

Small group communication as a counseling intervention strategy for promoting interest, skills, and behavioural intention towards business start up among youth who are victims of conflict in Nigeria

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Abstract

Background: The increasing number of displaced persons globally as a result of natural and manmade disaster suggests that relying on donations to feed such vulnerable individuals is not sustainable. Despite this humanitarian crisis, literature regarding how to promote the involvement of displaced persons in business is still at the development stage.

Objective: The goal of this study was to examine the effect of small group communication as a counseling intervention for promoting interest, skills, and behavioural intention towards business start up among youth who are victims of conflict. The study focused attention on those who are displaced from the conflict between farmers and herdsmen in Benue State, North Central Nigeria.

Methodology: The researchers achieved the goal of this study using a quasi-experimental design. A total of 470 young victims of conflict took part in the study and were randomly assigned to control and treatment groups. Data were collected with the use of a structured questionnaire while independent t-test was used to analyse the result.

Results: The results of our experiment showed that respondents who were exposed to the intervention reported greater interest, skills and more positive intentions towards business start up than their counterparts who were not.

Key contribution: The result of this study highlights the usefulness of small group communication as a tool for skill acquisition and behaviour intention towards business start up among vulnerable youth.

Conclusion: If victims of conflict receive adequate training, they could be empowered to become self-sustaining, rather than depending on donations for their livelihood.

Recommendations: Stakeholders should invest greater efforts in empowering young victims of conflict rather than focusing attention on the donations.

Keywords: conflict; farmers, herders, business, start up, small group communication, counseling

Introduction

Displacement is a serious humanitarian crisis deserving of urgent attention from policy makers, humanitarian agencies and donor agencies. This is because when people are displaced, they experience both physical and emotional discomfort. Displacement comes with loss of sources of income, in most cases, thus making the displaced persons to experience lack of income. Displaced persons need food, shelter and other basic needs in the short term but in the long term, they need to get their sources of income back. In the alternative, displaced persons need to develop new sources of income so that they can live a dignified life. Oyeoku *et al.* (2020) aver that displaced persons are typically vulnerable because of their urgent need for assistance. When people are in urgent need of help, they are susceptible to sexual and other forms of exploitations.

In Nigeria, most of the displaced persons are from rural areas who are affected by conflict, as the case with the conflict between farmers and herdsmen. The implication is that such persons will be of low socioeconomic status. Evidence in literature (Abdullateef *et al.*, 2017; Abah, 2010; Nyagba 2009) show that rural people are usually people of low economic status with low level of education. Isaac *et al.* (2019) in a study reported that up to 63% of displaced persons had only primary education and they were mainly very poor. The implication is that such persons can hardly get employment in the formal sector of the economy. They need to be empowered so that they can be self-sustaining. Nyagba (2009) in a study reported that the condition of those who are internally displaced in Nigeria is poor because they lack basic amenities such as water, electricity, among others. Youth are of particular interest because they have the energy to engage in any activity that they wish to engage in. Youth also represents the future of any nation and when they are affected by conflict and kept idle, it should bother stakeholders because they will become willing tools into the hands of criminals. Gever (2015) avers that the thoughts and condition of Nigerian youth should bother everybody because they are leaders of tomorrow. In this study, attention was focused on the displaced persons from the conflict between farmers and herdsmen.

The conflict between farmers and herders is one of the serious problems that Nigerian government is currently facing. The conflict has been experienced in all the six geopolitical zones of the country. Chiluwa, I. and Chiluwa, I. M. (2020) aver that the conflict between farmers and herdsmen is so perennial that it has become deadlier than Boko Haram insurgency. Fasona and Omajola (2005), in stressing the magnitude of the conflict reported that up to 35% of the conflict instances that are found in Nigerian media are attributed to the conflict between herders and farming communities. In the views of Kwaghtser (2019), addressing the conflict between farmers and herders in Nigeria is a very serious and urgent thing that the Nigerian government must do. Kwaghtser adds that the conflict has negatively impacted on economic and social activities in the affected areas because it has led to 55% reduction in food production in Benue State. Obi-Ani, N. A., and Obi-Ani, P. (2019) and Nwachukwu *et al.*, (2021) regret that the impact of the conflict between farmers and herdsmen is devastating because it negatively affects the socio-economic fabric of the Nigerian State. Other researchers (Asogwa *et al.*, 2020; Gever & Coleman 2017; Gever 2018; Obasi *et al.*, 2021; Oyeoku *et al.*, 2020) share similar views.

ThisDay (2020) did a report and found that between 2017 and 2020, herdsmen have been responsible for 654 attacks that led to the death of 2,539 persons while 253 persons were kidnapped. The conflict between farmers and herdsmen has also led to the displacements of many people. Idowu (2017) notes that more than 400,000 have experienced displacement in the last five years.

Taking care of displaced persons cost a lot of money. For example, the Federal Government of Nigeria spends N5 billion every month to take care of the welfare of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the northeast only (Obasi *et al.*, 2021). This amount is much considering especially that it will cost lesser to train displaced persons. It is against this background that this study examined how small group communication can serve as counseling intervention for prompting business start up among displaced persons of the conflict between farmers and herdsmen in Nigeria.

Objectives of the study

The aim of this study was to determine the impact of small group communication as a counseling intervention strategy for promoting interest, skills, and behavioural intention towards business start up among displaced persons in Nigeria. This objective was geared towards providing insight on the role that counseling through small group can play in empowering people who are displaced by conflict.

Literature Review

Youth and Skill Acquisition

Skill acquisition is one of the best ways to empower people instead of spoon-feeding them. Skill acquisition makes people more confident in themselves and prepares them to be self-sustaining. According to Udo (2015), skill acquisition is important to both the individual who acquires such skills and the society where such a person leaves. People without skills are a problem to themselves and the society at large. It is important to add here that when people acquire skills, they stand a better chance to be gainfully engaged, thus making them less vulnerable to crimes and criminality. Adofu *et al.* (2013) carried out a study to ascertain the impact of skill acquisition with specific attention to youth in Kogi State, North Central Nigeria. Survey research design was applied for conducted the study while data were collected through the utilization of questionnaire. The result of their study revealed that skill acquisition training was successful in improving the quality of their lives of youth.

Fatok (2019) equally tested the effectiveness of skill acquisition on a sample of 557 youth in Ondo State, Nigeria. Fatok reported that young people who are trained on skill acquisition are likely to have higher income with higher possibility of higher quality of life than youth with no skill. Inyang and Agwadu (2017) equally tested the impact of skill acquisition on youth people in rural areas. The researchers found that up 83.3% of young people from rural areas who received training on skill acquisition had their income improved more than their counterparts who did not receive the training.

Although the studies reviewed above examined the effectiveness of skill acquisition on youth, displaced young people who are displaced as a result of conflict were not considered. However, the above studies have shown that skill acquisition is a workable strategy for empowering young people. In the recent times, researchers are beginning to test the effect of skill acquisition among displaced persons.

Obasi *et al.* (2021) tested the effectiveness of theatre for development in triggering interest in selected art skills among victims of conflict. The art skills that were examined were weaving, fashion and design as well as painting. The researcher deployed a quasi experiment and examined 470 sample. The researchers reported that victims of conflict that received the treatment reported more interest and knowledge in the art areas than those who did not. The issue is that Obasi *et al.*, did not examine youth.

Gever *et al.* (2021) carried out a study wherein they investigated the impact of small group communication on interest in painting among victims of conflict. The treatment group was exposed to painting tips and procedure through small group communication. The result showed that participants who took part in the treatment reported more knowledge of painting than those who did not. Gever *et al.* then concluded that the intervention was effective. It is important to note here that the studies of Obasi *et al.* and Gever *et al.* though important because the researchers examined how to empower victims of conflict, the scope was limited to painting, weaving fashion and design. This makes it difficult to generalize the results to other aspects of business. Additionally, the researchers did not examine youth.

Small Group Communication as a counseling tool

Typically communication can take place under different circumstances involving different people with different target in mind. When communication involves three or more people who have common objective, it is called small group communication. According to Bormann and Bormann (1980) small group communication is the meaning sharing that takes place with two or more people interacting for period of time with clearly set out goals that are expected to be of benefit to all the parties involved. The critical point to note here is that small group communication involves small number of people and it is not a one off communication, rather, it takes place over time and there is target in mind. In the views of David and Chris (2009) small group communication can take place on a face-to-face or any other channels of communication based on the agreement among the people involved. Small group communication is a counseling tool. This is because through small group communication, participants will be counseled on certain issues with a view to influencing their behaviour.

Counseling is closely linked with communication. Talabi *et al.* (2021) say that communication is an important counseling tool to the extent that it will be difficult for effective counseling to take place without effective communication. Syahniar (2017) opines that counseling is one of the critical strategies for influencing peoples' behaviour and thought process deliberately. Daphne *et al.* (1994) did a study with the objective to determine the impact of counseling on health education. The researchers made use of experiment research design. It was found that counseling is an important tool for health education. Matliwala (2017) also tested the impact of counseling on mental health and reported that counseling is an important tool for behaviour change. Talabi *et al.* (2021) carried out a study wherein they examined the impact of counseling on intention towards ranching among herders. The researchers made use of an experimental research design and delivered the counseling intervention through digitally recorded music. The result of the study showed that counseling is an important strategy for influencing the behaviour of herders towards ranching. Studies (Emich *et al.*, 2020; Lowry *et al.*, 2006; Lamport & Rynsburger 2008) have been shown that small group communication is effective for behaviour change. However, less studies have focused attention to young people who are victims of conflict.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses articulation

Human Capital Theory (HCT) as well as the theory of planned behaviour were used to articulate this study. HCT was suggested in 1964 by Gary Stanley Backer and his associated Jacob propounded HCT. The theory seeks to point out the need for acquiring as a deliberate

strategy to promote human development (Goldin 2014). The theory assumes that human beings are assert that should be developed. Developing human beings, according to the theory, requires that they have access to skill acquisition training programmes so that they can be empowered. HCT makes a case for decision makers to pay close attention to skill acquisition as a deliberate strategy for promoting economic development. According to the theory, economic development cannot be possible if people are not empowered. Consequently, empowering people is an important strategy for promoting economic development.

The importance of skill acquisition to human development has been acknowledged in literature. For example, Inyang and Agwadu (2017) opine that acquiring skill is one of the essential considerations that propel business development in a country. Michael *et al.* (2016) corroborate that acquiring skill is a *sin qua non* for people to engage in entrepreneurship successfully. Human capital theory has been applied in recent literature to examine the impact of interventions. For example, Okpara *et al.* (2021) applied the theory to examine the impact of a social media-based intervention on entrepreneurial engagement of unemployed youth and reported the theory is an effective framework for studies related to human empowerment. Obasi *et al.* (2021) utilized the theory to examine the impact of theatrical intervention on intention towards painting and weaving and reported the same result. Therefore, based this theory, the researchers hypothesized:

H1: Small group communication counseling intervention will be effective in influencing business start-up intention among youth who are victims of conflict.

H2: Small group communication counseling intervention will be effective in influencing entrepreneurial skills among youth who are victims of conflict.

It is essential to note here that the behaviour intention elements of the study is not addressed by the Human Capital Theory. Therefore, the researchers made use of theory of planned behaviour. Ajzen propounded this theory in 1986 to explain the behaviour of human beings. Accordingly, it holds that a person intention to carry out an action is influenced by intention related to such a behaviour. Three variables determine intention to carry out a behaviour. Intention These are: subjective norms, attitude concerning an action and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991, 2008). According to Ajzen (1985), intention describes a person's readiness to carry out a particular behaviour. Attitude explains the assessment by a person has concerning the behaviour to be taken. Finally, subjective norms defines the opinion a person's peers have related to an issue. In this study, it is argued that intention to start a business can be positive or negative. It is positive when a person desires to start a business but negative when a person has no intention of starting a business. Based on the above theory, it is hypothesized:

H3: Small group communication counseling intervention will be effective in influencing positive intention to start business among youth who are victims of conflict.

Methodology

Research Design

The researchers utilized a quasi-experiment to carry out this study. This type of research design was considered most suitable for the study because it enabled the researchers to test the effectiveness of the study intervention.

Participants

A total of 470 young victims of conflict took part in the study. A priori power analysis was utilized to ascertain the adequacy of the sample. The G*power programme was applied with the parameters with power $(1 - \beta)$ at 0.90, 0.30 effect size f , and $\alpha = .05$. Using a random approach, the researchers assigned 250 respondents each into treatment and control groups.

Sampling Procedure

The researchers sampled the respondents for this study in stages applying different sampling techniques. The sampling techniques as well as the stages are explained below:

Stage one: This stage was the use of quota sampling to classify the respondents into experiment (n=234) group and control (n=236) group.

Stage two: At this stage, the researcher applied simple random sampling approach to sample six IDP camps in Benue State. Camps 1-3 were used as treatment camp while camps 4-6 were used as control camps.

Stage three: At this stage of the sampling, the researchers made use of accidental sampling. Here, the study was announced in the various camps and young victims who were interested in taking part in the study registered their names. Only victims within the ages of 18-35 were told to take come forward to participate. Those who indicated interest were categorized into 26 small groups of 9 persons eah.

The instrument of data collection for the study was a structured questionnaire. Researchers (Ale, 2020; Ogbonne; 2019 Odii *et al.*, 2020; Kari, 2020) report that questionnaire has the capacity to generate large volume of data. Three experts validated the instrument with particular reference to clarity, logicity and appropriateness. The reliability of the instrument was determined using Cronbach's Alpha and this showed that the instrument was reliable because it resulted to an overall Alpha $\alpha = .74$.

Procedure for the experiment

The experiment in this study involved participation in a small group discussion. In each of the groups, there was an expert in guidance and counseling as well as entrepreneurship. Participants were told of the importance of entrepreneurship and how to start a business. Each group discussion lasted between one to two hours. The small group discussion took place for two weeks. The discussion was organized in headings such as overview of entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship as a job creator; mistakes to avoid in entrepreneurship, step-by-step approach on how to be good at entrepreneurs, how to start a business and marketing your products and services. The discussion was interactive with questions and answer sessions. Members of the control group were promised training on how to start a business but did not receive the training until after the study. The reason for giving the control group the treatment after the study was in meeting up with the promise made to them earlier before they agreed to participate.

Data Analysis

The result of this study was analysed using simple percentages, mean and standard deviation. Also, the hypotheses were tested using independence *t-test*. All the results were presented in tables. Analysis were done using SPSS version 22.

Results

The return rate for this study was 100%. The high return rate could be because the questionnaire items were readout to the respondents for them to indicate their options. There was 65% male respondents in the sample and 35% female for the treatment group and 55% male and 45% female for the control group. All the respondents were youth who were within the age of 18-35 who were victims of conflict.

Table 1: Mean and t-test results on interest in business start among participants at baseline (Time 1) and post treatment (Time 2) according to group

Groups	Before-treatment (baseline-Time 1) (Interest in business start uo)				After treatment (Time 2)			
	Mean	SD	df	Not Sig	Mean	SD	Df	Sig
Control group	1.1	.56			1.0	.56		
Treatment group	1.0	.45	12	.71	3.3	.82	12	.02

Table 1 above tested the effectiveness of our intervention in stimulating the interest of victims of conflict in business start. It was found that before the treatment, both members of the treatment and control groups did not significantly differ in their mean score regarding their interest in business start up. However, after the treatment, the experiment group scored significantly higher while the control group did not significantly change. Consequently open this, our conclusion is that our intervention was effective in stimulating the interest of victims of conflict towards business start up. Therefore, we accept the first hypothesis which states that small group communication counseling intervention will be effective in influencing business start-up intention among youth who are victims of conflict.

Table 2: Mean and t-test results on entrepreneurial skills related to business start up among participants at baseline (Time 1) and post treatment (Time 2) according to group

Groups	Pre-treatment (baseline-Time 1) (entrepreneurial skills)				Post treatment (Time 2)			
	Mean	SD	Df	Not Sig	Mean	SD	df	Sig
Control group	1.0	.67			1.1	.91		
Treatment group	1.0	.67	11	.66	3.6	.63	11	.01

The result of the study as presented in Table two above sought to determine the effect of our intervention in improving the entrepreneurial skills of respondents related to business start up. Our result showed that prior to the intervention, study participants from the treatment and control groups scored noticeably low regarding their entrepreneurial skills vis-à-vis business start up. However, at post treatment, the experiment group scored higher while the control group did not significantly improve. Based on this result, the second assumption which states that small group communication counseling intervention will be effective in influencing entrepreneurial skills among youth who are victims of conflict.

Table 3: Mean and t-test results on behavioural intention related to business start up among participants at baseline (Time 1) and post treatment (Time 2) according to group

Groups	Pre-treatment (baseline-Time 1) (behaviour intention)				Post treatment (Time 2)			
	Mean	SD	Df	Not Sig	Mean	SD	Df	Sig
Control group	1.2	.67			1.1	.80		
Treatment group	1.1	.86	10	.62	3.6	.34	10	.02

Table 3 above was computed to measure the impact of our intervention on intention towards business start up among study participants. It was found that at baseline (Time 1) both the control and treatment groups scored low regarding their intention to start up a business. However, at Time 2 (post treatment) the experiment group scored significantly higher while the control group did not significantly change. Therefore, the last assumption was accepted and it is concluded that displaced persons who are exposed to a small group communication counseling intervention will report greater positive intention to start business than those who are not.

Discussion of Findings

The aim of this study was to determine the impact of a small group communication counseling intervention strategy on interest, skills and intention towards business start up among victims of conflict. The researcher examined displaced persons of the conflict between farmers and herdsmen in Benue State. It was found that displaced persons who are exposed to the treatment reported greater interest in business start up than their counterparts who are not. This aspect of the results extends the study of Okpara *et al.* (2021). This is because in the case of Okpara, *et al.* their focus was only on how social media-based intervention can simulate interest in business start up among unemployed youths. However, in the current study, the focus was on small group communication and displaced persons.

Additionally, the current study showed that small group communication counseling intervention was effective in improving the skills of displaced persons who took part in the study. This aspect of the results extends the study of Gever *et al.*, (2021) who reported that small group communication was effective in improving the knowledge of displaced persons related to painting. The study of Gever *et al.*, was limited to only one skill set. However, in the current study, attention was paid to entrepreneurship generally.

Finally, the result of the current study showed that respondents who were exposed to the treatment reported positive intention to start businesses than those who were not. This result has extended the study of Obasi *et al.* (2021) who examined the impact of theatre for development in influencing the behavioural intention of victims of conflict towards painting, weaving fashion and design. However the current study was not limited to only three areas but business start up in general. The current study has also offered a fresh perspective in the study of the impact of small group communication by linking it with counseling. This is an aspect that has rarely been

explored in literature related to small group communication (Emich, *et al*, 2020; Lowry *et al.*, 2006; Lamport, & Rynsburger, 2008) or counseling (Talabi *et al.*, 2021; Matliwala 2017). Therefore, it is expected this new perspective will shape future debate in literature related to communication effect as well as the impact of counseling.

The results of the study as discussed above have implications on policies and programmes aimed at promoting the welfare of displaced persons as well as addressing the challenges of humanitarian crisis in Nigeria. This is because the results make a strong case for the need to develop communication intervention strategies that will encourage displaced persons to get involved in business ventures. Displaced persons cannot continue to depend on donations from government and other donor organizations, they need to be empowered to stand on their feet so that they can contribute to economic advancement. This study provides evidence regarding the role of small group communication intervention in meeting this need.

Apart from the policy implications, the current study has implications on the theory of human capital as well as the theory of planned behaviour. Concerning HCT, the result of the study showed that the framework provides an appropriate explanation on how to empower displaced persons. The study has shown that training sessions can serve as appropriate ways of developing the human capital of displaced persons and making them available for the labour market. Concerning the theory of planned behaviour, the result of the current study showed that acquisition of knowledge and skills can play a greater role in influencing behaviour intention. This is because before the intervention, the respondents from both groups scored low regarding intention to start a business. But after the treatment, there was a change with the treatment group reporting greater readiness to start a business whereas their counterparts in the control group did not significantly change. It is expected that this information will be beneficial to other researchers who may want to apply the theory of planned behaviour in investigating intention to carry out an action.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

The conclusion of this study is that small group communication counseling intervention can serve as an important approach for empowering displaced persons from the conflict between farmers and herdsmen in Nigeria. Although this study has provided information regarding the effectiveness of small group communication as counselling intervention, it did not investigate how small group communication can serve as counseling intervention for combating anxiety among displaced persons. This is important because people who are displaced as a result of conflict, as the it is case with the conflict between farmers and herdsmen, are likely to suffer from fear and anxiety. There is the need to assist them overcome such emotional trauma. It is expected that future studies should pay greater attention to issues related to how to reduce anxiety among displaced persons and make them psychologically balanced to face life's challenges. Additionally, future researchers should pay greater attention on how to provide take off capital that will assist victims of conflict to start businesses.

Conflict of Interest

We declare no conflict of interest.

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