

Optimism and Psychological Distress among Inmates of Correctional Centres in Benue State

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DOI: [10.56201/rjhcs.v11.no3.2025.pg23.28](https://doi.org/10.56201/rjhcs.v11.no3.2025.pg23.28)

Abstract

The incidence and prevalence of psychological distress has been reported to be higher among custodial populations than the general population globally. Yet, not much attention is given to the state of psychological distress among inmates of correctional centres in Benue State. This study thus examined optimism and psychological distress among inmates of correctional centres in Benue State. The study employed a cross-sectional survey design, utilizing inmates in correctional centres in Benue State, comprising 295 (91.9%) males and 26 (8.1%) females. Their ages ranged from 16 – 66years (Mean age=37years, SD=1.08). The Life Orientation Test – Revised (LOT-R) and Kessler Psychological Distress Scale were used for data collection. Data analysis involved the use of Simple Linear Regression. Findings revealed that, optimism had a significant negative influence on psychological distress among the inmates of correctional centres in Benue State. The study made recommendations bordering on the need for correctional authorities to provide optimism training for inmates in correctional centres as a way of preventing, managing and mitigating the effect of psychological distress among inmates of correctional centres in Benue State in particular and Nigeria at large.

Key Words: *Optimism, Psychological Distress, Inmates*

Introduction

Psychological distress relates to the umbrella term encompassing multiple common psychological conditions, ranging from subclinical symptoms to clinical diagnoses of depression, anxiety, stress, or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). High levels of distress can be a feature of impaired mental health or common mental disorders, including depression or anxiety. Various forms of psychological distress, defined based on differing diagnoses and measures, are highly comorbid, share similar symptoms, and may be linked to the same underlying pathways of dysregulation (Marzo et al., 2021).

Among inmates in correctional centres, the peculiarity of their situation may pose predisposing potentials for psychological distress. In this vein, this study becomes compelling in view of the high and increasing number of inmates globally. For instance, global estimates suggest that, there are more than 10.74 million people imprisoned around the world and one in seven has a psychological problem (Widra & Herring, 2021). Correctional centres are places

where convicts are confined for several purposes among which include: deterrence, incapacitation, rehabilitation, retribution, and restitution. Given these challenging conditions, it is important for the inmates to be in good psychological states to enable them complete their jail term (Niloofer et al., 2022).

In Africa, the prevalence of psychological distress among the general population as a whole, and inmates specifically is of particular concern due to resource constraints for mental health in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (Winkler et al., 2017; World Health Organization, 2015). In 2017, there were 2.5 total mental health beds per 100,000 populations in African countries as a whole, 80% of which were in psychiatric hospitals, illustrating a contrast between where most existing mental health resources go (hospitals) and where services may be needed, and in reality delivered (World Health Organization, 2018).

A systematic review of data from 24 countries calculated a 10.2% pooled prevalence of major depression among male inmates, and 14.1% among female inmates. Furthermore, available evidence from data in 24 countries revealed a high pooled prevalence of 10.2% of psychological problems among inmates in Africa (Aish et al., 2019). Even though majority of the studies are prevalence-based studies, they underscore the urgency of addressing the psychological states of inmates in Africa, which is one of the gaps this study set to contribute in bridging.

One of the likely predictors of psychological distress is optimism. Optimism is an attitude reflecting a belief or hope that the outcome of some specific endeavour, or outcomes in general, will be positive, favourable, and desirable. It can also be seen as a mental attitude characterized by hope and confidence in success and a positive future. Optimists are those who expect good things to happen, while pessimists instead predict unfavourable outcomes. Optimism exists in various forms such as dispositional optimism and learned optimism. Dispositional optimism relates to the generalized, relatively stable tendency to expect good outcomes across important life domains, while learned optimism is the idea in positive psychology that a talent for joy, like any other, can be cultivated. There seems to be a link between positive thinking (optimism) and psychological distress among elderly people (Chiahemba et al., 2024), but the influence of optimism on psychological distress among inmates in correctional centres in Benue State is sparsely understood. Hence, this study sets to bridge this gap by examining optimism and psychological distress among inmates in correctional centres in Benue State.

Optimism and Psychological Distress

Chiahemba et al. (2024) examined the influence of positive thinking (optimism) on psychological distress among the elderly in Benue State. The hypothesis was formulated and tested using Regression Analysis. Findings revealed that, positive thinking had a significant role on psychological distress among the elderly. On the dimensions, having confidence in the future was not statistically significant to psychological distress while self-confidence and satisfaction were statistically significant to psychological distress. It was recommended that hence positive thinking can be learned according to learning theory, constant and conscious practice will lead to positive feelings, then to good health, happiness, physical and psychological health.

Babatola and Erhabor (2020) examined the predictive abilities of schizotypal personality traits (SPT) and family environments on personal optimism and sense of external security. Controlling for time currently spent as an inmate and religious affiliation, results indicate that SPT significantly and negatively predicts dispositional optimism. However, the perception of family environments did not. The model largely accounted for a variance of 56% in personal optimism and 59% in external security. This suggests the necessity of early detection and management of SPT for increased optimistic dispositions in prison inmates.

Olusoji et al. (2021) investigated the level of psychological adjustment, perceived social support and life optimism of Sickle Cell Anaemia (SCA) patients in Ile-Ife. The results revealed that overall, SCA Patients in Ile-Ife exhibited an average level of psychological adjustment (50.5%) and the adult married patients were more psychologically adjusted than the younger group who were unmarried. Results also revealed that there was a significant influence of social support on the psychological adjustment of SCA patients. The study concluded that social support and life optimism are critical factors for the psychological adjustment of SCA patients in Ile-Ife.

Ocal et al. (2022) evaluated the relationship between mental disorders and optimism in a community-based sample of adults. After adjustment in accordance with the independent variables, the relationship between each psychiatric disorder and Life Orientation Test (LOT) was calculated using logistic models. Overall, 24.5% of participants were categorized into at least one mental disorder group, with 20.8%, 3.5%, and 0.3% having one, two, or three mental disorders, respectively. The median LOT score was lower in patients diagnosed from the Primary Care Evaluation of Mental Disorders modules, except for the somatoform disorder module. Maintaining an optimistic view reduced the risk of mood disorders by .86, anxiety disorders by .89, and probable alcohol abuse by .83 times after adjustment. The study recommended that, the role of an optimistic view in coping with mental problems should be investigated in detail. Based on the gaps identified above, the following hypothesis was raised and tested.

Hypotheses

- i. Optimism will significantly influence psychological distress among inmates in correctional centres in Benue State.

Design

Cross-sectional survey design was adopted in this study. This survey design examines data at one point in time, and is best used to describe the status of phenomena and/or the relationships among variables (Shindi, 2017).

Population of the Study

The population for this study included 770 inmates across three Custodial centres (Makurdi, Gboko and Otukpo) in Benue State (Nigerian Correctional Services, 2023). Based on this population, a sample of 321 participants were drawn for the study.

Sampling

The researchers used purposive sampling technique to draw the participants for the study. This technique was deemed appropriate due to the prevalence of distress among inmates.

Participants

The participants included a sample of 321 inmates drawn from the three Custodial Centres in Makurdi, Gboko and Otukpo. They comprised 295 (91.9%) males and 26 (8.1%) females. Their ages ranged from 19 – 66years (Mean age=37years, SD=12.13). Furthermore, 100 (31.2%) were married, 130 (40.5%) were single, 31 (9.7%) were separated, 21 (6.5%) were widowed/widowers, while 39 (12.1%) were divorced. Moreover, 238 (74.1%) were from Makurdi Custodial Centre; 50 (15.6%) in Gboko Custodial Centre; while 33 (10.3%) were from Otukpo Custodial Centre.

Instruments

The Life Orientation Test - Revised (LOT-R) was developed by Scheier et al. (1994). The scale is a 10-item measure of optimism versus pessimism. Of the 10 items, 3 items measure optimism, 3 items measure pessimism, and 4 items serve as fillers. Respondents rate each item on a 5-point scale: 0 = strongly disagree, 1 = disagree, 2 = neutral, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree. The scale has a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of 0.72. In scoring the scale, items 3, 7, and 9 are reverse-coded thus: (0=4) (1=3) (2=2) (3=1) (4=0). The entire scale generates scores ranging from 0 to 24 by adding all the ratings of all the items. Higher scores on the scale means more optimism, while lower scores meant less optimism or pessimism.

The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale was developed by Kessler et al. (2003). The scale contains 10-items about emotional states, and measures psychological distress using a five-point scale that ranges from: 5 = All of the time to 1 = None of the time. The scale has a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .88 for the unidimensional structure. Scores on the scale are summed up yielding a possible minimum score of 10 points and maximum of 50. Low scores indicate low level of psychological distress, while high scores mean high levels of psychological distress.

Procedure

This study was carried out in Gboko, Makurdi and Otukpo. Data for this study was collected indirectly with the help of research assistants who were correctional service staff in the three correctional centres in the state. A letter of introduction was taken to the authorities of the correctional centres, accompanied with another letter seeking permission to carry out the study using inmates from the three correctional centres (i.e. Makurdi, Gboko and Otukpo). After obtaining permission, the consent of the inmates were sought and confidentiality assured, then the 321 questionnaires were administered to inmates by research assistants, who were staff of the correctional centres, and who have access to the inmates. The completed questionnaires were thereafter retrieved and considered for analysis.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, mean and standard deviation were used in analyzing the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Simple linear regression was used in testing the study hypothesis.

Results

Table 1: Summary of Simple Linear Regression showing influence of optimism on psychological distress among inmates of correctional centres in Benue State

Predictors	R	R ²	df	F	P	β	t	p
Constant	.262	.068	1,319	23.439	.000		41.993	.000
Optimism						-.262	5.419	.000

The result in table 1 shows that, optimism had a significant negative influence on psychological distress among inmates of correctional centres in Benue State [$R=.262$, $F(1,319) = 23.439$, $p<.001$]. The finding further revealed that, optimism accounted for 6.8% of the total variance observed in psychological distress among the inmates. This implies that, highly optimistic inmates will likely experience low levels of psychological distress, while inmates who are less optimistic will likely experience high psychological distress.

Discussion

Hypothesis one tested the influence of optimism on psychological distress among inmates in correctional centres in Benue State. Findings revealed that, optimism had a significant negative

influence on psychological distress. This finding suggests that, inmates in correctional centres in Benue State with high optimism are likely to experience low levels of psychological distress. The finding agrees with that of Chiahemba et al. (2024), who found that positive thinking (optimism) played a significant role in psychological distress. Similarly, Babatola and Erhabo (2020), found a significant negative influence of schizotypal personality trait on dispositional optimism among male prisoners. Another related study by Ocal et al. (2022) found that maintaining an optimistic view reduced the risk of mood disorders in a community-based sample of adults. The finding is also consistent with that of Balogun and Obosi (2021) who found that dispositional optimism among other variables significantly predicted mental health on the other hand, the finding disagrees with that of Shoaga et al. (2017), who found no significant relationship between psychological distress and optimism

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that, optimism is an independent and significant negative influencer of psychological distress among inmates of correctional centres in Benue State. This means that, inmates with high optimism will be less prone and less likely to experience high levels of psychological distress.

Recommendations

Based on the findings obtained from the present study, it is recommended that since optimism can also be learned, prison authorities in Nigeria should employ the services of clinical psychologists to provide optimism training to prison inmates. This is important in view of the established link between optimism, and psychological distress among inmates of correctional centres in Benue State.

Contributions to Knowledge

This study has brought an indigenous contribution to our understanding of the relationship between optimism, and psychological distress among inmates of correctional centres in Benue State. Such knowledge is important because it has deepened our understanding in this regard, and paved the way for informed, actionable recommendations and proposals towards prevention, mitigation, management and treatment of psychological distress among prison inmates in the study area.

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