

## EFFECT OF RATIONAL EMOTIVE BEHAVIOR THERAPY ON RE-OFFENDING THOUGHTS OF NIGERIAN PRISON INMATES

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### Abstract

*This study examined the effect of rational emotive behavior therapy on re-offending thoughts of prisoners at Nsukka Prisons, Enugu State, Nigeria. Twenty-four (24) male inmates participated in the study. The study used a pretest-posttest control group design. The Criminogenic Thinking Profile was used for data collection. Results from the ANCOVA analysis revealed statistically significant effect of rational emotive behavior therapy on re-offending thoughts reduction in the prison inmates in the treatment group compared to those in control group. Based on this finding, conclusion was drawn.*

**Keywords:** Inmates; Prison; Rational-emotive behavior therapy (REBT); Re-offending thoughts.

### Introduction

Considering the social and individual costs of criminal behaviour, developing efficient ways of reducing re-offending is an important challenge for the clinical field. Moreover, although it has been suggested that psychological interventions could be an efficient way of achieving this goal, very few studies have actually been conducted on the Nigerian forensic populations. Re-offending behavior has not only been on the rise but has become a major social problem and core criminal justice concern to the society, government, and prison counselors. It seems to be a common phenomenon among most inmates in Nigerian prisons (Abrifor, Atere & Muoghalu, 2013; Soyombo, 2009). This unyielding behavior usually brings about re-arrest, and consequently re-imprisonment. This phenomenon of re-arrest is often as a result of inmates' re-offending behavior, otherwise known as *recidivism*. According to the National Institute of Justice (2014), recidivism refers to a person's relapse into criminal behavior, often after the person had received sanctions or undergone intervention for a previous crime. Recidivism is determined by crimes that resulted in re-arrest, reconviction or return to prison with or without a new sentence during a three-year period after the prisoner's release.

Over the years, several studies have shown that re-offending behavior is a prevalent problem in Nigerian prison inmates. For instance, Soyombo (2009) reported that, the prevalence rate of recidivism in Nigeria in 2005 was approximately 37%. Wilson (2009) also reported that, studies conducted in Nigeria have documented that 81% of male criminal inmate offenders and 45% of female criminal inmate offenders were rearrested within 36months of discharge from the prison custody. Abrifor

(2010) cited in Abrifor, Atere and Muoghalu (2013) estimated that the prevalence of recidivism in Nigeria prisons was approximately at 52% in 2010. Since then, there has not been any indication that recidivism rate has declined. A study by Abrifor, Atere and Muoghalu (2013) showed that re-offending behavior among male recidivists was approximately 89% while female recidivists constituted 12% and this behavior was high among young offenders within the age groups of 26–35years (54%), 36–45years (22%) and 16–25years (21%). Abrifor and colleagues further reported that, the crimes were mostly theft and other minor stealing (20%), armed robbery (11%) and burglary (9%), and female recidivists were convicted for anger related offences such as murder (10%) and attempted murder cases (6%).

As a measure to reduce recidivism in Nigeria, Ataisikup (2013) examined the effect of cognitive restructuring intervention on non-skilled prisoners' self-esteem and attitude toward crime. The researcher found that cognitive restructuring intervention improved the self-esteem and attitude of non-skilled prisoners. In addition, age was not a significant factor on the self-esteem and attitude of the participants. Adeusi (2012) also investigated the efficacy of cognitive restructuring and behavioral rehearsal on conduct disorder in adolescents in special correctional centers in Lagos State, Nigeria. The researcher found that cognitive restructuring intervention and behavioral rehearsal therapies were effective in the treatment of conduct disorders of adolescents in the special correctional centers. In addition, the researcher revealed that there was no significant effect of cognitive restructuring and behavioral rehearsal on conduct disorder of the participants based on age, educational qualification and length of stay in the special correctional centers. However, there was a significant effect on religious affiliations. In a more recent study, Obikwelu (2015) found that need-focused cognitive restructuring intervention program had a significant main effect on self-esteem and self-efficacy of recidivist inmates in the prisons in the south-eastern Nigeria. Furthermore, other researchers have also used the techniques of rational emotive behavior therapy to help remediate problem behaviors among inmates. For instance, Piliero (1994) examined the effects of cognitive restructuring procedures on adolescent sex offenders, and reported that cognitive restructuring procedures tested in the study seemed effective in improving the cognitive distortions, levels of victim empathy, self-esteem and endorsement of positive social and sexual interests of adolescent sex offenders. Kirkpatrick (1996) also examined the effectiveness of a cognitive restructuring program in reducing recidivism of offenders under supervision in a community-based setting, and found that post-release recidivism of offenders was reduced by 7 percent.

Besides the increase in the number of offenders and re-offenders, the effects of imprisonment in Nigeria have become adverse that counselors are now concerned on how best to equip inmates with rational life skills that will help them overcome re-offending thoughts and behavior when they are released from the prison. Research by Orakwe(2002) has shown that most prisoners in Nigeria come out of the prison dejected, stigmatized, traumatized and hopeless. Agali (2004) interviewed 48 male and female Nigerian prisoners and recorded high level of psychological symptoms which correlated with worries and cognitive stress. Psychological trauma, stress and

feelings of helplessness associated with imprisonment in Nigeria have become source of concern for guidance counselors. Thus, Esere (2007) stated that it would be valuable if counselors extend their services to Nigerian prisons.

During the researchers' guidance and counseling practicum experience and clinical supervision at the Nigeria Prisons Service, Nsukka, it was observed that most inmates were re-offenders, and most of them have re-offended for at least three times in their lifetime. The situation is worrisome because if these re-offenders are left without appropriate and adequate therapeutic help, their re-offending thoughts and behavior may escalate to highly risky dimension that could endanger people's lives and properties in their communities of residence. However, it is worthy to note that effective group counseling could help such clients enhance self-responsibility, increase readiness for change, build support for recovery and change, acknowledge destructive behaviors, and cope with personal discomfort (Northwest Frontier Addiction Technology Transfer Center [NFATTC], 2004). Thus, groups can be useful in providing counseling and enhancing therapy. With rational-emotive behavior therapy (REBT) approach, the group tends to be didactic, philosophical and skills oriented (NFATTC, 2004).

Rational-emotive behavior therapy (REBT) which was developed by Dr. Albert Ellis in 1955 enable counselors to routinely look for the absolutistic 'shoulds', 'oughts', and 'musts' that lie behind client's thought, find these musts, shows them to the client, and teach the client how to dispute and change them into preferences. The theory also shows people that they consciously and unconsciously choose to disturb themselves by escalating their preferences into demands and cravings, and that they can train themselves not to do so and thereby create healthy feelings and emotions (Ellis & Dryden, 1997). The REBT group approach can allow members to share problems or concerns and enable them and the leader to give feedback and suggestions. REBT counselors can use group counseling techniques such as cognitive restructuring, role-playing, modeling, supportive techniques, insight-interpretative techniques, counter-conditioning and self-change, homework, reinforcement, desensitization, bibliotherapy and assertive training to facilitate group (Eneasator & Umezulike, 2010), however, the technique(s) to apply depends on the client's problem or concern. The rational emotive group is a leader-centered group and the leader encourages rational thinking among group members; encourages group members to act as auxiliary counselors for other members; serves as model for group members; and helps members give up their demands for perfection (NFATTC, 2004). A qualitative review of studies by Wilson, Bouffard and Mackenzie (2005) showed that interventions which aimed to reduce criminal behavior among convicted offenders using cognitive skills and cognitive restructuring approaches as well as programs that emphasize moral teachings and reasoning were effective. Yet, it is unknown whether inmates could be helped to overcome their re-offending thoughts in Nigerian prison setting through exposure to an REBT program. The main purpose of this study was to examine the effect of rational emotive behavior therapy on re-offending thoughts of inmates in a Nigerian Prison at Nsukka, Enugu State.

### **Hypothesis**

The researchers tested one null hypothesis at 0.05 probability level.

Ho: There is no significant effect of rational emotive behavior therapy on re-offending thoughts of prison inmates in the treatment group compared to those in control group.

### **Method**

#### **Ethical Consideration**

The Guidance and Counseling Unit of the Department of Educational Foundations, University of Nigeria Nsukka approved this study. Before collection of baseline data, the researchers also obtained permission from the Nsukka Prison's administration and informed consent from the participating prisoners.

#### **Design**

The study used a pretest-posttest control group design.

#### **Participants**

From a population of 313 male inmates composed of 264 awaiting trial inmates and 49 convicted inmates at Nsukka Prisons Division, Enugu State, a sample of 24 recidivist inmates were randomly selected to participate in the study.

#### **Procedure**

To identify potential participants, the researchers administered the Criminal Thinking Profile (CTP) at baseline to all convicted inmates. Cluster mean of 2.50 on the CTP was used as a benchmark for inclusion into the study. Thus, an inmate with cluster mean score of 2.50 and above was regarded as having re-offending thoughts and was therefore included in the study whereas any inmate with a mean score below this set benchmark was excluded.

The eligible participants were randomly assigned to the control and treatment groups respectively. After pre-testing both groups using the Criminogenic Thinking Profile (CTP), the intervention package was delivered to the treatment group but withheld from the control group. Treatment was guided by an REBT intervention package developed by the researchers. The package served as a guide for delivering the treatment intervention which aimed to dispute problematic beliefs of prison inmates capable of leading them to re-offending. The intervention program lasted for 6 weeks (2sessions per week at 50 minutes each). The prisoners in the control group only received the prisons' usual counseling service during the same period. At the end of the intervention, a posttest was administered to both groups.

#### **Instrument**

*Criminogenic Thinking Profile (CTP)*. The CTP developed by Mitchell and Tafrate (2011), is an internally consistent measure for assessing criminal thinking styles of individuals. The CTP was adapted by the researchers. The CTP is often used in cognitive-behavioral intervention programs. The CTP has 62 items with eight clusters (Disregard for Others, Demand for Excitement, Poor Judgment, Emotionally

Disengaged, Parasitic/Exploitive, Grandiosity, Inability to Cope and Justifying). The CTP is constructed on a four-point rating scale of strongly disagree to strongly agree. After piloting testing the instrument on Twenty (20) inmates (not included in the study), the reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach's alpha method. Cronbach's alpha for the clusters ranged from 0.88-0.92. The CTP had an overall internal consistency of 0.90alpha.

### **Intervention**

*Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy Manual.* The intervention manual for overcoming re-offending thoughts of prison inmates was based on the techniques and descriptions in REBT manuals (Ellis & Grieger, 1977; Walen, DiGiuseppe, Dryden, 1992). The manual also included some of Dr. Albert Ellis's quotes to aid in disputing participants' re-offending thoughts and motivate individual participants to change their dysfunctional emotions. The manual incorporated many positive aspects of individual inmates' cultural beliefs relevant to the treatment. The inmates were taught to see the link between irrational beliefs and re-offending with the aid of direct teaching, cognitive restructuring exercises, assignments, role-playing, modeling, supportive and bibliotherapeutic techniques of REBT. Homework assignments were given to the inmates at the end of each session. The researchers also incorporated Nigerian local language (Igbo) at some points in the group process. However, the main language of the intervention program was Pidgin English.

### **Control of Extraneous Variable**

To ensure that the outcome of this study was not affected by variables other than the treatment variable:

- i. The inmates were assigned to treatment and control groups randomly. The inmates were asked to pick one folded card in a container with either a 'T' or 'C' inscription on it. This balloting with replacement procedure gave each of the inmate equal chance of either getting into the treatment or control group.
- ii. The researchers tried to control for crime history. This was done by selecting convicted inmates who were sentenced for the second time and more; and have up to four months and above to complete their jail terms. This was to ensure that other events other than the treatment did not affect the dependent variable.
- iii. The researchers controlled for "Hawthorne effect" by informing the inmates that they were counselors who have been trained to assist them overcome their likelihood of re-offending after release.
- iv. The researchers endeavored to remove experimental mortality bias by selecting only inmates who have up to four months and above to complete their incarceration to ensure that no inmate dropped or get released in the course of the intervention.
- v. In order to eliminate inmate's sensitivity to the experiment and manipulation of thoughts, they were made to understand that their participation and

responses will not comprise the standard of care they were receiving at the prison.

### Data Analysis

The analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to test the null hypothesis at 0.05 probability level. The partial eta squared ( $\eta_p^2$ ) was used to determine the effect size of the treatment. To interpret the magnitude of the effect, the researchers adopted 0–0.20 as weak effect, 0.21–0.40 as modest effect, 0.41–0.80 as moderate effect, and 0.81 and above as strong effect (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007).

### Results

**Table 1:** ANCOVA results for the effect of rational emotive behavior therapy on re-offending thoughts of prison inmates by treatment conditions.

Group		N	Mean	SD	df	F	Sig.	$\eta_p^2$
Control	Pretest	12	45.50	4.09	(1, 22)	2.62	.00	.99
	Posttest	12	46.83	1.60				
Treatment	Pretest	12	43.67	5.68				
	Posttest	12	16.17	0.98				

As shown in Table 1, the results of data analysis revealed that the study participants in the control group had pretest mean score of 45.50 with standard deviation of 4.09 while participants in the experimental group had pretest mean score of 43.67 with standard deviation of 5.68. From the table, the control group had posttest mean score of 46.83 with standard deviation of 1.60, while the treatment group had posttest mean score of 16.17 with standard deviation of 0.98. Thus, the researchers found a significant and strong effect of rational emotive behavior therapy on re-offending thoughts of prison inmates in the treatment group compared to those in control group,  $F(1, 22)=2.62$ ,  $p=.00$ ,  $\eta_p^2 =.99$ . Therefore, the null hypothesis that there is no significant effect of rational emotive behavior therapy on re-offending thoughts of prison inmates in the treatment group compared to those in control group was rejected.

### Discussion

The study investigated the effect of rational emotive behavior therapy on re-offending thoughts in a sample of Nigerian Prison inmates. The researchers found that rational emotive group therapy had a statistically significant effect on re-offending thoughts of prison inmates in the treatment group compared to those in control group. This finding was supported by the effect size results which revealed

that the intervention had strong effect on re-offending thoughts reduction of the prisoners.

The finding is consistent with the assertion of NFATTC (2004) that rational emotive group leads to rational thinking among group members, and helps members give up their demands for perfection. The finding also supports previous interventions that showed positive effects of REBT techniques such as cognitive restructuring (Adeusi, 2012; Ataisikup, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 1996; Piliero, 1994; Obikwelu, 2015) in assisting prisoners. The finding also support the outcome of the qualitative analysis by Wilson, Bouffard and Mackenzie (2005) which revealed that interventions aimed at reducing criminal behavior among convicted offenders using cognitive skills and cognitive restructuring approaches and programs that emphasize moral teachings and reasoning were effective, with such positive effects favoring the cognitive-behavioral treatment programs. Thus, if REBT counselors can modify problematic beliefs of prisoners, and if those modifications will continue eventually lead to less re-offending, then a major contribution would continue to be made in Nigeria's correctional institutions.

### **Limitations**

The smallness of the sample size is a major limitation which affects the extent to which the outcome of this study would be applied by REBT counselors and researchers. Besides, this study could not adjust for the effects of gender, age, education, prison sentence, ethnicity, religion and other prisoner characteristics on the treatment modality adopted.

### **Conclusion**

Evidently, re-offending behavior in Nigeria is a major problem. This study examined the effectiveness of rational-emotive behavior therapy on re-offending among a Nigerian prisoner sample. A before-and-after analysis using 24 individuals revealed that the REBT was effective in reducing recidivism and significant differences emerged between the REBT group and control group.

### **Recommendations**

1. The government should intensify efforts towards recruiting and deploying counselors to the Nigerian Prisons Service to help curb the increasing incidence of re-offending behaviors among prison inmates in Nigeria.
2. In addition, providing funds for research interventions targeting the prison populations would be a positive step on part of the Nigerian Government.
3. Lastly, licensure of the counseling profession for counselors in Nigeria, may spur them into action research for offenders and also devotedly extending their research activities, guidance and counseling practical works and behavioral change counseling services to all the prisons population in the country.

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