

EFFICACY OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES AMONG DELINQUENT STUDENTS IN BORSTAL TRAINING INSTITUTION BARNAWA, KADUNA

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Abstract

Continuous interpersonal conflicts and mistrust among delinquents in custodial settings threaten the rehabilitative mission of Nigeria's Borstal Training Institutions. Grounded in the Cognitive Behavioural Theory (CBT) which posits that interpersonal dysfunction is a manifestation of underlying cognitive distortions and behavioural skill deficits, this study investigated the efficacy of a structured intervention focusing on relationship-building and conflict-resolution strategies for delinquent students at the Borstal Training Institution, Barnawa, Kaduna. The central research question was: To what extent can a CBT-based intervention, focused on relational and conflict-based schemas, effectively modify the cognitive distortions and behavioural deficits that hinder the rehabilitation of delinquent students in a Borstal setting? Employing a qualitative participatory action research design (PAR), a six-week intervention was designed to function as an applied CBT module. Cognitive restructuring and behavioural skills training was utilized to target maladaptive schemas related to trust, authority, and conflict. Thirty-two male juveniles (14-21 years old) with documented histories of interpersonal behavioural issues and assent to participate in a group-based programme were purposively selected from the juveniles at the institute. Data collection involved sustained participant observation, in-depth focus group discussions, and analysis of participant reflective journals. The findings indicated significant positive shifts in participants' cognitive and behavioural patterns. Key outcomes included a reduction in hostile attribution bias, enhanced emotional self-regulation, increased use of assertive communication, and a demonstrated preference for constructive conflict resolution over aggressive responses. The study concludes that relationship-building and conflict-resolution strategies are most efficacious when explicitly designed to modify the core cognitive

and behavioural mechanisms that sustain antisocial conduct. These results advocate for the systematic integration of manualized, CBT-informed psychosocial programmes within Nigeria's juvenile justice framework.

Keywords: Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, conflict resolution, relationship building, Borstal, rehabilitation

Introduction

Juvenile delinquency within the Nigerian context presents a complex challenge, particularly within custodial institutions like the Borstal Training Institution in Barnawa, Kaduna (Adekeye & Emmanuel, 2018; Osemuyi, 2025). These institutions are mandated with rehabilitation, yet often grapple with pervasive interpersonal conflict and deeply entrenched mistrust among inmates, which significantly impedes reformatory outcomes (Sarki et al., 2018). Traditional disciplinary approaches frequently fail to address the psychological underpinnings of these dysfunctional relational patterns (Won et al., 2025). This study proposes that such patterns are not merely behavioural issues but are directly fuelled by specific, identifiable cognitive structures.

Cognitive Behavioural Theory (CBT) provides a robust explanatory framework for this phenomenon (Chand et al., 2023). CBT posits that an individual's emotional and behavioural responses to an event are largely determined by their cognitive appraisal of that event (Ryum & Nikolaos Kazantzis, 2024). For delinquent youths, long-standing maladaptive schemas such as "All authority figures are exploitative," "Showing vulnerability is weakness," or "Aggression is the only way to earn respect" act as filters through which all social interactions are interpreted (Uvelli et al., 2025). These cognitions automatically trigger negative emotions (e.g., anger, fear) and precipitate maladaptive behaviors (e.g., pre-emptive aggression, social withdrawal) (Van Wijk-Herbrink et al., 2021). Consequently, any intervention aimed at improving relationships and conflict management must directly target these cognitive distortions while simultaneously building compensatory behavioural skills (Roxborough, 2025).

This study therefore sought to assess the efficacy of relationship-building and conflict-resolution strategies that are explicitly conceptualized and operationalized through the principles of CBT. The central research question is: To what extent can a CBT-based intervention, focused on relational and conflict-based schemas, effectively modify the cognitive distortions and behavioural deficits that hinder the rehabilitation of delinquent students in a Borstal setting?

Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this intervention was to enhance prosocial relating and conflict management by focusing on their underlying cognitive and behavioural components.

The specific objectives were to:

1. identify and facilitate the transformation of core cognitive distortions held by participants, particularly those pertaining to trust, the intentions of others, and the utility of aggression.
2. utilize positive relationship-building exercises as "behavioural experiments" designed to actively challenge and provide evidence that refute schemas of universal mistrust.
3. enhance emotional regulation by teaching participants the CBT model, thereby enabling them to draw clear links between activating events, their beliefs, and their resulting emotional and behavioural consequences.
4. replace dysfunctional conflict behaviors such as impulsivity, verbal and physical aggression with a set of structured non-violent communication and problem-solving skills through direct instruction and behavioural rehearsal.

Theoretical Review

Cognitive Behavioural Theory

This intervention is exclusively grounded in the principles of Cognitive Behavioural Theory (CBT), which offers a parsimonious yet powerful model for understanding and treating the interpersonal deficits observed in delinquent populations (Chand et al., 2023; Society for Advancement of Psychotherapy, 2025). It uses a minimum number of core principles to explain a wide range of complex phenomena. Instead of relying on complex or disparate explanations, CBT puts forward a direct link between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (IQWiG (Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care), 2025). By focusing on these core connections, the model provides a straightforward framework for intervention.

The framework is built on two central pillars:

Cognitive Restructuring: This pillar focuses on changing unhelpful, unhealthy, or negative thought patterns, also known as "cognitive distortions," and replacing them with more objective and realistic thinking (Ackerman, 2025; Chand et al., 2023). The underlying idea is that people's emotions and actions are influenced by their perception of events, rather than the events themselves. The core premise is that cognitive distortions such as systematic errors in thinking, perpetuate negative affect and maladaptive behavior. (M Durand, 2015; Ryum & Nikolaos Kazantzis, 2024). Participants in this context typically exhibited distortions such as "hostile attribution bias" (the automatic tendency to interpret ambiguous prosocial cues such as 'an accidental bump' or 'a neutral glance' as intentionally hostile and threatening), "catastrophizing" (believing that the consequences of a minor social setback such as 'losing an argument' or 'being teased' will be unbearable, catastrophic, and lead to a total loss of status or safety) and "overgeneralization" (holding broad, negative beliefs based on limited evidence, such as 'because one person betrayed me, all people are untrustworthy' or 'because I failed once, I will always fail') (Chand et al., 2023; Klein Tunte et al., 2019; Sian Ferguson, 2019).

Behavioural Activation: This pillar focuses on changing behavior to influence thoughts and

emotions, helping to break negative cycles (Kendra Cherry, 2025). For instance, consistent, predictable, and respectful behavior from facilitators providing live, disconfirming evidence against the notion "Authority cannot be trusted." (Kazantzis & Dobson, 2022). Conflict resolution as behavioural skills training is also operationalized as a set of concrete, learnable skills to replace a deficit (Radley & Dart, 2022). This involves cognitive rehearsal (mentally practicing a calm, pre-planned response to a potential provocation), assertive communication training (direct instruction and role-playing to replace passive or aggressive communication styles), and structured problem-solving (teaching a step-by-step cognitive-behavioural process by defining the problem, generating solutions, evaluating consequences, implementing and reviewing) to supplant impulsive and reactive behavior (IQWiG (Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care), 2025).

In the CBT framework, improved relationships and effective conflict resolution are the observable outcomes of successful cognitive restructuring and the acquisition of new behavioural competencies (Ryum & Nikolaos Kazantzis, 2024).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach (Zhang & Ying, 2019). This methodology was selected for its alignment with the empowering ethos of CBT, as it positions participants as active co-investigators in their own change process rather than passive recipients of an intervention. The PAR cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting was integrated into the session structures, allowing the program to be responsive to the emergent needs and insights of the participants.

Study Setting and Context

The research was conducted at the Borstal Training Institution in Barnawa, Kaduna. This is a custodial facility for male juvenile offenders, operating under the Nigerian Correctional Service. The institutional environment is characterized by its formal disciplinary structure, which, while necessary for security, often creates a climate where the cognitive schemas of mistrust and authority conflict are reinforced. Implementing a CBT-based relational intervention within this context presented a significant opportunity to test its efficacy against a challenging backdrop.

Participants and Sampling Method

The participant group consisted of thirty-two (32) male juveniles, ranging in age from 14 to 21 years. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select individuals who had documented histories of interpersonal behavioural issues (e.g., frequent involvement in fights, insubordination, isolation) but who were assessed by institution staff as having the cognitive capacity and minimal voluntary assent to engage in a group-based program. This sampling

strategy ensured the selection of information-rich cases relevant to the research question.

Intervention Structure and CBT Integration

The intervention was delivered over six weeks, comprising weekly group sessions lasting 90 to 120 minutes. Each session was meticulously structured to sequentially build upon CBT principles:

Sessions 1-2: Psycho education and self-monitoring (Andrea Zorbas, 2023; Psychology Tools, 2022). These initial sessions focused on introducing the CBT model in accessible language. Participants learned to identify the connections between activating events (A), their beliefs (B), and the resulting consequences (C) in their emotions and behaviors. They began maintaining simple reflective journals to capture their "automatic thoughts" in conflict situations.

Sessions 3-4: Cognitive restructuring applied to relationships (Blair Wellness Group, 2025). These sessions moved into active cognitive restructuring. Through guided discussions and specifically designed trust-building exercises (e.g., collaborative tasks requiring reliance on a partner), participants were guided to collect evidence that contradicted their global negative beliefs about trust and peer intentions. Journaling evolved to focus on recording this disconfirming evidence.

Sessions 5-6: Behavioural skills training for conflict (Seattle University, 2023). The final phase focused on skill acquisition. Participants learned and repeatedly practiced a structured conflict resolution protocol: 1) *Pause and identify* (emotional regulation and cognitive awareness of the activating event and automatic thought), 2) *Evaluate the thought* (a simplified form of cognitive restructuring "Is this thought 100% true?"), 3) *Choose a skill* (selecting from a taught repertoire, e.g., an "I feel..." statement), and 4) *Problem-solve* collaboratively*.

Data Collection

A multi-method approach to data collection was employed to ensure depth and triangulation:

1. Participant observation: The facilitators maintained detailed, structured observational logs after each session. These notes documented specific behavioural incidents, group dynamics, language used by participants, and instances where newly taught skills were either successfully applied or notably absent.
2. Focus group discussions (FGDs): Semi-structured FGDs were conducted at the midpoint and conclusion of the intervention. These discussions were designed to elicit participants' subjective experiences of the program, their perceptions of change in themselves and their peers, and their evolving understanding of concepts like trust and conflict.
3. Reflective Journals: Participants' personal journals provided a crucial window into their internal cognitive processes. The journals offered raw data on their automatic thoughts, their efforts at challenging them, and their personal reflections on the exercises.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed a systematic process for qualitative data. The extensive textual data from observation logs, FGD transcripts, and journal entries were subjected to a rigorous process of iterative reading and analysis. The initial phase involved identifying meaning units and generating initial codes that captured key concepts (e.g., "recognition of automatic thought," "expression of mistrust," "use of pause technique"). These codes were then grouped into potential themes based on their relationship to the research questions and theoretical framework. Key themes that emerged included: "shifting attributions of hostility," "the emergence of cognitive awareness," "behavioural substitution in conflict," and "building evidence for trust." The analysis continually moved back and forth between the data set and the developing themes to ensure they accurately represented the participants' experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was secured from the Borstal Institute's management. Informed assent was obtained from all participants, with a clear explanation that participation was voluntary and would not affect their legal status. Confidentiality was strictly maintained, and all identifying details were anonymized in the data. The facilitators were trained to be sensitive to issues of power and to avoid any activities that could potentially re-traumatize participants.

Results

The analysis of the qualitative data revealed several prominent themes indicative of cognitive and behavioural shift.

Modification of cognitive distortions

A central finding was the observable reduction in hostile attribution bias among participants. Where previously neutral actions were interpreted as threats, participants began to entertain alternative explanations. For example, one participant reflected in a focus group: "Before, if someone bumped into me, I thought it was a fight. Now, I might think first that it was maybe just crowded, or he didn't see me." This represents a fundamental cognitive shift from an automatic, hostile interpretation to a more considered, neutral appraisal. Journal entries similarly showed a progression from statements like "He disrespected me on purpose" to questions like "I wonder why he said that?"

Relationship-building as disconfirming evidence

The data strongly indicated that the structured, positive interactions with facilitators and peers served as powerful disconfirming evidence against entrenched schemas of mistrust. A participant noted in a discussion: "I saw that the facilitators kept their promises and listened to us without shouting. It made me think that maybe not all adults are out to get us." This statement illustrates how the consistent, notion-contradicting behavior of the facilitators initiated a process of cognitive restructuring regarding authority figures.

Acquisition and application of conflict resolution skills

Observational data and self-reports confirmed that participants began to consciously employ the behavioural skills they had learned. There were documented instances where, instead of escalating into physical altercations, conflicts were de-escalated because a participant utilized a taught technique. For instance, an observation log recorded: "A dispute over a missing item arose between P12 and P15. P12 was observed taking a deep breath and saying, 'I feel angry when my things are moved without asking,' rather than immediately accusing. This led to a conversation instead of a fight." This demonstrates the behavioural substitution of a learned, prosocial skill for a previously automatic aggressive response.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that relationship-building and conflict-resolution strategies have great rehabilitative efficacy when explicitly conceptualized and operationalized through the rigorous framework of Cognitive Behavioural Theory. The observed transformations from hostile attribution to considered appraisal, from impulsive aggression to skilled negotiation, are not merely behavioural anecdotes but represent a logical and demonstrable outcome of successfully targeting the specific cognitive and behavioural mechanisms that sustain antisocial conduct.

A key finding was the observable shift in participants' core cognitive schemas, particularly regarding trust and the intentions of others. The data suggest that this was not achieved through verbal persuasion alone, but through the process of experiential disconfirmation (Kabrel & Aru, 2025). The structured, consistent, and respectful behavior of the facilitators served as live, irrefutable evidence that directly contradicted the participants' maladaptive belief that "all authority figures are corrupt or exploitative." This aligns closely with the concept of "corrective experiences", which are fundamental to schema change in CBT (Fassbinder et al., 2016; Kabrel & Aru, 2026). When a participant noted, "It made me think that maybe not all adults are out to get us," it signifies a moment of cognitive restructuring where a deeply held, overgeneralized belief is beginning to fracture under the weight of new evidence. This process is more potent in a controlled, therapeutic environment than in traditional punitive settings, which typically reinforce rather than challenge these negative schemas (Smith et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the reduction in hostile attribution bias, a well-documented risk factor for aggression and violence (Dodge et al., 2015), was a critical outcome. Our findings resonate with the concept that aggressive children often misinterpret social cues (Lloyd-Esenkaya et al., 2021; The Swaddle Team, 2018). By using role-plays and guided reflections to explicitly practice generating alternative, non-hostile explanations for ambiguous events, the intervention provided a "cognitive antidote" against this automatic distortion. This deliberate practice in perspective-taking is a core component of CBT interventions for aggression, such as aggression replacement training (Brännström et al., 2016), and its success in this context confirms its cross-cultural applicability.

The observed substitution of aggressive reactions with assertive communication and structured problem-solving is a testament to the behavioural principle that individuals often engage in maladaptive behaviors simply because they lack a more effective alternative (Arlin Cuncic, n.d.). The intervention did not assume that participants knew “how” to resolve conflicts peacefully; it explicitly taught them, breaking down the complex social behavior of "conflict resolution" into manageable, learnable steps.

This "skills deficit" model is central to many effective offender rehabilitation programs (Gillian Giglierano & Ben Case, 2024). Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) for individuals involved in the justice system). By teaching participants to "pause and identify" before acting, the intervention directly targeted the neurocognitive deficit in response inhibition frequently identified in delinquent youth (Fosco et al., 2019). The reported use of "I feel..." statements represents more than just politeness; it is the behavioural enactment of emotional awareness and a move away from externalizing blame, a key step in developing accountability.

A unique contribution of this study is its demonstration of how cognitive and behavioural techniques are synergistically combined within a relational context. The relationship-building was not a separate activity; it was the very medium through which cognitive restructuring occurred. Conversely, conflict-resolution skills provided the behavioural tools to protect and nurture the trust that was being built. This integrated model addresses a critical gap which argues that effective rehabilitation must focus on the "criminogenic social learning environments" that shape offenders' worlds (Psychology Town, 2025).

The observed improvements suggest that CBT-informed psychosocial interventions can have a systemic impact. A punitive institution often operates on a behavioural principle of negative reinforcement, where compliance is motivated by the avoidance of punishment. In contrast, this intervention enhanced an environment where prosocial behavior was positively reinforced through successful social interactions and a sense of self-efficacy. This shift is crucial, as a positive institutional climate is a significant predictor of reduced in-violence and better post-release outcomes

This, however, raises a critical implementation challenge. The efficacy of such a program can be severely undermined if the general staff and correctional officers operate on a contradictory, punitive model. Therefore, a key recommendation is widespread staff training in trauma-informed care and CBT principles.

In conclusion, this study moves beyond demonstrating that "relationship-building works" to explain why and how it works through the precise mechanisms of Cognitive Behavioural Theory. By systematically challenging the cognitive schemas of mistrust and equipping delinquent youths with a concrete behavioural toolkit for conflict, the intervention facilitated a shift from a criminogenic mindset to the beginnings of a prosocial identity.

Recommendations

Rehabilitation in juvenile justice must therefore be an intellectually rigorous, psychologically informed endeavour. It is not a soft alternative to punishment, but a scientifically grounded strategy. Future policy should prioritize the integration of such theory-driven, evidence-based programs, supported by trained staff, to transform custodial institutions.

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