

# Effect of Self-Affirmation Therapy on Dispositional Optimism of Juvenile Delinquents in Southwest Nigeria: The Moderating Role of Social Support

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**Abstract:** This study examined the effect of Self-Affirmation Therapy (SAT) on the dispositional optimism of juvenile delinquents in Southwest Nigeria, with social support considered as a moderating variable. A pretest-posttest, control group quasi-experimental design was employed. Forty-four participants with low optimism scores on the Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R) were purposively selected from two public juvenile homes in Ogun and Oyo States and randomly assigned to either an experimental group (SAT;  $n = 20$ ) or a control group ( $n = 22$ ). The SAT group received eight weekly sessions aimed at reinforcing self-worth and personal values, while the control group participated in time management training. Measures included the LOT-R, the Dispositional Optimism/Pessimism Instrument (OPI), and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS). Data were analysed using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) and Scheffé's post hoc test. Results showed a significant main effect of the SAT intervention on dispositional optimism,  $F(2, 41) = 4.751, p = .014, \eta^2 = .188$ , indicating that SAT significantly improved optimism among participants. However, the moderating effect of social support was not statistically significant,  $F(3, 41) = 0.615, p = .609, \eta^2 = .043$ , suggesting that perceived social support did not significantly influence the relationship between SAT and dispositional optimism. The findings underscore the potential of self-affirmation interventions in promoting psychological resilience and positive future expectations among institutionalised adolescents.

**Keywords:** self-affirmation therapy, dispositional optimism, juvenile delinquents, social support

## 1. Introduction

Across the globe, juvenile delinquency remains a major psychological and societal concern, especially regarding the emotional and cognitive development of youth in correctional settings. Delinquent adolescents often grapple with various internalised and externalised problems, ranging from low self-worth to heightened aggression and hopelessness (Shader, 2003). Among these concerns, dispositional optimism, defined as the general expectation that good things will happen, has emerged as a crucial psychological resource linked to positive outcomes, even in adverse contexts (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010). Optimistic individuals are more likely to persevere through hardship and exhibit adaptive coping mechanisms. However, in juvenile justice systems worldwide, promoting optimism among inmates is often overlooked, yet it could serve as a buffer against recidivism and foster rehabilitation.

In recent years, there has been growing international interest in the psychological rehabilitation of incarcerated youth, focusing on resilience-building and positive psychology frameworks. Interventions that promote dispositional optimism have demonstrated efficacy in reducing depressive symptoms, improving goal-setting behaviour, and enhancing overall well-being (Scheier et al., 2001). Countries such as Canada and the United States have integrated cognitive-behavioural programmes into juvenile rehabilitation efforts, which have shown promising effects in increasing positive expectations about the future (Lipsey, Howell, Kelly, Chapman, & Carver, 2010). Nonetheless, there remains a global disparity in the implementation of such psychological interventions, especially in low- and middle-income countries where correctional systems may lack the resources or policies to support such developmentally crucial programming.

In Africa, juvenile delinquency is shaped by socio-economic, cultural, and familial factors, with many youths entering correctional facilities following histories of poverty, abuse, and neglect (Nsereko, 2014). The institutional conditions of African juvenile homes often do not prioritise mental health services, leaving psychological needs unmet. Although organisations such as UNICEF have championed the rights and rehabilitation of incarcerated minors, studies examining the psychological well-being of these youths, particularly in relation to their dispositional traits like optimism, remain sparse (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2001). Moreover, correctional institutions across the continent continue to face criticism for punitive rather than rehabilitative practices, further limiting opportunities to cultivate traits associated with long-term adjustment and positive re-entry into society.

In Nigeria, juvenile justice has undergone structural reforms, yet much of the system remains overburdened and under-resourced. Delinquent youths in correctional homes often experience overcrowding, inadequate mental health services, and limited access to structured educational and psychosocial support (Ajiboye, Adebayo, & Akinade, 2020). These conditions are likely to impact negatively on their self-perception and future orientation. Research in Nigeria has primarily focused on the criminogenic factors

influencing juvenile delinquency, with limited emphasis on the internal psychological states that contribute to or mitigate delinquent behaviours. In particular, there is scant empirical investigation into the role of dispositional optimism as a protective factor that may enhance coping and decrease the likelihood of reoffending. This dearth of attention is particularly problematic given the developmental vulnerabilities of incarcerated adolescents.

The Southwest region of Nigeria, which includes economically and culturally diverse states, has a significant number of juvenile rehabilitation centres. Many of these facilities house adolescents from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, often with traumatic histories and limited psychosocial support networks (Atilola, 2015). Despite ongoing government and non-governmental interventions, the psychological rehabilitation of delinquents in this region remains minimal, with interventions focusing more on punitive correction than therapeutic support. This underscores the importance of exploring and promoting evidence-based strategies that can enhance positive psychological traits such as optimism among delinquents. Within this context, understanding the factors that foster or hinder dispositional optimism is necessary to improve the prospects of successful reintegration into society.

Self-affirmation theory offers a valuable framework for promoting dispositional optimism in adverse contexts. According to Steele (1988), self-affirmation involves affirming one's core values and strengths, thus protecting the self from threats and fostering adaptive outcomes. Empirical studies have shown that self-affirmation interventions can buffer against psychological distress and enhance positive future-oriented thinking, especially among marginalised populations (Creswell et al., 2005; Cohen & Sherman, 2014). In correctional contexts, self-affirmation exercises have the potential to improve self-concept and engender a sense of hope and agency. Applying this intervention among delinquent adolescents could serve to reinforce their identity beyond deviant behaviour, thus promoting resilience and optimism about future possibilities.

Social support serves as a critical moderating factor in the psychological adjustment of youths, particularly those in institutionalised settings. Defined as the perception or experience of being cared for and valued by others, social support can enhance the effectiveness of self-affirmation interventions by providing external validation and emotional reinforcement (Thoits, 2011). Among adolescents in juvenile homes, peer, staff, and family support have been found to mitigate stress, reduce feelings of isolation, and promote prosocial attitudes (Olashore, Ogunwale, & Ogiogio, 2018). As a moderator, social support may amplify the impact of self-affirmation on dispositional optimism, creating a more robust and enduring positive psychological shift. Understanding this interaction is essential for designing comprehensive interventions tailored to the realities of juvenile rehabilitation settings in Nigeria.

Despite growing interest in positive psychology and correctional mental health, there is a noticeable gap in literature focusing on the interplay between self-affirmation, social support, and dispositional optimism among incarcerated adolescents in Nigeria. Most existing studies are either descriptive or focus on risk factors without integrating intervention-based frameworks. There is a paucity of empirical research that investigates how psychological interventions can foster optimism and how social support systems might influence such outcomes, particularly within the Nigerian juvenile justice context. This study, therefore, seeks to bridge this gap by exploring the effect of self-affirmation on the dispositional optimism of delinquents in juvenile homes, with social support as a moderating variable. The aim is to provide empirical evidence that informs policy and practice in the psychological rehabilitation of juvenile offenders in Southwest Nigeria.

### **1.1 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of self-affirmation intervention on the dispositional optimism of delinquents in juvenile homes in Southwest Nigeria, with social support examined as a moderating variable. The study aims to enhance understanding of how psychological interventions can promote positive future-oriented thinking among institutionalised adolescents, thereby contributing to their emotional rehabilitation and reducing the risk of recidivism. Through this investigation, the study seeks to provide empirical evidence to inform juvenile justice policies and psychosocial intervention strategies within correctional settings. Specific objectives of the study are the following:

1. To examine the level and pattern of dispositional optimism among juvenile delinquents residing in public juvenile homes in Southwest Nigeria.
2. To determine the effect of self-affirmation intervention on the dispositional optimism of juvenile delinquents.
3. To examine the moderating role of social support in the relationship between self-affirmation and dispositional optimism.

### **1.2 Research Question**

1. What is the level of dispositional optimism among delinquents in juvenile homes in Southwest Nigeria?

### **1.3 Hypotheses**

The following hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance

- H<sub>01</sub>:** Self-affirmation intervention will have no significant effect on the dispositional optimism of juvenile delinquents.

**H<sub>02</sub>:** Social support will not significantly moderate the relationship between self-affirmation and dispositional optimism among juvenile delinquents.

## 2. Theoretical Underpinning

The Social Learning Theory, developed by Albert Bandura (1977), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how behaviours and cognitive dispositions are acquired through observation, imitation, and social reinforcement. Unlike behaviourist theories that focus solely on direct conditioning, Social Learning Theory emphasises vicarious learning, individuals can learn new attitudes and behaviours simply by watching others and observing the consequences of those behaviours. This perspective is especially relevant in institutional settings such as juvenile homes, where adolescents are constantly exposed to peer behaviours, authority figures, and structured environments that either reinforce or discourage specific patterns of thinking and behaviour. Within this context, dispositional optimism, a general expectation that good things will happen can be seen not only as an innate trait but also as a learned outlook shaped by the social environment. If delinquents are surrounded by negative role models and reinforced for maladaptive behaviours, they may internalise a pessimistic worldview. Conversely, consistent exposure to affirming models and hopeful thinking can foster the development of optimism and promote positive psychological adjustment (Zimmerman, 2000).

Social Learning Theory also supports the integration of self-affirmation and social support as critical mechanisms for reshaping cognitive dispositions. Self-affirmation, when practiced or observed in a supportive setting, can serve as a powerful tool for reframing negative self-concepts and modelling adaptive responses to adversity. Social support from peers, caregivers, and institutional staff enhances this process by providing reinforcement, validation, and a safe space for cognitive and behavioural transformation. Bandura's (1977) concept of reciprocal determinism—where personal, behavioural, and environmental factors interact dynamically further explains how supportive environments can amplify the internalisation of optimistic beliefs. As such, the interaction between self-affirmation and social support aligns with the key principles of Social Learning Theory: behaviours are learned and reinforced in a social context, and individuals are active agents in their own psychological development. This theoretical grounding justifies the study's focus on fostering dispositional optimism among juvenile delinquents through a socially embedded, intervention-based approach.

## 3. Methods

This study employed a pretest-posttest, control group quasi-experimental design to examine the effect of Self-Affirmation Therapy (SAT) on the dispositional optimism of juvenile delinquents in Southwest Nigeria, with social support serving as a moderating variable. Participants were drawn from two public juvenile homes located in Ogun and Oyo States. A multistage sampling technique was utilised: first, two states were randomly selected from the six in the Southwest geopolitical zone, and then purposive sampling was employed to identify participants who met the study's inclusion criteria. Eligible participants were officially registered delinquents in the homes, physically and mentally fit, and had scores below 13 on the Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R), indicating low dispositional optimism. A total of 44 participants were selected and randomly assigned into two groups: 20 participants in the experimental group (SAT) and 22 participants in the control group. The level of social support perceived by participants was measured using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) and was categorised into low, moderate, and high for moderation analysis.

The intervention spanned a period of eight weeks, during which participants in the SAT group received weekly one-hour sessions facilitated by trained research assistants, with assistance from staff members at the juvenile homes. The sessions were structured to enhance the participants' sense of self-worth by prompting reflection on core personal values, individual strengths, and positive self-affirming experiences, thereby encouraging more optimistic expectations about their future. In contrast, the control group received neutral training on time management, which was not expected to influence dispositional optimism. Pretest and posttest data were collected using the LOT-R, the Dispositional Optimism/Pessimism Instrument (OPI), and the MSPSS. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Ibadan Research Ethics Committee, and formal consent was secured from the management of each participating juvenile home. Data were analysed using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) to statistically control for baseline differences and evaluate the main effect of the intervention. Additionally, Scheffé's post hoc test was employed to identify specific group differences, and moderation analysis was conducted to assess whether perceived social support levels significantly influenced the effect of SAT on dispositional optimism.

## 4. Results and Discussion

**4.1 Research Question:** What is the level of dispositional optimism among delinquents in juvenile homes in Southwest Nigeria?

**Table 4.1: Descriptive Statistics of Dispositional Optimism Scores among Juvenile Delinquents (N = 44)**

Group	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation

All Participants	44	6.00	17.00	11.32	2.89
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As presented in Table 4.1, the mean score of dispositional optimism among the 44 juvenile delinquents was  $M = 11.32$  ( $SD = 2.89$ ) on the LOT-R scale. Since the LOT-R ranges from 0 to 24 (with scores below 13 typically interpreted as low optimism), the average score falls within the low dispositional optimism category. This suggests that, generally, the participants in this study tend to have pessimistic expectations about their future and limited confidence in positive outcomes. The findings underscore the psychological vulnerability of juvenile delinquents in institutional care and highlight the need for interventions such as Self-Affirmation Therapy aimed at fostering a more optimistic outlook and enhancing their coping abilities and emotional resilience.

The low level of dispositional optimism observed among juvenile delinquents in this study may be attributed to several interrelated psychological and environmental factors. First, many institutionalised adolescents have experienced early-life adversities such as family breakdown, abuse, neglect, and socio-economic hardship, all of which are known to impair emotional regulation and reduce one's expectation for positive life outcomes. Being placed in a juvenile facility often further reinforces feelings of rejection, isolation, and powerlessness, particularly in the absence of consistent parental or emotional support. Such experiences can shape cognitive schemas that view the future as threatening or hopeless, thereby diminishing the likelihood of developing an optimistic outlook.

Secondly, the structured and often punitive environment of juvenile homes may inadvertently suppress the development of positive future expectations. These facilities are frequently under-resourced and may lack programmes that promote psychological wellbeing, self-worth, and goal setting. Moreover, stigma and labelling associated with being a "delinquent" can erode self-concept and personal agency. Without intentional interventions such as strength-based therapies, adolescents may internalise a negative identity, viewing themselves as permanently damaged or socially excluded. This cognitive framing makes it difficult to adopt an optimistic perspective, especially when their life circumstances have provided few examples of success, safety, or stability.

These findings align with prior empirical research. For instance, research by Chang et al. (2011) demonstrated that adolescents with adverse childhood experiences tend to report lower levels of optimism and higher levels of depression and hopelessness. Similarly, findings by Nasir and Ghani (2019) revealed that institutionalised youth often score significantly lower on psychological wellbeing and optimism measures than their non-institutionalised peers. Furthermore, Snyder and Lopez (2020) emphasised the role of affirming environments in developing optimism, noting that youths exposed to consistent affirmation and support are more likely to adopt future-oriented and positive thinking. The present study reinforces the need for targeted psychological interventions like Self-Affirmation Therapy in juvenile institutions to promote resilience and positive self-perception among at-risk youths.

**4.2 Hypothesis One ( $H_{01}$ ):** Self-affirmation intervention will have no significant effect on the dispositional optimism of juvenile delinquents.

**Table 4.2 Effect of Treatment Group on Dispositional Optimism**

Source	Type III SS	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta <sup>2</sup>
Trtgrp	750.629	2	375.315	4.751	.014	.188

Table 4.2 shows a statistically significant main effect of treatment group (i.e., Self-Affirmation Therapy vs Control) on dispositional optimism among juvenile delinquents,  $F(2, 41) = 4.751$ ,  $p = .014$ . Since the p-value is less than the alpha level of 0.05, the null hypothesis ( $H_{01}$ ) is rejected. This result suggests that Self-Affirmation Therapy had a significant positive effect on the dispositional optimism of participants. Furthermore, the partial eta squared ( $\eta^2 = .188$ ) indicates a moderate effect size, implying that approximately 18.8% of the variance in dispositional optimism can be attributed to the treatment intervention.

The findings from Table 4.2 indicate that participants who underwent Self-Affirmation Therapy experienced an improvement in their levels of dispositional optimism compared to those in the control group. This suggests that the intervention had a meaningful impact on the participants' cognitive and emotional outlooks. By encouraging participants to reflect on their core personal values and internal strengths, the therapy likely helped them reframe negative self-concepts and develop more hopeful expectations about their futures. Such outcomes are particularly valuable in institutional contexts where youths are often burdened with feelings of hopelessness, rejection, and social exclusion.

The observed change in optimism among the participants underscores the relevance of applying self-affirmation interventions in juvenile correctional settings. These institutions frequently lack rehabilitative programmes that address the psychological wellbeing of their residents. The ability of Self-Affirmation Therapy to foster a sense of self-worth, purpose, and resilience can play a crucial role in shaping a more positive identity and promoting long-term behavioural change. For many of these adolescents, the opportunity to engage in affirming self-reflection may be the first structured intervention aimed at cultivating inner strength and positive emotion.



These findings align with earlier research demonstrating the benefits of self-affirmation in enhancing emotional functioning and promoting positive psychological outcomes. For example, Creswell et al. (2005) found that self-affirmation exercises reduce psychological distress and improve adaptive functioning in stressful environments. Similarly, Sherman (2013) highlighted how value-based affirmations contribute to psychological resilience and self-integrity. In youth populations, Layous, Nelson, Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, and Lyubomirsky (2014) provided evidence that even brief self-affirmation activities can lead to improvements in mood and future-oriented thinking. Collectively, these studies support the use of self-affirmation as a cost-effective and impactful intervention to improve optimism and mental health among vulnerable adolescents.

**4.3 Hypothesis Two ( $H_{02}$ ):** Social support will not significantly moderate the relationship between self-affirmation and dispositional optimism among juvenile delinquents.

**Table 4.2 Extract – Moderating Effect of Social Support**

Source	Type III SS	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta <sup>2</sup>
Trtgrp * ss	145.831	3	48.610	0.615	.609	.043

The interaction effect between treatment group and social support (Trtgrp \* ss) on dispositional optimism is not statistically significant, as shown in Table 4.2,  $F(3, 41) = 0.615$ ,  $p = .609$ . Since the p-value is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis ( $H_{02}$ ) cannot be rejected. This suggests that social support did not significantly moderate the effect of Self-Affirmation Therapy on the dispositional optimism of juvenile delinquents. The partial eta squared of .043 also indicates a small effect size, reinforcing the conclusion that social support did not meaningfully interact with the treatment in influencing the outcome variable.

One possible explanation for the non-significant moderating effect of social support on the relationship between Self-Affirmation Therapy (SAT) and dispositional optimism lies in the restrictive and emotionally uniform nature of juvenile institutional settings. Unlike adolescents in family or school environments, those in correctional homes often experience limited, inconsistent, or superficial emotional support. The structured, rule-bound nature of juvenile homes—where interpersonal relationships are tightly regulated and interaction with external support systems is constrained—could reduce the subjective perception of meaningful support, regardless of the participant's actual social network. As a result, the variation in social support may have been insufficient to exert a detectable moderating influence on the intervention outcome. This situation makes it difficult for perceived social support to enhance or reduce the effect of a highly internalised therapy such as SAT.

Another rationale for this outcome relates to the fundamental mechanism through which Self-Affirmation Therapy operates. SAT primarily promotes internal reflection, self-validation, and value affirmation, which strengthens an individual's sense of self-worth and resilience independent of external influences. In environments characterised by mistrust or fractured attachments—such as among delinquents who may have experienced neglect, abuse, or abandonment—internal affirmation strategies might provide a more dependable source of psychological strength than perceived social support. These adolescents may have learned to rely more on internal coping strategies due to past interpersonal failures or environmental instability. Thus, while social support remains valuable in other contexts, its influence on the efficacy of SAT may be minimal among emotionally vulnerable populations whose sense of security is more deeply rooted in internal than external resources.

This result aligns with emerging empirical findings that highlight the independent effectiveness of self-affirmation in enhancing psychological outcomes without reliance on external moderators such as social support. For instance, Sherman and Cohen (2021) explained that self-affirmation interventions are effective because they activate core values that buffer self-integrity threats, even in the absence of strong social ties. Similarly, Liu, Zhou, and Ho (2022), in a meta-analytic review, concluded that self-affirmation interventions tend to yield significant psychological improvements across diverse populations, including institutionalised youth, regardless of their perceived social connectedness. A Nigerian study by Ogbe, Akanbi, and Alonge (2022) further supports this view, revealing that internal factors such as self-efficacy and emotional resilience were stronger predictors of adolescent wellbeing than social support in high-adversity settings. These corroborative studies strengthen the interpretation that while social support remains a vital psychological resource, it may not significantly enhance interventions like SAT in institutional contexts where youths' reliance on external relationships is weakened or unstable.

## 5. Conclusion

This study investigated the effect of Self-Affirmation Therapy (SAT) on the dispositional optimism of juvenile delinquents in Southwest Nigeria, with social support as a moderating variable. Findings revealed that SAT significantly improved dispositional optimism among the participants, indicating that interventions grounded in self-affirmation principles can help enhance positive future expectations in emotionally vulnerable populations. However, the moderating role of social support was not statistically

significant, suggesting that the impact of the therapy was largely independent of participants' perceived levels of social support. These results underscore the efficacy of SAT as a standalone psychological intervention capable of promoting resilience and optimism among institutionalised adolescents, thereby offering valuable insights for juvenile rehabilitation efforts in Nigeria and comparable contexts.

### 5.1 Limitations

Despite its significant contributions, this study is not without limitations. The sample was limited to two juvenile institutions in Ogun and Oyo States, which may constrain the generalisability of the findings to other settings with different administrative structures, cultural dynamics, or institutional conditions. In addition, the relatively small sample size ( $N = 44$ ) might have limited the statistical power to detect subtle interaction effects, particularly with respect to social support. The study also relied on self-report instruments, which are subject to social desirability bias and may not fully capture the depth of participants' psychological experiences. Lastly, the absence of a follow-up assessment restricts understanding of the long-term effects of the intervention.

### 5.2 Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that juvenile correctional institutions integrate structured self-affirmation programmes into their rehabilitation frameworks. Such interventions should be facilitated by trained psychologists or counsellors and supported by institutional staff to foster engagement and consistency. Policymakers and social welfare departments are encouraged to prioritise mental health support within juvenile homes, as improving dispositional optimism can contribute to reduced recidivism and better social reintegration. Furthermore, stakeholders should consider complementing such interventions with broader psychosocial support services that include family counselling, mentorship, and value clarification programmes aimed at strengthening the youths' identity and coping resources.

### 5.3 Suggestions for Further Studies

Future research should aim to replicate this study using a larger and more diverse sample across multiple geopolitical regions in Nigeria to enhance external validity. Longitudinal designs are also suggested to assess the durability of treatment effects over time and to determine whether gains in dispositional optimism translate into behavioural or academic improvements. Additionally, further studies may explore other potential moderators such as emotional intelligence, trauma history, or peer relationships, to uncover deeper insights into the mechanisms influencing therapeutic outcomes. Experimental comparisons between self-affirmation and other strength-based interventions (e.g., cognitive behavioural therapy, solution-focused brief therapy) would also be valuable in determining the relative effectiveness of different approaches in juvenile rehabilitation contexts.

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