



Impact of Proxemics on Cultural norms and... Ayena, O. O. & Oyedirán, A. O. (2026)

Impact of Proxemics on Cultural Norms and Client Comfort in Client-Counsellor Interactions among University Sex Counsellors in Nigeria

AYENA Olugbenga Oladapo¹

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-9855-9091>

Email: ayenaaa@eauedoyo.edu.ng

Telephone: +2348038038090901

OYEDIRAN, Ayotunde Oyedele¹

oyediranao@eauedoyo.edu.ng

¹Department of Special Education and Guidance and Counselling, Emmanuel Alayande University of Education, Oyo, Oyo State, Nigeria

Abstract

This study aimed to explore the role of physical distance in client-counsellor interaction in Nigerian university sex counselling settings, focusing on proxemics and its impact on therapeutic outcomes. The study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing a case study approach to gather in-depth insights into the experiences of clients and counsellors. The population of the study comprised clients and counsellors in Nigerian university counselling centers, with a sample of 30 clients and 20 counsellors selected using purposive sampling techniques. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and questionnaires. The instruments were validated through pilot testing and expert review, ensuring their validity and reliability. Data collected were analyzed using t-tests, ANOVA, and Chi-Square to test the hypotheses. Results in hypothesis one revealed that physical distance has a significant effect on client comfort levels (F -statistic = 4.21, $p = 0.026$). Results in hypothesis two revealed that cultural norms significantly influence client-counsellor interaction ($\text{Chi-Square} = 12.51$, $p = 0.002$). Results in hypothesis three revealed that optimizing physical distance significantly improved interaction outcomes ($t = 2.15$, $p = 0.04$). Findings of this study implied that physical distance between client and counselor significantly impacts the therapeutic process. The study concluded that optimizing physical distance significantly improve client-counsellor interaction outcomes in Nigerian university sex counseling sessions, suggesting that factors like cultural norms and therapeutic techniques also play a bigger role. The study, however, recommended that counsellors should prioritize client comfort, cultural sensitivity, and effective therapeutic techniques, adjusting physical distance according to client preferences and cultural norms.

Key words: Proxemics, sex counselling, physical distance, client-counsellor interaction, cultural sensitivity.

Introduction

Proxemics, the study of physical distance in human interaction, plays a significant role in counselling, influencing client comfort, openness, and therapeutic outcomes. Research suggests that maintaining appropriate physical distances can build trust and rapport, while invading personal space can trigger stress and anxiety (Mohammed looti, 2025). Studies have shown that clients' perceptions of physical distance can impact their willingness to disclose personal information. For instance, a study found that decreasing personal space can hinder discussion of sensitive topics. Conversely, a comfortable physical environment can promote self-disclosure and improve therapeutic engagement (Sinclair, 2020; Sanders & Lehmann, 2019; McParlin, Cerritelli, Rossetini, Friston, & Esteves, 2022; Taiwo, Chinyio, Hewson, & Agberotimi, 2023). The ideal physical distance varies across cultures and individuals, emphasizing the need for counsellors to be aware of proxemic nuances. A recent study highlighted the importance of considering clients' attachment styles and preferences for physical distance to optimize therapeutic relationships (Egozi, Tishby & Wiseman, 2021; Taiwo et al., 2023).

Proxemics, the study of physical space and distance in human interactions, is crucial in sex counselling. The physical environment and distance between the counsellor and client can significantly impact the therapeutic relationship and discussions around sensitive topics. Research highlights the importance of proxemics in creating a safe and comfortable space for clients to discuss their sexual concerns. A study by Rudd (2000) emphasizes the need for counsellors to be aware of their clients' personal space and cultural backgrounds when addressing sensitive topics (Rudd, 2000). In sex counselling, proxemics can influence the client's perception of the counsellor's empathy and trustworthiness. When counsellors respect clients' personal space, it fosters trust and rapport, allowing clients to open up about their concerns (Mohammed looti, 2025). Moreover, sex-positive counselling approaches prioritize creating a safe and non-judgmental space for clients to



Impact of Proxemics on Cultural norms and... Ayena, O. O. & Oyediran, A. O. (2026)

explore their sexuality. This involves being mindful of proxemics, among other factors, to ensure clients feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics (Schubert & Pope, 2022; Phillips, 2022). Proxemics, the study of physical space and distance in human interactions, is vital in sex counselling, especially in Nigerian university settings. Despite its importance, there's a noticeable lack of research on proxemics in these contexts (Rudd, 2000). Studies emphasize the significance of proxemics in creating a comfortable and safe space for clients to discuss sensitive topics. For instance, Rudd (2000) explored cross-cultural interpersonal space in counselling relationships, underscoring the need for awareness about proxemics (Rudd, 2000). In Nigerian universities, cultural and social factors may influence proxemic behaviors, making it essential to investigate this aspect of counselling. Research suggests that cultural background, gender, and personality traits can affect personal space preferences.

In Nigeria, discussing sex and sexuality is often stigmatized, making it challenging for individuals to seek counselling services. Creating a comfortable and non-judgmental environment is crucial for effective sex counselling (Asekun-Olarinoye, Asekun-Olarinoye, Olajide, & Fawole, 2013). Research highlights the importance of cultural sensitivity and awareness in addressing sexual concerns in Nigeria. A study on HIV/AIDS counselling in Nigeria emphasized the need for counsellors to establish trust and rapport with clients, ensuring a safe space for discussion (Iwuchukwu & Ajuwon, 2015). Moreover, Nigerian cultural norms often perpetuate negative attitudes towards sex and sexuality, leading to increased stigma and shame (Asekun-Olarinmoye et al., 2013) [3]. Counsellors must be aware of these cultural nuances to provide effective support.

The physical distance between the client and counsellor significantly impacts the therapeutic process, particularly in sex counselling settings. Proxemics, the study of physical space and distance, can either facilitate or hinder open communication (Okken, van Rompay, & Pruyn, 2013). Research highlights the importance of proxemics in counselling. A study by Okken et al. (2013) found that clients' perceptions of physical distance influenced their willingness to disclose personal information. In Nigerian university settings, cultural norms and individual preferences may influence proxemic expectations, making it crucial to explore this aspect of counselling. In sex counselling, counsellors' awareness of proxemics can help create a comfortable environment for clients to discuss sensitive topics. Mohammed looti (2025) emphasizes the role of proxemics in shaping client-counsellor relationships and therapeutic outcomes.

Recent studies highlight the importance of physical distance in counselling, showing that clients' comfort and openness are significantly influenced by the physical space between them and their counsellors. Research suggests that optimal physical distance can enhance client self-disclosure and therapeutic engagement (Taiwo, Chinyio, Hewson, & Agberotimi, 2023). For instance, a study by Okken et al. (2013) found that clients perceived intermediate distances (around 127cm) as more comfortable for discussing personal topics. Another study by Sanders and Lehmann (2019) revealed that clients' preferences for counselling room design were driven by a desire for physical and emotional comfort, which was achieved through a welcoming and relaxed environment (Taiwo et al., 2023). These findings underscore the need for counsellors to consider proxemics – the study of physical space and distance – in their practice. By adjusting physical distance and creating a comfortable environment, counsellors can foster a stronger therapeutic alliance and improve client outcomes. For instance, Okonkwo (2022) found that Nigerian clients preferred a moderate physical distance (about 3-4 feet) from their counsellors, which facilitated feelings of comfort and trust. Similarly, Uche (2021) highlighted the importance of respecting clients' personal space and avoiding physical touch in Nigerian sex counselling contexts.

Studies have also shown that cultural norms and expectations surrounding physical distance can vary significantly across cultures (Hall, 2018; Adewunmi, 2020). In many African and Middle Eastern cultures, closer physical proximity is associated with warmth and intimacy (Albas, 1991). In contrast, Northern European and North American cultures often prefer greater physical distance, valuing personal space (Hall, 1966). A study on interpersonal distance in Nigeria found that cultural norms influenced participants' comfort levels with physical proximity (Ezeh & Akanbi, 2013). These cultural differences in proxemics can affect counselling outcomes. Counsellors working with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds must consider these nuances to establish effective therapeutic relationships. For example, in some cultures, physical touch is a common way of showing empathy and understanding, while in others, it is seen as an invasion of personal space (Adewunmi, 2020).



Impact of Proxemics on Cultural norms and... Ayena, O. O. & Oyediran, A. O. (2026)

Objectives of the Study

The study aimed to explore the role of physical distance in client-counsellor interaction in Nigerian university sex counselling settings; investigate cultural norms and expectations surrounding physical distance in Nigerian sex counselling contexts; and identify strategies for optimizing physical distance to enhance client-counsellor interaction in sex counselling sessions.

Research Hypotheses

1. Physical distance has no significant effect on client comfort levels when discussing sex-related issues in Nigerian university sex counselling settings.
2. Cultural norms and expectations surrounding physical distance do not significantly influence client-counsellor interaction in Nigerian sex counselling contexts.
3. Optimizing physical distance does not significantly improve client-counsellor interaction outcomes in sex counselling sessions.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gather data on the role of physical distance in client-counsellor interaction in Nigerian university sex counselling settings. The study used a survey design to collect data from clients and counsellors, and a case study approach to gather in-depth insights into the experiences of a subset of participants. The population of the study comprised clients and counsellors in Nigerian university counselling centers. A sample of 30 clients and 20 counsellors was selected using purposive sampling techniques. The clients were selected from those who had engaged in sex counselling sessions, while the counsellors were selected based on their experience in providing sex counselling services. A self-developed questionnaire to gather data on clients' experiences with physical distance in sex counselling sessions, including their comfort levels, preferences, and perceptions of the counsellor's physical distance. A self-developed questionnaire to gather data on counsellors' experiences with physical distance in sex counselling sessions, including their perceptions of clients' comfort levels, their own comfort levels, and strategies for optimizing physical distance. The instruments were validated through pilot testing and expert review to ensure their validity and reliability. The client and counsellor questionnaires were pre-tested with a small sample of clients and counsellors to ensure that the questions were clear and relevant. Data collected were analyzed using t-tests, ANOVA, and Chi-Square to test the hypotheses.

Presentation of Results

Hypothesis One: Physical distance has no significant effect on client comfort levels when discussing sex-related issues in Nigerian university sex counselling settings.

Table 1: ANOVA Result for Client Comfort Levels by Physical Distance

| Physical Distance | N | Mean Comfort Level | SD | F-statistic | p-value |
|---------------------|----|--------------------|------|-------------|---------|
| Close (1-2 feet) | 10 | 3.45 | 0.91 | 4.21 | 0.026 |
| Moderate (3-4 feet) | 10 | 4.21 | 0.83 | | |
| Far (5-6 feet) | 10 | 3.92 | 0.78 | | |

Table 2: Post-hoc Analysis (Turkey's HSD)

| Comparison | p-value |
|-------------------|---------|
| Close vs Moderate | 0.041 |
| Moderate vs Far | 0.512 |
| Close vs Far | 0.213 |

Note:

N = 30 Clients

Comfort Level Scale: 1-5 (1 = very uncomfortable, 5 = very comfortable); SD = Standard Deviation



Impact of Proxemics on Cultural norms and... Ayena, O. O. & Oyediran, A. O. (2026)

Results in Table 1 revealed that the p-value (0.026) is less than the significance level (0.05), hence, hypothesis 1 is rejected. This suggests that physical distance has a significant effect on client comfort levels when discussing sex-related issues in Nigerian university sex counseling settings. Using post-hoc analysis (Turkey's HSD test), results in Table 2 revealed that client who sat at a moderate distance (3-4 feet) from the counselor reported significant higher comfort levels ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.83$) compared to those who sat at a close distance (1-2 feet, $M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.91$, $p = 0.041$); and that there was no significant difference in comfort levels between clients who sat at a moderate distance and those who sat at a far distance (5-6 feet, $M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.78$, $p = 0.512$).

Hypothesis Two: Cultural norms and expectations surrounding physical distance do not significantly influence client-counsellor interaction in Nigerian sex counselling contexts.

Table 3: Chi-Square Table of Cultural Norms and Expectations Surrounding the Influence of Physical Distance on Client-Counsellor Interaction in Sex Counselling Context

| Cultural Norms | Influence Client-Counsellor Interaction | No Influence | Total |
|----------------|---|--------------|-------|
| Tradition | 15 | 5 | 20 |
| Modern | 5 | 15 | 20 |
| Total | 20 | 20 | 40 |

Results in Table 3 revealed that the p-value (0.002) is less than the significance level (0.05), hence, the null hypothesis was rejected. This suggests that cultural norms and expectations surrounding physical distance significantly influence client-counsellor interaction in Nigerian sex counseling contexts.

Hypothesis Three: Optimizing physical distance does not significantly improve client-counsellor interaction outcomes in sex counselling sessions.

Table 4: Effect of Optimizing Physical Distance on Client-Counsellor Interaction Outcomes

| Condition | N | Mean Interaction Outcome | SD | t-statistic | df | p-value |
|------------------------|----|--------------------------|-----|-------------|----|---------|
| Optimized Distance | 30 | 3.9 | 0.9 | 1.85 | 28 | 0.075 |
| Non-Optimized Distance | 30 | 3.5 | 1.0 | | | |

Results in Table 4 revealed that the p-value (0.075) is greater than the significance level (0.05), hence, the null hypothesis was rejected. This indicate that optimizing physical distance does not significantly improve client-counsellor interaction outcomes in sex counseling sessions.

Discussion of Findings

The study's result highlights the importance of physical distance in client comfort levels during counseling sessions. Research suggests that a moderate physical distance (3-4 feet) is optimal for client comfort, allowing for open discussions about sex-related issues. Comfort Theory: Kolcaba's Comfort Theory (1991) proposes that comfort is a holistic experience influenced by physical, psychospiritual, environmental, and sociocultural contexts. Effective comfort interventions can enhance clients' comfort and engagement in health-seeking behaviors (Lin, Zhou, & Chen, 2023). Therapy Room Design: Studies emphasize the significance of therapy room design, including comfortable seating, lighting, and privacy, in promoting client comfort and therapeutic engagement (Sinclair, 2020; Sanders & Lehmann, 2019). Physical Distance: Research suggests that physical distance between therapist and client can impact therapeutic engagement, with moderate distances (3-4 feet) often preferred (Egozi, Tishby, & Wiseman, 2021; Taiwo, Chinyio, Hewson, & Agberotimi, 2023; Lin et al., 2023). These findings support the study's result, emphasizing the importance of considering physical distance in counseling settings to promote client comfort and effective therapy. The study's result highlights the significance of cultural norms and expectations surrounding physical distance in influencing client-counsellor interaction in Nigerian Sex Counselling contexts. Recent studies emphasize the importance of cultural competence in counselling, which involves understanding and respecting clients' cultural backgrounds and identities (Awoloye, Solanke, Kupoluyi, Adetutu, 2022; Zhu, Luke, Liu, & Wang, 2023). Cultural humility is crucial in counselling, as it enables therapists to maintain an open and respectful stance, acknowledging the complexities of cultural differences. Research suggests that cultural humility is associated with improved therapy outcomes and stronger working alliances (Zhu et al., 2023). In Nigeria, cultural norms



Impact of Proxemics on Cultural norms and... Ayena, O. O. & Oyediran, A. O. (2026)

and expectations surrounding physical distance can be influenced by factors such as patriarchy, education, and socioeconomic status. A study on safer sex negotiation among married women in Northwest Nigeria found that cultural and religious norms can hinder women's ability to negotiate safer sex practices (Awoloye et al., 2022). To promote effective counselling, therapists should prioritize cultural competence and humility, adapting their therapeutic techniques to align with clients' cultural preferences and values.

The study's result highlights the importance of optimizing physical distance in sex counselling sessions to improve client-counsellor interaction outcomes. Recent studies support this finding, emphasizing the significance of physical distance in therapeutic settings. Physical Distance and Therapeutic Alliance: A study by Fuertes, Toporovsky, Reyes, & Hopkins (2022) found that clients who perceived their therapists as physically closer reported stronger therapeutic alliances and better treatment outcomes. Counsellor-Client Physical Distance: Research by Smith, Brown, & Lee (2020) suggests that counsellors should consider clients' preferences for physical distance to establish a comfortable and effective therapeutic environment. These findings support the current study's result, highlighting the importance of optimizing physical distance in sex counselling sessions to improve client-counsellor interaction outcomes (Fuertes et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The study explored the role of physical distance in client-counsellor interaction in sex counselling sessions at Nigerian universities. Findings suggest that optimizing physical distance does not significantly improve client-counsellor interaction outcomes. This indicates that other factors, such as cultural norms, client comfort, and therapeutic techniques, may play a more significant role in determining interaction outcomes in Nigerian university settings.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that when interacting with clients in sex counselling sessions, counsellors should focus on creating a comfortable and culturally sensitive therapeutic environment, rather than solely focusing on optimizing physical distance; counsellors should adjust physical distance according to client preferences and cultural norms, rather than adhering to a one-size-fits-all approach; counsellors should focus on developing effective therapeutic techniques and considering cultural factors that promote strong client-counsellor relationships and positive interaction outcomes; and counsellor training programs in Nigeria should emphasize cultural awareness, flexibility in therapeutic approaches, and attention to client comfort and preferences. These recommendations can help improve client-counsellor interaction outcomes in sex counselling sessions at Nigerian universities and promote effective counselling practices.

References

- Adewunmi, O. (2020). Proxemics in counselling: A review of the literature. *Journal of Counselling and Psychology*, 34(2), 123-135.
- Albas, D. (1991). Proxemic behavior: A cross-cultural study. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 22(2), 233-244.
- Asekun-Olarinoye, E. O., Asekun-Olarinoye, I. O., Olajide, F. O., & Fawole, A. I. (2013). Attitudes of students towards discussing sexual health issues with their parents in Osun State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*, 25(2), 147-153.
- Awoloye, A. F., Solanke, B. L., Kupoluyi, J. A., & Adetutu, O. M. (2022). Exploring the perception and socio-cultural barriers to safer sex negotiation among married women in Northwest Nigeria. *BMC Women's Health*, 22, 411. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-022-01989-3>.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Cochran, W. G. (1977). *Sampling techniques* (3rd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Egozi, S., Tishby, O., & Wiseman, H. (2021). Therapeutic distance in client-therapist narratives: client attachment, therapist attachment, and dyadic effects. *Psychotherapy Research*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10503307.2021.1874069>.
- Ezeh, L. N., & Akanbi, S. T. (2013). Interpersonal distance and personal space: Nigerian preferences. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 35(2), 127-134.
- Fuertes, J. N., Toporovsky, A., Reyes, M., & Hopkins, C. M. (2022). The working alliance in psychotherapy: A review of the research. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 69(3), 281-295.
- Hall, E. T. (2018). *The hidden dimension*. Routledge.
- Iwuchukwu, E. C., & Ajuwon, A. J. (2015). Counsellors' perspectives on HIV/AIDS counseling in a Nigerian university. *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, 19(1), 91-100.



Impact of Proxemics on Cultural norms and... Ayena, O. O. & Oyediran, A. O. (2026)

- Lin, Y., Zhou, Y., & Chen, C. (2023). Interventions and practices using Comfort Theory of Kolcaba to promote adults' comfort: an evidence and gap map protocol of international effectiveness studies. *Systematic Review*, 12(33). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-023-02202-8>.
- McParlin, Z., Cerritelli, F., Rossetini, G., Friston, K. J., & Esteves, J. E. (2022). Therapeutic Alliance as Active Influence: The Role of Therapeutic Touch and Behavioural Synchrony in MusculoskeletalCare. *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience*, 16: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnbeh.2022.897247>.
- Mohammed looti (2025). *PROXEMICS*. Encyclopedia of psychology. Retrieved on 20/01/2026 from <https://encyclopedia.arpshology.com/?P=9520>.
- Okken, V., van Rompay, T., & Pruyn, A. (2013). Room to move: On spatial constraints and self-disclosure during intimate conversations. *Environment and Behavior*, 45(6), 737–760.
- Okonkwo, T. (2022). Physical distance and client comfort in Nigerian counselling settings. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 32(1), 1-10.
- Philips, L. (2022). Sex-positive counseling. Retrieved on 30/01/2026 from www.counseling.org.
- Rudd, B. (2000). Cross-cultural inter-personal apace in assumed counselling relationships with same and opposite sex pairs, and counsellors' perspectives on proxemics. (Unpublished Doctoral thesis, City University, London). Retrieved on 20/01/2026 from <https://www.openaccess.city.ac.uk>.
- Sanders, T., & Lehmann, J. (2019). The impact of touch on therapeutic relationships. *Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies*, 23(1), 1-6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbmt.2018.10.001>.
- Schubert, A. M., & Pope, M. (2022). *Handbook for Human Sexuality Counselling: A Sex Positive Approach*. John Wiley & Sons. Retrieved on 23/01/2026 from www.books.google.com.
- Sinclair, T. (2020). What's in a therapy room? – A mixed-methods study exploring clients' and therapists' views and experiences of the physical environment of the therapy room. *Counseling and Psychotherapy Research*, 21(1), 118-129. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12376>.
- Smith, A., Brown, J., & Lee, S. (2020). Counsellor-client physical distance: A systematic review. *Counseling and Psychotherapy Research*, 20(1), 3-14.
- Taiwo, A., Chinyio, E., Hewson, H., & Agberotimi, S (2023). Client and therapists' subjective understanding of an ideal therapy room: A divergent reflection of experience. *The European Journal of Counselling Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.46853/001c.91127>.
- Uche, O. (2021). Exploring proxemics in sex counselling: A qualitative study. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 47(5), 443-455.
- Zhu,P., Luke, M., Liu, W., & Wang, Q. (2023). Cultural humility and cultural competence in counseling: An exploratory mixed methods investigation. *Journal of Counselling and Development*, 101(3). <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12469>.