

Effects of Cognitive Restructuring and Social Skills Training on Avoidant Personality Disorder among Senior Secondary School Students in Imo State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

This study investigated the effectiveness of cognitive restructuring and social skills training in managing Avoidant Personality Disorder (APD) among senior secondary school students in Imo State, Nigeria. Utilizing a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test, post-test, and control group. 120 students aged 15 to 18 were randomly assigned to either the cognitive restructuring group, social skills training group, or control group. The interventions that lasted six weeks, were evaluated using the Avoidant Personality Disorder Scale (APDS). Data analysis employed ANOVA to determine the impact of the interventions. Results revealed that both cognitive restructuring and social skills training significantly reduced APD symptoms among participants. The cognitive restructuring group showed a mean score reduction of 30.02, while the social skills training group exhibited a reduction of 27.40. Cognitive restructuring demonstrated a slightly greater improvement. However, the variance between the two interventions was not statistically significant. These findings suggest that both therapeutic approaches are effective in reducing symptoms of APD, offering valuable strategies for school counsellors to enhance the mental health of affected students. This study provides critical insights for educational institutions and mental health professionals in developing targeted interventions for managing APD among adolescents, emphasizing the importance of tailored approaches in school counselling.

Keywords: Cognitive Restructuring, Social Skills Training, Avoidant Personality Disorder (APD), Senior Secondary School Students.

Introduction

Avoidant Personality Disorder (APD) is a chronic psychological condition marked by feelings of hypersensitivity, inadequacy, to criticism, and avoidance of social interactions as a result of fear of rejection (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals with APD often face significant distress and difficulties in their personal, academic, and work lives, as their fear of negative judgment limits their ability to form meaningful relationships and participate in social activities (Katzman, Becker, & Coles, 2019). The disorder generally begins in adolescence or early adulthood, which is a critical period for identity formation and social growth (Kroenke, Spitzer, & Williams, 2016). For senior secondary school students in Nigeria, APD symptoms can severely

affect academic performance and personal development, leading to disengagement from collaborative learning and extra-curricular activities (Okoro & Nwafor, 2020).

In Nigeria, socio-cultural factors may amplify the challenges faced by adolescents with APD. Hierarchical and collectivist norms emphasize conformity and respect for authority, which can create additional pressures for youth to excel socially and academically (Nweze & Uzoechina, 2021). Mental health stigma further complicates the situation, leading to delayed or insufficient intervention for students with APD (Doku & Asante, 2022). Many adolescents with APD struggle to communicate their emotional difficulties, with their avoidance often misinterpreted as aloofness by teachers and peers (Okorie, Nwafor, & Uwakwe, 2023). It becomes imperative to address the need for effective therapeutic interventions that address both cognitive and social aspects of APD to improve their academic and personal outcomes (Uwakwe, 2021).

Cognitive restructuring and social skills training are evidence-based therapies known for their effectiveness in managing personality disorders, including APD (Beck, 2019). Cognitive restructuring aims to alter maladaptive thought patterns, such as catastrophic thinking and low self-worth, which fuel avoidant behaviour and social withdrawal (Clark & Wells, 2021). By challenging negative thoughts, individuals with APD can develop a more positive self-concept and become more open to social interactions. Social skills training, meanwhile, provides practical tools for managing interpersonal situations, such as conversation skills and conflict resolution (Stravynski & Amado, 2020). When used together, these interventions can help adolescents with APD gradually overcome social fears and adopt healthier behaviour patterns (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2022).

Despite the potential of these interventions, research on their application among Nigerian adolescents with APD remains limited (Nwokolo & Okorie, 2021). Most studies in Nigeria focus on broader mental health issues like anxiety and depression without addressing personality disorders specifically (Chukwuorji, Eze, & Ugwu, 2021). Cultural and socio-economic factors can also impact the effectiveness of interventions. For example, Nigeria's collectivist culture may increase social pressure on adolescents predisposed to avoidance, thereby intensifying their fear of rejection (Adewuya & Oladipo, 2022). Furthermore, socio-economic disparities, particularly in rural areas like Imo State, can restrict access to psychological services, leaving many students without adequate support (Onukwufor & Ugwu, 2020).

Recent studies affirm the effectiveness of cognitive restructuring (CR) and social skills training (SST) in mitigating APD symptoms, especially among adolescents. Nguyen, Bello, & Kim (2023) and Johnson, Smith, & Roberts (2023) highlighted CR's role in reducing social anxiety by challenging maladaptive beliefs, while Lee & Kim (2022) demonstrated its efficacy in altering negative thought patterns linked to social withdrawal. Similarly, SST has been shown to improve social skills and reduce avoidance behaviours, as noted by Santos, Garcia & Roberts (2022) and Bello & Chukwuma (2023). Akintola & Okoye (2023) suggested that a combined approach of CR and SST is particularly effective for APD, addressing both cognitive and behavioural aspects of the disorder.

This study aims to bridge the research gap by exploring the effects of cognitive restructuring and social skills training on senior secondary school students with APD in Imo State, Nigeria. Given the specific cultural, educational, and socio-economic contexts of Nigerian adolescents, it is essential to understand how these interventions can be tailored to their needs (Ekeh & Anyanwu, 2023). The study's findings will provide valuable insights for school counselling programs and mental health policies, contributing to the overall well-being of Nigerian youth (Nweze & Uzoechina, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

Avoidant personality disorder poses significant challenges for senior secondary school students in Imo State, affecting their ability to form meaningful relationships, engage in classroom activities, and perform academically. Despite the psychological interventions available, there is a scarcity of empirical studies examining their effectiveness in Nigerian educational contexts. Thus, this study seeks to address this gap by assessing the impact of cognitive restructuring and social skills training on APD among students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of cognitive restructuring and social skills training interventions in managing Avoidant Personality Disorder (APD) among senior secondary school students in Imo State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. assess the impact of cognitive restructuring on reducing symptoms of APD,
2. evaluate the influence of social skills training on improving social engagement and interpersonal functioning in affected students and

3. determine whether there is a significant difference between the two interventions in terms of their effectiveness in addressing the symptoms of APD.

Research Questions

1. What is the effect of cognitive restructuring on avoidant personality disorder among senior secondary school students in Imo State?
2. How does social skills training influence the symptoms of avoidant personality disorder in these students?
3. Is there a significant difference in the effectiveness of cognitive restructuring and social skills training in managing avoidant personality disorder?

Research Hypotheses

1. Cognitive restructuring will significantly reduce symptoms of avoidant personality disorder among senior secondary school students in Imo State.
2. Social skills training will significantly reduce symptoms of avoidant personality disorder in these students.
3. There will be a significant difference between the effects of cognitive restructuring and social skills training on avoidant personality disorder.

Methodology

This study employed a quasi-experimental design using a pre-test, post-test, and control group. Participants were randomly assigned to either the cognitive restructuring group, the social skills training group, or a control group. Each intervention lasted six weeks, with assessments conducted before and after the treatment.

Population

The population of the study comprises about 1200 senior secondary school students in Imo state Nigeria.

Participants

A total of 120 senior secondary school students from six schools in Imo State participated in the study. The students were selected through simple random sampling. Participants were between 15 and 18 years old, with an equal representation of males and females.

Instrumentation

The primary instruments used in this study were:

Avoidant Personality Disorder Scale (APDS):

The Avoidant Personality Disorder Severity Index (AVPDSI) is a semi-structured clinical interview designed to assess the severity of avoidant personality disorder (AVPD) symptoms as defined in the DSM-IV and DSM-5. A study by Baljé et al. (2023) evaluated its psychometric properties, including factor structure, reliability, interrater reliability, validity, clinical cutoff scores, and sensitivity to change. The findings indicated that the AVPDSI is a reliable and valid tool for measuring AVPD severity.

Additionally, the Dimensional Clinical Personality Inventory (IDCP) has been adapted to assess AVPD traits. The IDCP-Av, developed in alignment with the Hierarchical Taxonomy of Psychopathology (HiTOP), comprises factors such as Criticism Avoidance, Isolation, and Self-Sacrifice. Research indicates that the IDCP-Av demonstrates high reliability and validity in measuring AVPD traits.

Furthermore, the Personality Inventory for DSM-5 (PID-5) includes traits pertinent to AVPD assessment, such as anxiousness, withdrawal, anhedonia, and intimacy avoidance. Studies have shown that the PID-5 possesses robust psychometric properties, making it a valuable tool for evaluating personality disorders, including AVPD.

In summary, instruments like the AVPDSI, IDCP-Av, and PID-5 have demonstrated strong psychometric properties, supporting their validity and reliability in assessing avoidant personality disorder.

Description: The APDS is a self-report questionnaire used to assess the symptoms of avoidant personality disorder. The scale was adapted for the Nigerian context by Okeke and Eze (2018).

Scoring Scale:

The APDS consists of 20 items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale:

1 = Strongly Disagree

2 = Disagree

3 = Neutral

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

The total score ranges from 20 to 100.

Higher scores indicate more severe symptoms of avoidant personality disorder, while lower scores suggest fewer or milder symptoms.

2. Cognitive Restructuring and Social Skills Training Manual (CRSSTM):

Description: The CRSSTM is a structured manual developed to guide the delivery of cognitive restructuring and social skills training sessions. The manual includes detailed instructions for each session, including techniques and activities designed to help students challenge maladaptive thoughts (cognitive restructuring) and develop interpersonal skills (social skills training).

Scoring: The manual itself does not have a scoring scale, but its effectiveness is measured by the improvement in participants' post-intervention scores on the APDS.

The APDS was validated through expert review and pilot testing, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.85 using Cronbach's alpha. The CRSSTM was similarly validated by counselling professionals, ensuring it was culturally appropriate and contextually relevant for Nigerian students.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection occurred in three phases:

1. Pre-test: The APDS was administered to all participants to establish a baseline.
2. Intervention: Cognitive restructuring and social skills training were conducted with the experimental groups for six weeks, while the control group received no intervention.
3. Post-test: The APDS was re-administered to assess the effectiveness of the interventions.

Method of Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (ANOVA) to test for significant differences in pre-test and post-test scores between the experimental and control groups. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results and Discussion

To test the three hypotheses and understand the effects of cognitive restructuring and social skills training on avoidant personality disorder among senior secondary school students in Imo State, Nigeria, the results of the pre-test and post-test scores were analyzed using ANOVA. Below is a presentation of the results in tabular form, followed by discussions aligned with the research hypotheses.

Table 1: Pre-test and Post-test Mean Scores for Cognitive Restructuring and Social Skills Training on Avoidant Personality Disorder

Group	N	Pre-test Mean (M)	Pre-test SD	Post-test Mean (M)	Post-test SD	Mean Difference
Cognitive Restructuring	40	66.23	4.45	38.21	3.97	30.02
Social Skills Training	40	67.75	4.50	40.35	4.25	27.40
Control Group	40	68.60	4.60	67.30	4.20	1.30

Discussion of Results Based on Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Cognitive restructuring will significantly reduce symptoms of avoidant personality disorder among senior secondary school students in Imo State.

Table 2: ANOVA for Hypothesis 1: Effect of Cognitive Restructuring on APD

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Between Groups	10240.80	1	10240.80	642.94	$p < 0.05$
Within Groups	1242.05	78	15.92		
Total	11482.85	79			

The F-value (642.94) is significant at $p < 0.05$, indicating that cognitive restructuring significantly reduced APD symptoms. As shown in Table 2, students who received cognitive restructuring therapy showed a significant reduction in symptoms of avoidant personality disorder. The mean score dropped from 68.23 (pre-test) to 38.21 (post-test), resulting in a mean difference of 30.02. This indicates a substantial improvement in the cognitive restructuring group. The reduction in avoidant personality disorder symptoms aligns with previous studies (Beck, 2019) that have emphasized the effectiveness of cognitive restructuring in reshaping maladaptive thought patterns and enhancing self-esteem.

Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported, as cognitive restructuring had a significant effect on reducing symptoms of avoidant personality disorder.

Hypothesis 2: Social skills training will significantly reduce symptoms of avoidant personality disorder in these students.

ANOVA Table 3 for Hypothesis 2: Effect of Social Skills Training on APD

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Between Groups	9024.40	1	9024.40	506.10	$p < 0.05$
Within Groups	1391.23	78	17.83		
Total	10415.63	79			

The F-value (506.10) is significant at $p < 0.05$, showing that social skills training significantly reduced APD symptoms. The group that underwent social skills training also showed significant improvements in avoidant personality disorder symptoms. The mean score dropped from 67.75 (pre-test) to 40.35 (post-test), resulting in a mean difference of 27.40. Social skills training provided students with tools to improve their interpersonal communication and reduce their social anxiety, which contributed to the observed reduction in APD symptoms.

This supports Hypothesis 2, as social skills training had a measurable positive effect on reducing avoidant personality disorder symptoms among the students.

Hypothesis 3: There will be a significant difference between the effects of cognitive restructuring and social skills training on avoidant personality disorder.

ANOVA Table 4 for Hypothesis 3: Difference Between Cognitive Restructuring and Social Skills Training on APD

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p-value
Between Groups	1152.64	2	576.32	32.75	$p < 0.05$
Within Groups	4064.51	117	34.75		
Total	5217.15	119			

The F-value (32.75) is significant at $p < 0.05$, indicating a statistically significant difference between the intervention groups and the control group. Cognitive restructuring had a slightly greater effect than social skills training. Comparing the mean differences for cognitive restructuring (30.02) and social skills training (27.40) in Table 1, it can be seen that both interventions were effective in reducing avoidant personality disorder symptoms, but cognitive restructuring had a slightly larger effect

than social skills training. Although both interventions significantly reduced symptoms, cognitive restructuring showed a marginally greater improvement.

However, the statistical difference between these two interventions was not large enough to establish that one method is definitively superior to the other in this context. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 is partially supported; while cognitive restructuring had a slightly greater impact, both interventions were effective and beneficial for the students.

Hypothesis 1 stated that cognitive restructuring will significantly reduce symptoms of avoidant personality disorder among senior secondary school students in Imo State.

The results showed a substantial reduction in symptoms of avoidant personality disorder (APD) among students who received cognitive restructuring (CR). The pre-test mean score was 66.23, which decreased to 38.21 in the post-test, resulting in a mean difference of 3002. This reduction suggests that cognitive restructuring is effective in addressing the negative thought patterns characteristic of APD.

Recent studies corroborate these findings. Nguyen, Bello, & Kim (2023) found that cognitive restructuring significantly reduced symptoms of social anxiety and avoidance behaviours, which are similar to those seen in APD among high school students. Lee & Kim (2022) also reported that cognitive restructuring helped adolescents modify maladaptive beliefs, leading to decreased social withdrawal. Garcia et al. (2021) demonstrated that targeting irrational beliefs through cognitive restructuring led to greater social engagement and improved self-perception among participants.

Additionally, Oladejo & Adebayo (2022) conducted a study on cognitive-behavioural approaches in Nigeria and found that cognitive restructuring led to increased social participation and reduced isolation in adolescents. The substantial mean difference in this study aligns with these findings, underscoring the effectiveness of cognitive restructuring as an intervention for APD.

Hypothesis 2 stated that Social skills training will significantly reduce symptoms of avoidant personality disorder in these students.

The results indicate that social skills training (SST) also effectively reduced symptoms of APD. The pre-test mean score of the SST group was 67.75, which decreased to 40.35

in the post-test, resulting in a mean difference of 27.40. This suggests that SST helps students develop better social interactions, reducing avoidance behaviours.

Recent literature supports the effectiveness of SST in reducing social withdrawal and enhancing social functioning. Santos et al. (2022) reported significant improvements in communication skills and decreased social anxiety in adolescents following SST interventions. Bello & Chukwuma (2023) highlighted the success of SST in reducing symptoms of social avoidance among Nigerian students, emphasizing the role of practical social exercises. Ahmed & Yusuf (2022) found that SST interventions increased self-confidence in social settings, leading to a decrease in symptoms of APD. Furthermore, Smith & Roberts (2024) found that SST led to immediate behavioural improvements in students with social anxiety, suggesting that SST can be especially effective for students needing hands-on strategies to manage social situations. The results of this study, showed a notable mean difference of 27.40, align with these findings, reinforcing the value of SST in reducing APD symptoms.

Hypothesis 3 stated that there will be a significant difference between the effects of cognitive restructuring and social skills training on avoidant personality disorder.

The results of this study indicate a notable difference in the mean scores between the cognitive restructuring and social skills training groups. The mean difference for cognitive restructuring (30.02) was slightly higher than that for social skills training (27.40), suggesting that cognitive restructuring may be more effective in reducing APD symptoms. However, both interventions were significantly more effective than the control group, which showed a negligible change (mean difference of 1.30).

Comparative studies support these findings. Martins & Roberts (2023), in a meta-analysis, noted that cognitive restructuring tends to yield more significant long-term changes in maladaptive thoughts, while SST provides more immediate improvements in social behaviour. Akintola & Okoye (2023) found that a combined approach of cognitive restructuring and SST led to the most substantial improvements, suggesting that each intervention addresses different aspects of APD.

Friedman, Roberts, & Santos (2022) compared cognitive and behavioural approaches for social avoidance, reporting that cognitive restructuring was particularly effective in altering self-defeating beliefs, while SST was more impactful in practical social

scenarios. Johnson et al. (2023) also observed that cognitive restructuring led to deeper cognitive changes in adolescents with APD, but SST facilitated better peer interactions. These studies emphasize the complementary nature of cognitive restructuring and SST, aligning with this finding of a significant difference in their effects. The slightly greater efficacy of cognitive restructuring in this study might indicate its potential to address the root cognitive distortions underlying APD, while SST remains crucial for skill-building in social contexts.

The results indicate that cognitive restructuring and social skills training are both effective in addressing avoidant personality disorder among senior secondary school students. The study aligns with previous research (Beck, 2019; Okoro & Nwafor, 2020), confirming that these interventions help students reframe maladaptive thoughts and develop better interpersonal skills, ultimately enhancing their academic and social functioning. Furthermore, the findings have important implications for school counselling programs in Imo State, suggesting that structured interventions can play a key role in helping students overcome psychological barriers to learning and personal development.

Conclusion

The results indicate that both cognitive restructuring and social skills training are effective strategies for reducing symptoms of avoidant personality disorder among senior secondary school students in Imo State. Cognitive restructuring produced slightly better outcomes, though both approaches significantly improved the students' ability to cope with social anxiety and interpersonal challenges. This suggests that school counsellors in Imo State should consider integrating both techniques into their practice to offer a holistic approach to managing personality disorders among students. The findings showed a significant reduction in symptoms of avoidant personality disorder among students in both the cognitive restructuring and social skills training groups compared to the control group ($p < 0.05$). Cognitive restructuring had a slightly higher impact on reducing APD symptoms than social skills training, though both were effective. This study demonstrates that cognitive restructuring and social skills training significantly reduce avoidant personality disorder symptoms among senior secondary school students in Imo State, Nigeria. The results support the implementation of these interventions in school-based counselling programs to improve students' mental health and academic outcomes.

Recommendations

1. Counsellors in Imo State should integrate cognitive restructuring and social skills training into their counselling services to support students with avoidant personality disorder.
2. Future research should explore the long-term effects of these interventions on students' academic performance and social adjustment.
3. Policymakers should provide resources for counsellor training in these therapeutic techniques to enhance mental health support in schools.

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