011). However, it was not clear how the use of the empty chair counselling technique helped university students with peer relationship challenges in Zambia thereby necessitating this study.

The empty chair technique is a Gestalt counselling technique that has been useful in helping clients deal with ways of expressing their thoughts and feelings in a safe and neutral environment. In addition, the technique is ideal for dealing with issues of conflict with other individuals. The technique calls for an active imagination on the part of the client to imagine that the person they have problems with is in the empty chair even though that person is not there. Additionally, Elliott et al (2004) expounded that the empty chair technique is a therapeutic means for encountering the unfinished situation in imagination, especially if the other person is unavailable. It is used for two types of unfinished business: neglect or abandonment and abuse. In both types of businesses, the representation of the other person in the chair serves as a function that is integral to the resolution of the problem. Drake (2022) adds that the words and gestures of a client are directed at an empty chair, and through such an exercise both the counsellor and client learn new insights about issues with the client or situation at hand. Despite such literature, it remained unknown how the empty chair counselling technique helped students with peer relationship problems in Zambia's universities.

Ontologically, the authors believe that knowledge is a subjective reality and epistemologically constructed by the participants. Therefore, to understand how the empty chair counselling technique helped the students who had peer relationship problems, there was a need to get subjective experiences from the students who experienced the technique. In terms of axiology, the experiences of participants were valued and respected. This was done by obtaining ethical clearance from the University of Zambia, where the researchers were affiliated. Whereas, methodologically, qualitative methods were used to achieve the purpose of the study.

In line with Carpenter (2013), the study used a hermeneutic phenomenological design to bring out an understanding, descriptions and interpretations of the experiences of participants and the meanings in their subjective experiences of their life worlds existential. Similarly, in line with the proponent of life world existential, Van Manen (1997), the four lived worlds 4 existential: lived body, lived time, lived space, and lived human relations were applied to this study.

Lived body or corporeality which refers to physical body or bodily presence in our everyday lives, including all that individuals feel, reveal, conceal, and share through their lived body was put into account to understand how the empty chair counselling technique helped clients with poor peer relationships. The lived body were the participants or clients who through their lived body interacted and experienced the empty chair counselling technique.

The existential of lived time or temporality was also to understand the clients' experiences. Temporality is composed of a subjective understanding of time as opposed to the objective or "factual" time, and it refers to how participants experience their world on a temporal level. The way participants feel can influence how they experience time and moments, and conversely, constraints, freedoms, and demands placed by time can also affect how they feel. About this study, refers to how the participants experienced the empty chair counselling technique in helping them to resolve their peer relationship challenges.

In terms of lived space or spatiality, it simply implies the subjective experiences of the spaces participants found themselves in. The spaces participants found themselves in could affect the way they felt and, conversely, how they felt could affect the way they experience a particular space. Poor peer relationships usually manifest in experiences of either lack of contact with peers, confluence, unfinished business or fragmentation. So how the participants experience their peer relationships – good or bad may imply their lived space.

The fourth existential life world was the lived human relations or relationality. It refers to the relations participants make and/or maintain with others in their life-world. Human relations include the communications and relationships participants experience with others through the spaces and interactions they share and create with them (Van Manen, 1997). In relation to this study, lived human relations imply how the participants related to lead to their poor peer relationships.

The authors of this article believe that having good relationships with peers can motivate students to succeed, but negative relationships can also discourage them. Similarly, Hattie (2012) espoused that students who feel rejected by their peers may feel lonely and disconnected, which can lead to disengagement and lower achievement. Maunder (2016) also found that positive social interactions in school improved students' overall experiences. Students who had strong connections with their peers tended to adjust better to university life, while those who struggled with peer relationships had a harder time adjusting. It was, therefore, important to explore how use of the empty chair counselling technique helped students overcome challenges in their relationships with peers, as this could have a major impact on their overall adjustment and experience in their university life.

METHODOLOGY

A constructivist paradigm was used to explore the lived experiences of counsellors and students who had prior experience with the empty chair Gestalt counselling technique in resolving challenges relating to peer relationships. The study used a hermeneutic phenomenological design to bring out an understanding, descriptions and interpretations of the behaviours of humans and the meanings in their subjective experiences (Carpenter, 2013). The study population was all 4 counsellors currently working at a public university and 16 students who were counselled using the empty chair Gestalt technique selected using expert purposive sampling. Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024) explain that expert purposive sampling helps to select participants that have both knowledge and experience about the area under study. The procedure for data generation for this study involved retrospective record review and semi-structured interviews. The data was then analysed thematically in line with the guidance by Bryman (2016). This involved categorizing data based on familiarization, creating of codes according to data themes, searching themes in the coded data, reviewing the categories of data and naming before finally reporting the findings under the subheadings of the themes.

FINDINGS

Participants Knowledge of the Empty chair counselling technique

Participants were asked to describe how they understood the empty chair counselling technique. The findings showed that there was a common understanding of the empty chair technique as a technique that enabled users to vent emotions and address their issues using an empty chair. Further, participants understood that an empty chair counselling technique demanded a participant talk to an unoccupied chair while imagining the other person or situation they had issues with is seated on the empty chair. It also meant role-playing a person they had a problem with seated on an empty chair and talking to him about the feeling

experienced in the now.

Some verbatim were extracted to support the findings. For instance, participants became aware of their thoughts and emotions. One of the students, participant #2 had this to say: *“This is where I need to express my emotions”* (PS2). Similarly, counsellors agreed with the students. For instance, one of the counsellors, participant # 3 said that; *“the empty chair counselling technique is an approach that allows individuals to process interpersonal or internal conflicts and become aware of their thoughts and reactions”* (PC3).

Helps to bring disclosures: Further findings from other participants indicated that the empty chair was a counselling technique that helped to bring about disclosures especially if one could not physically address the person or things that may have somehow brought them distress or pain. For instance, one of the counsellors, participant # 1 said that: *“This is a counselling technique usually, the client who plans to share/disclose certain information impersonates the person (s) with whom they would wish to know this information in their absence”* (PC1).

Promotes imagination: Students who participated in the study knew the empty chair counselling technique requires one to use his or her imagination to imagine the person they had unresolved issues were in the empty chair and had to confront them as a way of addressing their concerns. In support, one of the students, participant #11 recalled, *“I imagined that the person I wanted to talk to is seated in the empty chair listening to me”* (PS11).

Counsellors agreed with the students and one of them, participant # C4 said that: in using the empty chair counselling technique, clients imagine a person is in an empty chair facing them and therefore engage in a dialogue with them. The technique helps clients to explore unresolved feelings, conflicts, or unexpressed thoughts. It provides a tangible way of addressing internal and interpersonal challenges. In addition, the empty chair counselling technique serves as a symbolic tool for expressing emotions and gaining insight into resolving the problem at hand. (PC4).

Encourages participants to express themselves in an imaginary way: For instance, one of the students, participant # 8 stated that; *“the empty chair counselling technique encouraged me to express myself in an imaginary manner”* (PS8). The techniques also helped to create awareness of conflicts clients had in themselves. For instance, Student Participant # 14 said that *“this is an approach that allows individuals to process their interpersonal or internal conflict and become aware of their thoughts.”* (PS 14)

Can be used in child counselling: Another student, participant # 4 indicated that *“the empty chair counselling technique can also be used on children with problems. A child client would face the empty chair while imagining that there is an elderly and fearful person whom he intends to confront”* (PS 4). In agreeing with the students, one of the counsellors, participant C2 had this to say: the empty chair technique is a counselling technique that helps clients to emote and address their unresolved issues by using their imaginative ability to imagine a significant other person with whom they may have issues is seated in the chair (CP 2).

Based on these findings, it is evident that the participants (both counsellors and students) had an understanding of the empty chair counselling technique. This can be attributed to their experiences with the technique. Overall, the findings suggest that the empty chair counselling technique was an effective intervention-counselling tool to the participants who had interpersonal relationship problems.

Experiences with the Empty Chair Counselling Technique

The students and their counsellors were asked to share their experiences using the empty chair counselling technique. Findings are that some initial challenges due to hesitation by some students were experienced.

However, many of them eventually became more comfortable with the process and were able to open up freely. The clients who pushed passed this inertia were able to overcome hesitation and eventually made progress with the use of the empty chair. In agreeing with the experiences, one of the students, Participant # 3 stated that; *“the process was quite overwhelming. At first, I wasn’t comfortable enough”* (SP3). Another student, participant # 7 added by saying; *“there was a lot of hesitation when starting but I seemed to have gotten the concept along the way”* (SP7). Student participant # 5 however, expressed mixed experiences by saying, *“It was okay but a bit hard”* (SP 5).

Despite some students experiencing hesitations and difficult when starting, many of them indicated that they had good experiences with the empty chair counselling technique. This was due to:

Assurance of confidentiality: One of the experiences that made it good was the assurance of confidentiality from the counsellor. This was alluded to by student participant # 11 who said, *“It was awesome because it was just between me and the counsellor and I was assured that what we discussed in the counselling session was not going to go anywhere else to third parties”* (SP 11). Similarly, student participant # 12 revealed how the counsellor helped him to freely express himself by saying *“The counsellor helped me express my feelings without limits”* (SP12).

In triangulating the data generated so that truth is established, counsellors were also asked to express their experiences of using the empty chair counselling technique. It was found that one of the positive outcomes of using the technique was that students came to terms and faced their fears. To this effect, one of the counsellors, participant # 2 had this to say;

It was interesting. Whereas the majority of students initially were sceptical about using the empty chair counselling technique since it felt to them like they were doing the actual disclosures. But in the end, most of the students who went through it appreciated how the technique exposed their fears and gave them the mental and physical tenacity to proceed with actual disclosures. (C2)

Similarly, another counsellor, participant # 3 said that, *“clients were able to come to terms with their situations as they talked their mind to the imaginary person in the chair”* (C3). When this finding was further verified with the students, one of them, Participant # 3 said that *“the empty chair counselling technique enabled me to address my fears and emotions”* (S3).

It can be seen that the experiences of the empty chair were positive and negative to some of the counsellors. The positive aspects included being able to freely express themselves, face their fears, and freely come to terms with unresolved issues, while the negative experiences included hesitation and discomfort to engage in the technique. Therefore, counsellors must use the positive side of the experiences to help clients with interpersonal relationship challenges and inform practice.

Rating of the empty chair technique by students in addressing their concerns in counselling

The participants were asked to rate how they felt helped by the empty chair counselling technique. Figure 1 shows the results of the ratings.

Count of During your counseling sessions, were your concerns and those of your client effectively addressed using the empty chair technique?

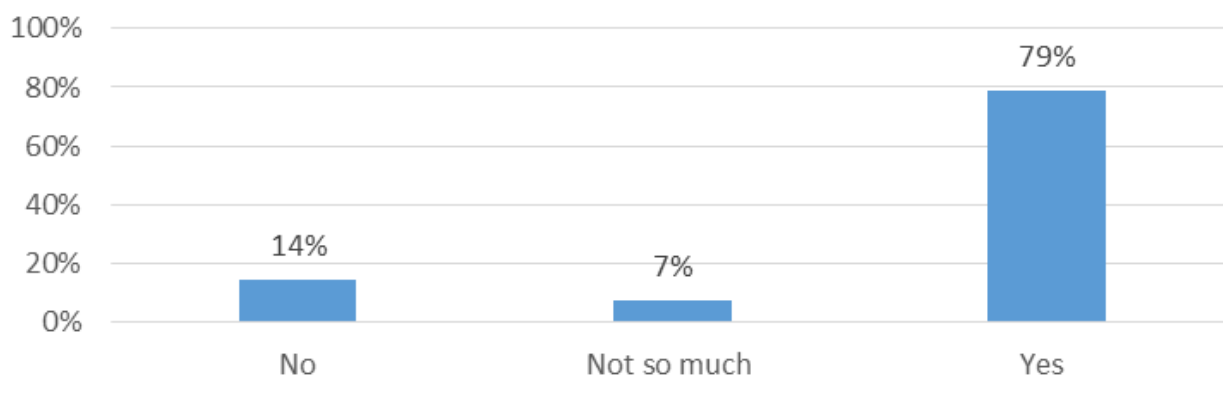


Figure 1: Results from fieldwork showing ratings of the empty chair counselling technique in addressing students' concerns during counselling sessions.

In terms of how the students who went through the counselling perceived the empty chair counselling technique in addressing their concerns, it was found that 13 of them indicated that their concerns were addressed. This implies that the empty chair technique is helpful in counselling persons with peer relationship challenges.

Benefits of the empty chair counselling technique

The study established some Participant's lessons from the use of the empty chair. Some of the views that were common to all included the ability to aid in venting for unfinished business.

Participants were able to express their issues on the empty chair as evidenced by Participant 2 who stated; “*I have learnt that it helps in expressing a lot of intrapersonal things like my emotions.*” (PS 2). Another student, participant #1 added that “*the empty chair can be used for several interpersonal issues that clients may have*” (PS 1).

The empty chair was also seen to be a technique that allows clients to freely imagine their problem situation and be able to speak freely about it. This was what one of the counsellors, participant C3 said about the empty chair technique, “*It works where the client can understand and has an average abstract or imagination of the situation or person they have issues with sitting in the empty chair*” (C3).

The study findings revealed that there was an emphasis on the client being willing to open up and speak freely about their situation. Openness to address their concerns was found to be key to bringing about awareness. One of the counsellors, participant # 4 stated that:

“if the student can stay open to laying their thoughts and feelings on the chair, their issues tend to feel bearable and can be processed, and the student could find some peace after using the techniques” (C4)

The need for counsellors to have a well-developed skill set and expertise in using the empty chair was vital. The counsellors alluded to this fact and stated that the role of the counsellor's skill in using the empty chair technique was vital and needed to be perfected as most of its effectiveness depended on it.

The counsellor's skills in using the empty chair were further emphasized so that they can help clients reduce conflicts that may arise out of confronting each other.

The empty chair was seen to help reduce interpersonal conflict that may arise from individuals confronting each other. For instance, one of the students, participant # 11 noted that; *"It is a good way of using diplomacy because you can use it outside your school place as well to keep your situation under control"* (PS 11).

Further, another student, participant # 13 added that *"the empty chair counselling technique helped me to learn how to let go of the feeling of hurt without having to talk to the actual person."*

The research findings suggest that the empty chair technique can be an effective tool for resolving various issues in counselling. The technique works particularly well when the client is willing and able to engage with it. Additionally, the empty chair technique can be especially helpful for clients who are unable to confront the person or issue they are struggling with in person. In such cases, the client can use their imagination to vividly picture the person or issue in the empty chair. This can help the client to work through their issues and find resolution. Overall, the empty chair technique is a valuable tool for therapists to use in helping clients to express and resolve their emotions.

Counselling issues where the empty chair technique was used

Participants were asked on the type of issues the empty chair was mostly employed. The results from the counselling documents that were reviewed showed that the technique was mostly applied to situations that needed clients to address issues that were unmet like stress, frustrations, unresolved conflicts and relationship challenges.

This was confirmed by the responses from the students. For instance, participant # 12 stated; *"the empty chair when I was feeling stressed and had interpersonal issues"* (SP12). Another student, participant # 15 said *"empty chair technique was used on me when I had unresolved traumas and conflicts"* (PS15).

Relationship challenges were among the issues addressed using the empty chair technique. The responses from interviews supported this statement. For instance, one of the students, participant # 16 said *"The empty chair technique was used when clients had problems in their relationships"* (PS 16). One of the counsellors, participant # C1 added *"mostly interpersonal issues where the client needs to vent and wouldn't normally approach the other person physically"* (C1). Participant 10; *"Conflicts, unresolved emotional issues"*, Participant 11 and *"Childhood and adulthood traumas"*

The study revealed that using the empty chair to help with disclosures for those clients who could not fully come to accept their found HIV status and would want to vent. The technique was seen to help aid disclosure and help clients come to terms with their found HIV, STI and pregnancy status. Participant 9 indicated that

"Often disclosures of various kinds... E.g. HIV and STI disclosures, and pregnancy disclosures. Also, I often use it a lot in behaviour modification with students"

Aiding dealing with rejection issues was also noted to be among the issues that were addressed by the empty chair technique. Some participants hinted at the technique being able to assist victims of rejection and relationship disappointments. Confirmed by Participant 12 stated that *"the technique helped with dealing with rejection"*.

Participant 14 emphasized that the technique helped to deal with or have an imaginary dialogue with

someone who has offended or you have offended or the same person has challenges with different parts of their personality.

“By involving the client having an imagined conversation with someone they have an issue with, or it could be used to facilitate dialogue between different parts of the client’s personality”

Based on the study findings, it was observed that the use of empty chair body language was most commonly associated with addressing a wide range of issues, including but not limited to unresolved relationship challenges, rejection issues, the need for venting and releasing emotions, managing stress, and resolving both intra and inter-personal conflicts.

DISCUSSION

Participants’ knowledge of the Empty chair

The participants exhibited a thorough comprehension of the concept of the empty chair. Some of the commonly mentioned aspects in the explanation of the empty chair technique included its usefulness in allowing clients to express and release their emotions, by talking to an unoccupied chair while visualizing a person or situation that they may have unresolved issues with. Additionally, the empty chair technique was also found to be an effective tool for role-playing, gaining insights, and symbolically processing emotions. Similar explanations of the empty chair counselling technique were recorded by (Drake, 2022 and Elliott et al, 2004). The studies showed that the empty chair was a tool used by counsellors to help clients process unfinished business, using imagination or visualization and involved expression of oneself to an occupied chair. These findings on knowledge of the empty chair are consistent with the literature and show that the participants had an understanding.

The study established that the empty chair was a counselling technique that helped with disclosures and was ideal to help clients that had issues with and could not confront that significant other person or situation but through the empty chair role-playing, the clients could find some relief as if they had talked or addressed the person or issue that gave them some discomfort. Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan (2004) highlighted what happens when an individual struggles with social relationship issues and they avoid confronting the issues that the unresolved issues can cause maladjustments. Similarly, Ndhlovu (2005) emphasises the goal of Gestalt theory being partly increasing self-awareness in clients that allows them to be present in the moment therefore as they role play with the empty chair, they have a chance at addressing their unresolved issues. Through this process, both counselling and clients gain insights into the issues and can take responsibility and resolve them in the now.

Experiences with the Empty Chair

The findings point to the empty chair counselling technique being widely used to help clients deal with emotional and psychological issues. However, the success of the technique according to the findings was influenced by both positive and negative experiences of its users. Brennan (2021) argues the limitations that Gestalt counselling was more effective with unfinished business and not resolving cases that had hereditary psychological effects. Brennan, (2021) and Ndhlovu (2015) support these findings by stating that the techniques are effective on unfinished business caused by contact with the environment where an individual is found and not effective on psychological factors not influenced by individuals’ thoughts. These findings show some negatives and limitations of the empty chair counselling technique as it is seen as not so effective in addressing hereditary effects.

The study established that some first-time users have reported hesitancy and inertia. Some users found it difficult to engage with the technique due to discomfort, feeling overwhelmed, and reluctance to express

their concerns. This hesitation to engage with the empty chair could also be partly attributed to the writing of Simmers-Falnagan and Sommer-Flanagan (2004) and Ndhlovu (2005) that for clients to fully reach the recovery stage enabling them to fully function they have to go through five stages that starts with the phoney stage where the client is somehow not making real efforts but hiding in some façade. The unreal stage requires both counsellor skills and the client being willing to go to the next stage resulting in a hesitancy to engage in the counselling process.

The findings of the study have shown that the empty chair technique has also been associated with positive experiences. Some clients reported overcoming inertia and making significant progress in expressing their emotions. Clark (2013) notes that Gestalt counselling techniques do not involve any forced work therefore these findings agree with this ascension that the clients were able to overcome their initial challenges without being forced to do so. As such the technique helped them to face their fears and anxieties, which improved their overall well-being. Zaitun and Wangid (2023) conducted a study that showed that the empty chair counselling technique helped to reduce the effects of anxiety. The results of such literature align well with the findings of this study. The empty chair Gestalt counselling technique is effective despite the challenges that may be encountered in its application. Counsellors need to be skilled and introduce the technique with care and knowledge so that clients appreciate it fully.

Further findings of the study indicated the role that the counsellor played in facilitating for the client to adjust and come to terms with what the activities required. The counsellor's skills and ability to help the clients be at home were key in the process. The writing of Lofrisco (2013) recognised the counsellor's skills and noted the role that counselling theories play in guiding counsellors in their practice. From the foregoing, it can be seen that the counsellor's skills and practice need to be based on counselling theories that can help guide practice and anticipate outcomes. It should also be noted that the role of the counsellor in gestalt counselling is that of allowing clients to become more aware of their experiences in the now moment, their responses and their perceptions in the now about the situation (Clarke, 2021). Counsellors must be adequately trained to offer appropriate and scientifically based approaches that respond to clients' unique needs.

To ensure that the empty chair technique remains effective, its users must consider both the positive and negative experiences. They should focus on the positive side to help clients deal with issues in their lives, while also addressing the negative side to inform the counselling practice. By doing so, counsellors can help clients overcome their emotional and psychological challenges, leading to better outcomes.

Effectiveness in addressing concerns in counselling using the empty chair technique

The findings on how the participant's concerns were addressed when exposed to the empty chair indicated that 13 clients felt their issues were addressed, 1 not so much addressed and 2 felt not addressed. The scores put the empty chair as an effective tool in addressing issues clients had. This agrees with various writers like Hitge (2006), Ndhlovu (2005), and Drake (2022) who have recorded the effectiveness of the empty chair which agrees with the 79 per cent of the clients that indicated yes to the empty chair being effective in addressing issues. This finding can be used to conclude that the empty chair was effective in addressing relationship issues and that there was confidence in its effectiveness amongst the users.

Despite the high score of 13, other participants scored 1 for not so much addressed and others scored 2 for felt not addressed. The critics of Gestalt counselling like Clarke and Marsh (2005), Brennan (2021) and Corey (2005) mention some limitations of the theory that could be used to explain the ratings of some clients whose concerns were not addressed. It could be said that the empty chair technique is not effective for all types of client issues. This can help to say that counsellors need to be knowledgeable enough to anticipate which counselling approach and technique is adequate to respond to a variety of client concerns.

Benefits from the use of the empty chair

The empty chair technique is an effective tool for resolving various issues that arise among students who are experiencing intra personal and peer relationship issues. According to research findings, this technique is particularly successful when the client is willing and able to engage with it fully. Khairunnisa et al (2019) found similar results that the empty chair helped prisoners to address their unfinished business that included sadness, guilt and often being less involved with others. The counsellor's skills and expertise also play a vital role in the effective use of the technique.

One of the significant advantages that the findings pointed to on the empty chair technique is that it can be especially helpful for clients who are unable to confront the person or issue they are struggling with in person. In such cases, the client can use their imagination to picture the person or issue in the empty chair vividly. The study findings are in line with Palmer (2011) who stated that in Gestalt counselling the client learns to use internal and external senses to bring about awareness to become self-supportive and self-responsible. This, in turn, can help the clients to work through their issues and find resolution. The findings are supported by Frauke et al (2021) who found the empty chair Gestalt counselling technique to be a preferred intervention by clients. Adding to the helpfulness of the empty chair that the study found.

The study showed further that the empty chair technique requires the counsellor to create a safe and comfortable environment for the client. The counsellor then encourages the client to imagine that the person or issue they are experiencing is sitting in an empty chair. The client is encouraged to express himself or herself fully to the imaginary person or issue as if they were present in the room. The counsellor listens actively and provides guidance and support throughout the process. Through this process, the client is helped to become self-aware (Cavichia, 2013). From this, it is clear that the counsellor has a role of creating an environment that encourages self-expression and that the roles that the clients needs to perform should be explained so that they are not left guessing.

Overall, the empty chair technique is a valuable tool for counsellors to use in helping clients to express and resolve their emotions. It can be an alternative way to gain insight into the client's thought processes and feelings, and help them work through difficult situations they may be facing agreeing with the goal of Gestalt where the client collaborates with the counsellor without fear of being judged (Cavichia, 2013). Even from this, it can be noted that the empty chair can help both the counsellor and client learn more about the experiences of the client as they are allowed to re-live their experiences in the now without fear of being judged or misunderstood.

Counselling Cases where the empty chair technique was used

The study revealed that in the records maintained by counsellors, the most common issues faced by clients for the empty chair technique were related to unresolved relationship challenges, rejection issues, the need for venting and releasing emotions, managing stress, and resolving both intra-and interpersonal conflicts. These challenges were often addressed by using the empty chair technique, which involves visualizing an empty chair and allowing the client to express their emotions, thoughts, and feelings towards the person or situation that is causing them distress. This ascension is supported by Romadhon and Sanyata (2019) who found Gestalt techniques help in facilitating the resolution of deep-seated emotional issues and promotes healing and growth. This further aligns with the writing of Ankrom (2020) that the techniques in gestalt help to improve one's self-control, mental state regulation, awareness, tolerance for negative feelings and emotions, communication and understanding of one's personal needs. From this finding, it can be seen that the empty chair was used on cases that require expression of unresolved issues that are of social, emotional and psychological nature.

It can be seen from these findings further that the common issues that the empty chair technique was used were that they were mostly issues that arose from non-hereditary challenges. Brennan (2021) confirms such findings that the Gestalt counselling techniques were not so effective in addressing behaviours that were hereditary but helpful with other social and psychological issues impacting behaviour. This entails that counsellors need to be knowledgeable enough to detect what counselling approach and technique they adopt in order to successfully help clients well.

CONCLUSION

The study established that the empty chair counselling technique is an effective technique that was used to help students address their unmet issues. In the use of the empty chair 13 student rated it to be effective in addressing their issues, 2 student rated the technique as not effective and 1 student not so much. Some of the aspects that impacted the use of the empty chair technique included the client's readiness to engage in the activities, the client being able to use their imagination and counsellor skills. Some of the notable cases where the empty chair was mostly used were issues to do with rejection, unresolved relationship challenges, release of emotions and venting spaces, and intra and inter-personal conflicts. The study has shown how important the counsellor is in helping clients. The knowledge and level of training for counsellors have a huge role in making the counselling process a success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of this study, the following recommendations have been developed;

1. Training providers to offer specialized training in the use and application of various counselling techniques to practicing counsellors.
2. There is a need for Counsellor Regulatory bodies to conduct examinations to regulate Counsellor Licensing periodically as Counsellor skills play a pivotal role.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Counsellors must have the knowledge and expertise to determine the most suitable counselling approach and technique to address a wide range of client issues.

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