



Efficacy of Empty Chair Technique in Resolving Conflicts Between Parent-Child Relationships

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Abstract:

This paper outlines the efficacy of the Empty Chair technique of Gestalt therapy to resolve conflicts in a parent-child relationship. This paper also highlights at which developmental stage the conflicts arise or at which stage the child needs more attention. Different types of conflicts have arisen in a parent-child relationship over the past 10 years. Results of the study indicated that identity conflicts in adolescents stem from the cause of the parent-child relationship and, if not resolved, can lead to the trigger of identity, which will start at any point in the child's life. And the results also implicated that the use of the Empty Chair Technique can help effectively resolve parent-child conflict, and it has also shown improvements in client conflict resolution related to both internal and external factors. It was also discerned that there is a great scope for further research in this area of study. To do so, the paper examines how Gestalt and Empty Chair techniques can be effectively employed to understand and seek resolution between different individuals and the parent-child dynamic. Further research to see the implications of the Empty Chair techniques can be conducted.

Keywords: Gestalt Therapy · Relationship · Empty Chair · Conflicts

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There are different types of connections that get cultivated and nourished within an equation between individuals. There are different elements combine's friends and family and emotionally close equations with a special someone. Hence these equations are a great source of joy, satisfaction and excitement, requiring a certain level of conflict resolution.

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Parent-Child Relationship

Relationships are multi-dimensional and complicated to define. There is not one mould that can fit into every situation or can be applied to every individual. According to Lobb (2016), in dissects, partnership in synchrony is an essential factor but is often neglected, and she describes it as a dance with reciprocity. Lobb further elaborates, 'Synchrony means that ability to respond to the other in short enough time to create a rhythm of one with the other—to create a dance'. Hence, this synchrony is established in the primary relationship during infancy.

Relationship problems or conflicts depend on the early parent and child relationship. It is a deciding factor for the future relationship when the child has high synchrony with his parents. The regulation for the future relationship becomes stronger with a heightened sense of alliance, self-esteem and self-confidence. It gives the child more independence and provides them with internal resources to handle stressful situations independently.

As the review paper discusses the parent-child relationship, it is essential to discuss the development stages of a child to understand better where conflict can arise or at which stage the child needs more attention vis-à-vis their relationship with parents. Much empirical research has validated Erikson's developmental theory concerning personality development, culture, life and identity.

The eight stages of psychosocial development by Erikson (1968) state the development milestones from birth to death, but here, we look at the part where the child has a significant conflict with self and parents. The child begins to face identification conflict during the age of adolescence. The onset of puberty leads to the development of cognitive skills and physical changes in the body. With the development of self begins the development of the child's identity, providing a sense of ideology and a space for the individual to grow. Moreover, this also fosters a growing sense of direction and belongingness.

Erikson believed that embedding a strong sense of identity is vital for the child's development. If this is not resolved, the conflicts emerge in young adulthood, during college years, as the most extensive experience happens within the identity during this period of an individual (Waterman, 1985). The environment provides a sense of diversity and can trigger identity conflicts if there are unresolved issues. Parenting plays an essential role as child adjustment and supportive parenting are correlated.

Role of Conflicts in Parent-child Relationship

The word 'conflict' has a relational feature that indicates that the two parts are set against each other. Conflicts can be internal as well as external. Internal conflicts are when a person/ individual has an inner struggle that cannot choose between a split of interests. External conflicts can be experienced within an individual relationship, family, close relationship, or a romantic partner; in that case, it is the struggle of that relationship.

Issues faced through family dynamics are more prevalent during the child's adolescent period. Often the child spends less time with the family. This is when conflicts increase as the child transitions from the inside and with an increase in roles and responsibilities of transitioning into an adult. (Hill, 1988). Interpersonal conflicts refer to a lack of motivation and conflicts in feelings, needs, interests and behaviour in a person (Haig, 2006). It is pretty widespread; it can occur in 10-25% of the sample of the research solution for significant conflicts: anger, frustration, guilt, loneliness and resentment (Fried, 2015).

Gestalt Therapy

The Empty Chair technique in Gestalt Therapy offers a solution to longstanding conflicts or patterns that individuals find challenging to resolve. According to Fritz Perls (1951), Gestalt Therapy views individuals as integrated entities consisting of body, mind, and soul. Understanding this approach

is most effective when individuals explore their own perspectives and bring past experiences into the present moment. The term "Gestalt" denotes a focus on completeness, emphasizing the importance of addressing unresolved emotions such as anger, pain, anxiety, and resentment in the present. Failure to do so may result in the emergence of both psychological and physical symptoms.

Perls (1951) contended that fostering self-awareness is a crucial role of the Gestalt therapist, aiding clients in gaining deeper insights into themselves and the decisions impacting their well-being and relationships. Through this heightened self-awareness, individuals grasp the interconnectedness of their emotional and physical aspects, leading to the cultivation of self-confidence. Ultimately, this enhanced understanding empowers clients to lead more fulfilling lives and navigate challenges with greater effectiveness.

Gestalt therapy is described as a form of process psychotherapy aimed at enhancing an individual's connection with the community and the broader environment (Melnick & Nevis, 2005). Billies (2005) characterises Gestalt Therapy as a means of liberating individuals from habits that hinder interpersonal contact. It involves the process of assimilating needs or significance and discarding what is deemed unnecessary.

The term 'here and now' holds a central place in Gestalt Therapy, introduced by Fritz Perls as the 'Gestalt Outlook'—an authentic, undistorted approach to life, thought, and emotion. What sets Gestalt Therapy apart from other therapeutic methods is its distinct focus on the present moment ('here and now') and the specifics of 'what and how,' steering clear of delving into past events for understanding or explanation.

Perls emphasised the importance of individuals taking responsibility for all their actions, reflecting an existential approach to psychotherapy rooted in the concept that life comprises a series of choices

an existential orientation perceives life as presenting exciting choices and opportunities to explore one's potential. Individuals with an existential orientation often find dissatisfaction in routine or conventional patterns (Fager & Shepherd, 1970). The term "Gestalt" refers to the shape or form of something, suggesting that the entirety is more significant than the sum of its parts. In this counseling theory, perception plays a pivotal role. Gestalt therapy is centered on assigning meaning and making sense of our world and experiences.

The Empty Chair Technique

The Empty Chair Technique, also referred to as the Two-chair Technique, is a role-playing activity in which the therapist asks the client self to sit on an empty chair. Emphasis is placed on what clients feel and notice while performing the activity within themselves. After this, the client is asked to switch seats and reverse roles, continue the dialogue from the opposing perspective, observe their feelings, and notice what is happening to them.

The goal of Gestalt Therapy is that clients become more self-aware of their actions, how they are doing them, and how they can change themselves while learning to accept and value themselves. According to Yontef and Simkin (1989), 'awareness and dialogue are the two primary tools in gestalt therapy'. They define awareness as the experience of being in touch with one's feelings, actions, and overall existence. Awareness implies knowing one has control over choice and responsibility for feelings and behaviour.

The Empty Chair Technique is a talking exercise in which there is an expression of thoughts and feelings as if being spoken to a specific person who is not present. Words and gestures can be directed to an empty chair, and one can imagine the person sitting in it while talking. The therapist uses the technique of an empty chair to help the client identify their feelings. It helps them express themselves freely, become less anxious and more confident, it helps the client to gain perspective of the relationship, and it allows the client to learn

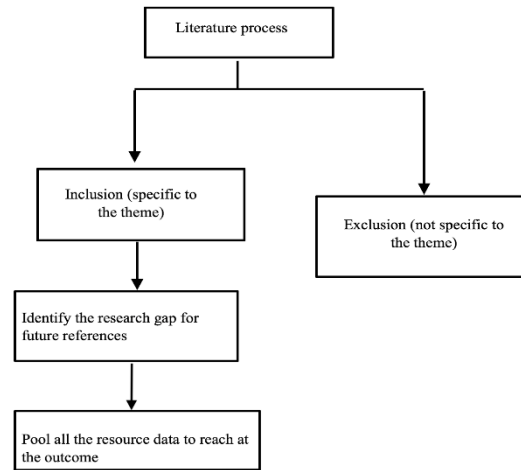
better communication skills. It is a way to clarify emotions and find ways to handle a situation where the client is feeling stuck or experiencing conflict. (Nurihsan & Hafina, 2019)

The various contexts used in the technique can be described as follows: a) External dialogue (a conflict situation that has emerged from the past involving someone else) includes a real or imaginary person, b) internal dialogue (a state of conflicts with one own self which can be the polarities or the inner child) working with the person's projections, retroflexion, introjection and life decisions, and c) this approach then combines internal and external to resolve the conflict in a corrective manner associating with the client's schemas or emotional modification (Kellogg, 2004).

Review Process

Firstly, there is a selection of the topic/ theme (which specific area the researcher wants to work on). Secondly, there is inclusion (related to the topic) and exclusion (unrelated to the topic or not fitting in the research domain). Thirdly, after the inclusion, there is the identification of the research gap; the researcher should be able to gauge and base the research towards seeking a possible solution. Lastly, the researcher pools all the data together to reach an outcome.

The paper reviewed the literature on four primary areas, i.e., parent-child relationship, conflicts, gestalt therapy and empty chair technique. The combination of two or more areas together has been discussed. The field's development and growth have been discussed over the years. Only published scientific research and review papers for the theories have been considered. Google Scholar, Scopus and Research Gate were used to research current work in these areas.



Gestalt Therapy and Conflicts

Pitulko (2022) conducted a comparative analysis of internal conflict's intensity among students in three parameters—loneliness, guilt and resentment—and considered internet/ digital technology use. After applying Gestalt Therapy to students who often turn to read a book or spend a lot of time on the internet to solve an internal conflict, it was observed that there were significant differences in indicators of internal conflicts such as the feeling of guilt, resentment and loneliness. Students who were high in all three levels moved to low levels after the therapy was performed. The limitation seen in the study was that the participants were from a particular department and major of the university. It was also noticed that they were within the same age group and could be a source of different conflict resolution.

Gestalt Therapy

The goal of the study conducted by Seen, Ahmad and Khalid (2021) was to identify the level and symptoms of psychological well-being and the effects of the Empty Chair Technique on individuals suffering from grief. The results of the study focused on the unfinished business of the client. They conducted six sessions with her to resolve the experience of grief and explore different patterns to help her overcome her state. After applying the Empty Chair Technique, it was seen

that within three sessions, there was a tremendous increment in the score that improved the client's unresolved feelings or attained closure. At the end of all six sessions, there was a considerable improvement in the client's psychological well-being. The limitation of the study was that there was a single subject/client participation, and the result of the client's progress was shown.

The research was conducted to understand the transformation process of Gestalt psychology over 70 years by Paruzel-Czachura and Koieczniak (2020). The study presented the phenomenological method, concepts and techniques used in Gestalt Therapy and the areas wherein the techniques and concepts are used. Although the theory has been presented for the past 70 years, the therapy's ambiguities are still present. The author analysed all the scientific publications in the domain. Analysis was made based on all research articles and the main finding. In the realm of Gestalt Therapy, methods like psychodrama, dream work, chair work, and bodywork and approaches like holism, awareness (figure-ground), here and now, contact and contact boundary, the client is the expert/the client is free, the client's responsibility for change, and internal support were thoroughly analysed and experienced. The limitation was that not all concepts were discussed extensively, and reference articles were provided. This research provided the review to upscale the analyses for Gestalt Therapy to achieve more scientific development in that area.

Trijayanti, Nurihsan and Hafina (2018) researched the effectiveness of Gestalt counselling with the Empty Chair Technique to reduce guilt among at-risk adolescents. The results indicated cases wherein a client had shown condemnation of themselves, excessive fear, and great hope to undo the mistake made; there was a reduced empty chair technique for the client. Another client showed deep regret, extreme sadness and repeated thinking about the negative behaviour. These efforts were carried out with high guilt towards his family members, and a similar scenario was observed with the last client. Still, the results show that after the effect of the

technique, the worst-case possibility of suicide was prevented by applying Gestalt Therapy.

Oliver and Fiebert (2013) conducted a case study to identify different tools available for Gestalt counsellors. Those tools were the mate selection process, facial expression, other physiological cues, and verbal and non-verbal communication. They developed a four-stage model that was as follows a) emergence of the problem, b) external polarities, c) internal polarities and d) integration. This method was used for three sessions, two sessions with husband and wife individually and one session combined with both, which displayed the compelling view of integrating intra- marital polarities, which helped them see a new perspective in the relationship. There were experiences of mild conflicts at the start of the session. Study findings were used on one couple within a non-conflicting scenario.

Conflicts

Dijk, Valk, DeKovic and Branje (2020) conducted a meta-analysis study on interpersonal conflict, parenting and child adjustment in divorced families. The sample of 115 divorced families was evaluated through the bivariate correlation. The results showed that the direct association between parenting, conflicts of inter-parenting and child adjustment had a significant correlation. Lower levels of parenting support showed a higher level of inter-parental conflicts. The indirect association of parent support and child adjustment results showed that the internalising and externalising of the child conflicts were high when support was less. It also depicted that the negative parenting and relational process are more strongly related to post-divorce child adjustment than positive parenting and relational processes. Although it showed the significant issues with parent-child post-divorce conflicts, some of the limitations the researcher faced were that the moderate scope of the study was not discussed. The cause of whom and under what circumstances inter-parental conflicts arise was not assessed.

Nielsen (2017) conducted empirical research to re-examine parental conflicts, co-parenting and custody arrangements. The paper was focused on four central questions. It was shown that for a parent with a child having chronic emotional, behavioural, or medical problems, the conflict would be higher due to ongoing stress in caregiving (Kerins & Prinz, 2016). Another relevant factor was the child's well-being regarding the family conflicts during the divorce. Child-in-adolescent girls are more caught in parental arguments/ conflicts during that period, and boys are less involved (Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1996). Poor parenting and a higher level of conflict go hand in hand. It gets difficult to understand whether conflict, poor parenting, or a combination of both results in worse outcomes for children (Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). The study talked about conflicts, but the focus was terrible parenting and conflicts. The new focus area or framework can be a loving, supportive relationship with both parents.

According to Tucker et al. (2003), their research on conflict resolution reveals a notable increase in conflicts between parents and adolescent children, affecting both males and females. Sibling relationships are also marked by a constant mix of love and hate. Surprisingly, children tend not to actively seek resolution for their conflicts, leading to potential personal development issues as these conflicts are not mirrored in their relationships with siblings. The study suggests that achieving conflict resolution might be more attainable in relationships with lower overall conflict levels, as there would likely be fewer negative emotions such as resentment and anger hindering the process. Conflict resolution tendencies differ among family members and are more closely associated with positive adjustment. In the context of conflicts between mothers and adolescents, maintaining a lower level of conflict with the mother is considered more crucial for the child's well-being.

Discussion

The current study reviewed resolving the conflicts in a parent-child relationship using the Empty Chair Technique. The paper employs the research conducted over the years and observes conflicts that can happen in any part of life. Still, Erikson states that identity conflicts are not resolved in the adolescent stage, i.e., stage four of Erikson's psychosocial developmental stages. It writes that the trigger of identity can start at any point in life if it remains unsolved. (Waterman, 1985). These conflicts can be lowered if the Gestalt Therapy method is used, as stated in the study by Pitulko (2022) performed on college students to resolve inner conflicts like guilts, resentment and loneliness. The technique of Empty Chair has shown improvement in clients closer to external persons as well as internal conflicts discussed in the study with Seen et al. (2021), Paruzel-Czachura (2020) and Trijayanti (2018).

The conflicting relationship between parent and child significantly impacts parental support, child adjustment, and emotional connection, as Nielsen (2017) stated. A conflict resolution study by Tucker et al. (2003) shows the constant hate/love relationship between parents and children and their siblings. Dijk (2020) also stated that divorce, arguments and conflicts between a couple affect the child more.

The Empty Chair Technique functioning study by Oliver and Fiebert (2013) was examined, and the four stages model was used to resolve conflicts within a couple-dynamic. This presented a new perspective and ways to deal with the situation collectively. By combining research as a 'whole', as stated by Gestalt Therapy, there is scope for further analysis of the research in this domain. Additional work can be done using an extensive qualitative technique which can help gain more insights into the change in the client's behaviours. The case studies of fewer clients have been used, and the relationship between the empty chair and conflict resolution has not been conducted in India, so the cultural aspect of India has not been studied through

this technique. On further analysis, it was observed that there could be future scope for research in this area of study, and a broader perspective can be received.

Conclusion

The report reviews papers for researching the parent-child relationship and resolving conflicts using the Empty Chair Technique from Gestalt Therapy. It narrows down the various advantages and the processes of Gestalt Therapy. The gap which we could see in this studies was, less participants, no Indian study related to Gestalt Therapy and Empty chair technique and a solution based approach to therapy can be further researched. The paper decerns that there is a current gap in the research, which can be appropriately filled with further research in the area from multiple perspectives.

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Declarations

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