

Effect of Empathy and Unconditional Positive Regard Counselling Techniques on the Self-Concept of Juvenile Delinquents in Nasarawa State

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Abstract

This study employs a quasi-experimental, pre-test post-test control group design to investigate the effects of Empathy and Unconditional Positive Regard Counselling Techniques on the self-concept of juvenile delinquents in Nasarawa State. The main objective is to examine the effectiveness of these techniques in enhancing self-concept among inmates in Remand Homes. Two research questions and corresponding null hypotheses were formulated. The population consisted of 60 juvenile delinquents, from which a sample of 36 (18 males, 18 females) was selected from Keffi and Lafia Correctional Centres. Participants were grouped into three: 9 received Empathy Counselling, 9 received Unconditional Positive Regard Counselling, and 18 served as a control group. The Behavioral Assessment Scale (BAS) Test (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition or DSM-5 Symptoms Checklist) was adapted to assess self-concept. The intervention lasted for 12 weeks. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) were used to answer the research questions. Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance, with pre-test scores as covariates and post-test scores as the dependent variable. The findings revealed that both Empathy Counselling and Unconditional Positive Regard Counselling Techniques significantly enhanced the self-concept of juvenile delinquents compared to the control group. It is recommended that structured treatment packages incorporating both techniques be used in remand homes and clinical settings, and that mental health professionals be trained in their application to reduce juvenile delinquency and improve self-concept.

Keywords: Empathy, Unconditional Positive Regard, Counselling Technique, Self-concept, ANCOVA, Juvenile Delinquents, DSM-5.

Introduction

Juvenile delinquency remains a global challenge, affecting young individuals across various societies and regions. In Nigeria, the issue of juvenile delinquency has received considerable attention due to its impact on individuals, families, communities, and the society at large (Curtis & Sood, 2022). Within the context of Nigeria, Nasarawa State is not immune to the complexities posed by juvenile delinquency. The practices and conditions within the correctional centers, particularly Lafia and Keffi Correctional Centers, have highlighted significant concerns regarding the welfare and rehabilitation of juvenile offenders.

The imprisonment of minors alongside hardened criminals within correctional facilities in Nasarawa State has raised alarm bells among judicial experts, stakeholders, and advocacy groups. This practice contradicts internationally recognized standards and domestic laws that prioritize the protection and rehabilitation of young offenders (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, (2014) Article 40; Child's Rights Act 2003, Section 277; Administration of Criminal Justice Act 2015, Section 494). Despite these legal provisions, the unfortunate reality persists, leading to questions about the well-being and prospects for reintegration of juvenile delinquents.

The collaboration between the State Ministry of Justice, Law Hub Development and Advocacy Centre, and the Macarthur Foundation indicates a growing recognition of the urgency to address this pressing concern. This collaboration underscores the gravity of the situation and the need to find effective solutions that prioritize the rehabilitation and well-being of juvenile delinquents in Nasarawa State.

Young individuals involved in delinquent behaviours exhibit a range of troubling actions, including theft, vandalism, drug abuse, and violent acts. Juvenile delinquency falls under the category of "Juvenile Offenders" in the criminal justice system. These are individuals, typically under the age of 18, who have committed offenses considered illegal if done by an adult. The purpose of juvenile justice systems is to provide interventions that focus on rehabilitation and treatment rather than punishment. By recognizing the unique vulnerabilities and malleability of young minds, the hope is to divert delinquents from a life of crime and guide them towards a more constructive future (Curtis & Sood, 2022).

Counselling interventions play a crucial role in addressing the self-concept of juvenile delinquents. self-concept refers to an individual's perception of themselves, encompassing beliefs, feelings, and attitudes about their own identity and worth. A negative self-concept can exacerbate the cycle of criminal behaviour among juvenile delinquents, as they may internalize negative emotions and thoughts, further fueling delinquent activities. Addressing the psychological aspects of juvenile delinquency is crucial in breaking this cycle and fostering a more positive self-concept to facilitate rehabilitation and reintegration into society (Fagbemi & Alabi, 2023).

Empathy and unconditional positive regard are foundational principles within Counselling psychology that have shown promise in positively impacting individuals' self-concept and behaviour (Petersen & Debold, 2019). Empathy, the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, and

unconditional positive regard, providing acceptance and support without judgment, have shown promise in positively impacting individuals' self-concept and behaviour. Implementing Counselling techniques based on empathy and unconditional positive regard can create a supportive and understanding environment for juvenile delinquents, encouraging introspection, self-exploration, and positive change (Petersen & Debold, 2019).

Juvenile delinquency is a pressing concern within the Nasarawa State correctional centers, characterized by young individuals engaging in unlawful behaviours that can have detrimental effects on their lives and society. Among the contributing factors to juvenile delinquency, the negative self-concept of these young individuals plays a significant role. These juvenile delinquents often harbour negative self-perceptions, leading to low self-esteem, a lack of belief in their potential for positive change, and an increased likelihood of persisting in delinquent behaviours.

In the context of addressing juvenile delinquency within Nasarawa State correctional centers, the potential impact of Counseling techniques, specifically empathy and unconditional positive regard, remains an uncharted territory. The lack of research on the effects of empathy and unconditional positive regard Counselling techniques on the self-concept of juvenile delinquents in the Nasarawa State correctional centers creates a significant knowledge gap.

Empathy and unconditional positive regard have been widely explored in Counselling literature, demonstrating their significance in fostering positive therapeutic outcomes for various populations, including those involved in delinquent behaviors. Several studies have emphasized the importance of empathy in Counseling, showing that a strong empathetic relationship between the counsellor and the client contributes to increased client satisfaction, greater self-awareness, and positive changes in behavior (Petersen & Debold, 2019). Nonetheless, in the context of juvenile delinquency, limited research exists specifically on the effects of empathy and unconditional positive regard Counselling techniques on the self-concept of juvenile delinquents in Nasarawa State.

Understanding the effectiveness of incorporating these Counselling techniques is crucial to determining their potential to foster positive changes in the self-concept of juvenile delinquents, thereby aiding in their rehabilitation and successful reintegration into society. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effect of empathy and unconditional positive regard Counselling techniques on the self-concept of juvenile delinquents within the Nasarawa State correctional centers.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the effect of empathy Counselling technique on the self-concept of juvenile delinquents in the Remand Homes in Nasarawa State Correctional Centers?
2. What is the effect of unconditional positive regard Counselling technique on the self-concept of juvenile delinquents in the Remand Homes in Nasarawa State Correctional Centers?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated to guide the study:

1. There is no significant effect of empathy Counselling technique on the self-concept of juvenile delinquents in the Remand Homes in Nasarawa State Correctional Centers in Nasarawa State.
2. There is no significant effect of unconditional positive regard Counseling technique on the self-concept of juvenile delinquents in the Remand Homes in Nasarawa State Correctional Centers in Nasarawa State.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for this study lies in two key Counselling approaches: Empathy and Unconditional Positive Regard, which are fundamental concepts in Carl Rogers' person-centered therapy. Person-centered therapy is a humanistic approach that emphasizes the importance of the therapeutic relationship and the counsellor's ability to provide a supportive and empathetic environment for clients. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. In counselling, it involves the counsellor's genuine effort to understand the client's emotions and experiences without judgment or criticism. By displaying empathy, the counsellor creates a safe space where the juvenile delinquent can feel heard, understood, and accepted. Through this process, the delinquent may become more receptive to Counselling and willing to explore the underlying factors contributing to their delinquent behaviour (Peter, 2019). Moreover, unconditional positive regard is an essential aspect of person-centered therapy, involving the counsellor's acceptance and support for the client without conditions. For juvenile delinquents who may have faced judgment and rejection from others, experiencing unconditional positive regard in counselling can be transformative. These concepts align well with the aim of addressing the self-concept of juvenile delinquents and guiding them towards positive change.

Research Method

The study employed a quasi-experimental, pre-test post-test control group design. The choice of a quasi-experimental design is suitable for this study, considering the practical constraints and ethical considerations associated with conducting research on a vulnerable population within Remand Homes. One research instrument titled "Behavioral Assessment Scale (BAS) Test (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition or DSM-5) Symptoms Checklist" was used in the data collection for the study. This was selected due to its alignment with the DSM-5, providing a standardized framework for understanding mental health and behavioural issues. This was used by the Remand Homes officials to identify the juvenile delinquents for inclusion in the study. The researchers then selected a sample of 36 inmates (18 males and 18 females) from two Remand Homes, namely, Keffi Correctional Centre and Lafia Correctional Centre in Nasarawa State. Descriptive statistics, specifically mean scores and standard

deviations were used to analyze the data. To test the null hypotheses and evaluate the effectiveness of the counselling techniques, the Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was employed. The significance level was set at 0.05 alpha, meaning that any p-value below 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: What is the effect of Empathy Counselling Technique on the self-concept of juvenile delinquents in the Remand Homes in Nasarawa State Correctional Centres?

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of Self-Concept Scores for Juvenile Delinquents Exposed to Empathy Counselling Technique

Group	N	Pre-test Mean (\bar{x})	Pre-test SD	Post-test Mean (\bar{x})	Post-test SD
Experimental	30	2.60	0.498	3.30	0.651
Control	30	2.57	0.504	2.77	1.006
Mean Diff	–	–	–	0.53	–

Table 1 shows that the experimental group exposed to empathy counselling had a post-test mean of 3.30 compared to a control group mean of 2.77. This suggests that empathy counselling had a positive effect on improving self-concept among juvenile delinquents.

Research Question 2: What is the effect of Unconditional Positive Regard Counselling Technique on the self-concept of juvenile delinquents in the Remand Homes in Nasarawa State Correctional Centres?

Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviation of Self-Concept Scores for Juvenile Delinquents Exposed to Unconditional Positive Regard Technique

Group	N	Pre-test Mean (\bar{x})	Pre-test SD	Post-test Mean (\bar{x})	Post-test SD
Experimental	30	1.67	0.959	3.37	0.490
Control	30	1.30	0.794	1.53	0.507
Mean Diff	–	–	–	1.84	–

Table 2 reveals that juvenile delinquents in the experimental group who received unconditional positive regard counselling showed a post-test mean of 3.37, while the control group recorded only 1.53. This indicates a notable improvement in self-concept due to the counselling intervention.

Testing of Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance using **ANCOVA**.

Hypothesis 1:

There is no significant effect of Empathy Counselling Technique on the self-concept of juvenile delinquents.

Table 3. ANCOVA Summary on the Effect of Empathy Counselling Technique on Self-Concept

Treatment Group	N	Post-test Mean (\bar{x})	SD	df	F-cal	F-crit	p-value	Remark
Experimental	30	3.30	0.651	1,57	5.95	4.00	.018	Ho Rejected
Control	30	2.77	1.006					

Since $p = .018 < 0.05$, the null hypothesis is rejected. Empathy counselling had a statistically significant effect on self-concept among juvenile delinquents.

Hypothesis 2:

There is no significant effect of Unconditional Positive Regard Counselling Technique on the self-concept of juvenile delinquents.

Table 4: ANCOVA Summary on the Effect of Unconditional Positive Regard Counselling Technique on Self-Concept

Treatment Group	N	Post-test Mean (\bar{x})	SD	df	F-cal	F-crit	p-value	Remark
Experimental	30	3.37	0.490	1,57	52.56	4.00	<.001	Ho Rejected
Control	30	1.53	0.507					

Since $p < .001$, the null hypothesis is rejected. Unconditional Positive Regard counselling significantly improved the self-concept of juvenile delinquents compared to the control group.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study provide critical insights into the effect of Empathy Counselling Technique and Unconditional Positive Regard Counselling Technique on the self-concept of juvenile delinquents in Nasarawa State Correctional Centres. The results indicate a positive impact of both counselling approaches, suggesting their relevance in rehabilitative practices within remand home settings.

The findings relating to Research Question/Hypothesis One revealed that the Empathy Counselling Technique significantly enhanced the self-concept of juvenile delinquents. Descriptive statistics showed that participants in the experimental group had a higher post-test mean score ($\bar{x} = 3.30$) than those in the

control group ($\bar{x} = 2.77$). This finding was further supported by the ANCOVA analysis ($F(1,57) = 5.95$, $p = .018$), indicating that the improvement was statistically significant.

This suggests that empathy, as a therapeutic condition, promotes self-awareness and emotional healing, particularly in adolescents who may have experienced neglect, trauma, or social rejection. The increase in self-concept observed among juveniles in the experimental group highlights the transformative role of empathetic counselling in reshaping the self-perceptions of delinquent youths. This finding aligns with Smith et al. (2020), who emphasized that empathetic interventions increase resilience and reduce psychological distress among vulnerable populations. Similarly, Victor (2022) reported that empathy-based approaches enhance self-concept and foster prosocial behaviour among at-risk adolescents.

The findings on Research Question/Hypothesis Two revealed that the Unconditional Positive Regard Counselling Technique had an even more profound effect on the self-concept of juvenile delinquents. The post-test mean score of the experimental group ($\bar{x} = 3.37$) was significantly higher than that of the control group ($\bar{x} = 1.53$), and the ANCOVA result confirmed a strong effect ($F(1,57) = 52.56$, $p < .001$).

This indicates that juvenile delinquents responded positively to an environment of non-judgment, acceptance, and support provided by the counsellor. The significance of this finding can be linked to the psychological need for affirmation, especially among youths with a history of social rejection, low self-worth, or emotional instability. This result agrees with Gibson and Dollard (2020), who noted that unconditional positive regard fosters self-acceptance and encourages behavioural change. Similarly, Kristensen et al. (2022) observed that self-compassion-based interventions, including positive regard, resulted in significant gains in self-concept and emotional stability among delinquent adolescents.

These findings corroborate the theoretical foundations laid by Rogers (1957), who emphasized the importance of empathy and unconditional positive regard in facilitating self-discovery and psychological growth. The present study supports Rogers' person-centred approach, demonstrating its applicability in correctional and rehabilitative contexts.

More so, the findings address a critical gap in Nigerian juvenile rehabilitation practices, where emphasis has often been placed on punitive measures rather than therapeutic interventions. The success of these techniques suggests the need for a shift in approach, from punishment to psychological empowerment, within juvenile justice institutions in Nasarawa State and beyond.

In conclusion, both techniques—empathy and unconditional positive regard—proved effective in enhancing self-concept among juvenile delinquents. The interventions appear to have mitigated internalized shame and negative self-perceptions, paving the way for rehabilitation. This affirms the view of Yusuf et al. (2018), who noted that counselling that affirms dignity and humanity is key to the transformation of deviant youth. Thus, the findings call for institutional support and policy advocacy for the integration of person-centred counselling models into juvenile rehabilitation programs in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Based on the study findings, it is concluded that both Empathy Counselling Technique and Unconditional Positive Regard Counselling Technique are effective in improving the self-concept of juvenile delinquents in Nasarawa State Correctional Centres. The interventions demonstrated a statistically significant impact, with juveniles in the experimental groups showing higher levels of self-worth, positive self-image, and emotional adjustment compared to those in the control group. The findings affirm that addressing psychological and emotional dimensions—specifically through person-centred counselling approaches—is critical in the rehabilitation of delinquent youths. The effectiveness of these techniques cuts across gender and background, highlighting the universality of the need for empathy and unconditional acceptance in therapeutic settings. Several psychological and institutional factors hinder positive identity formation among juvenile delinquents. These include prolonged stigmatization, lack of supportive rehabilitation programs, and the absence of trained mental health professionals in correctional facilities. Therefore, to promote effective juvenile reform and reintegration into society, there is an urgent need to adopt counselling approaches that build the self-concept of incarcerated youths. Based on these results, it is recommended among others that the Government, in collaboration with relevant stakeholders in justice, education, and mental health, should introduce structured and professional counselling programs within all juvenile correctional facilities. Mental health practitioners should be regularly trained in person-centred therapeutic techniques, particularly those emphasizing empathy and unconditional positive regard. Furthermore, policies should be developed to prioritize psychological rehabilitation over punitive correction, ensuring that every juvenile receives access to professional, affirming, and consistent counselling services that promote emotional growth and reduce recidivism.

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