

# The Effectiveness of Life Skills Training on Hope in Boy Adolescent Prisoners in Basra, Iraq

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** The delinquency of children and adolescents can be considered as one of the most complicated social issues that has engulfed the world today. The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of life skills training on the level of hope in adolescent prisoners in the city of Basra, Iraq.

**Method:** The statistical population of this study included all the delinquent adolescent boys of a prison in the Iraqi city of Basra. The research sample consisted of 40 of these adolescents who volunteered to participate in the research and were then randomly assigned to two experimental and control groups. The tool used in this research was the Snyder Hope Scale. The research design was a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up test. To analyze the research hypotheses, multivariate and single-variable covariance analysis methods were used.

**Results:** The results showed that life skills training significantly increased the hope and its components (agency and pathway thinking) in the experimental group.

**Conclusion:** The results of this study showed that adolescent prisoners could be trained with life skills to have a better and improved life experience through increased levels of hope.

**Keywords:** Hope, Adolescents, Prisoner, Delinquency, Iraq

## Introduction

The issue of delinquency, especially that of children and adolescents has become one of the most complicated social problems in most societies today. Different ideas have been expressed about the causes of increased crimes in general, and at younger ages in particular. For example, various psychological or physical conditions at the person's home can have a significant impact on their likelihood of engaging in delinquent behaviors. Factors such as parental criminality, harsh parental disciplines, lack of parental involvement, family conflicts, child abuse, neglect, and rejection by parents are extremely strong precursors to juvenile delinquency [1]. Van Goozen et al. have argued that, despite the improvement in living standards and the expansion of psychological services and centers, crimes against children and adolescents are increasing [2]. There are many possible causes for this disastrous social phenomenon, including a combination of biological, psychological, social, and cultural factors. In recent years, the expansion in utilization of prison systems reflects the reality of increase in rates of crime, delinquency, and social and legal deviances, and the multifactor nature of crime should be considered when designing reduction strategies. Most crimes can be considered in four dimensions: biological, psychological, social, and legal. Some studies show that delinquents have more deficits in their life skills compared to non-delinquent individuals [3].

The defect in the full attainment of life skills in one or more aspects of development can

be caused by various factors, including poor verbal and nonverbal communication skills, poor problem-solving skills, involving in high-risk behaviors, lack of self-esteem, and lack of seeing themselves as valuable. Accordingly, some behavioral scientists believe that many juveniles lacking life skills are the ones most likely to exhibit the most behavioral problems. They recommend interventions to strengthen life skills that prevent delinquency. Life skills help individuals to effectively deal with challenges and situations of life, and work positively and adaptively in relation to other people, society, culture, and the environment, and to provide them with mental health [4]. For this reason, learning and practicing life skills can enhance or improve people's attitudes and behaviors, and as a result, with the emergence of healthy and positive behaviors, many of such problems are either solved or prevented [5].

Some studies have shown that life skill programs are effective in various aspects of life. For example, the results of some studies indicate that life skills training is effective in preventing substance abuse in schools [6]. Also, Mahdavi Hajia et al. in a research conducted on university students, concluded that life skills training significantly increased their happiness [7]. Additionally, learning life skills may affect the amount of hope in life, in general. In the positive psychology movement, special attention has been given to the experience of hope. Hope, as a factor in the richness of life, enables people to see themselves in a perspective beyond their present state. Individuals experiencing stressful events often report fluctuating levels of hope. With some accounts, they may expect anything to happen to them, including a miracle, and since the power of anticipation is great, these individuals would often move in the direction of their predictions [8]. Nickerson et al. have suggested that targeted interventions of positive psychology, based on interpersonal skills training can lead to life satisfaction and vitality in students who are victims of bullying [9]. Also, Baghaei-Moghadam found that life skills training can reduce anxiety, anger management, and increase happiness in adolescents with physical and motor impairment [10].

Hopelessness has a negative impact on people's lives. It creates conditions in the cognitive framework that tells them that a good future for them is not possible [11]. Studies show that hopelessness during adolescence may lead to self-harm or other undesirable conditions [12-15]. Ideally speaking, "being imprisoned" is a sad and unfortunate experience, especially for an adolescent, and for this reason imprisonment can have many psychological, physical, economic, and social

consequences. Probably one of these important consequences is "disappointment" and "loss of hope". The present research seeks to answer the fundamental question of whether life-skills training increases the amount of hope in imprisoned delinquent adolescent. Some researchers have also focused on evaluating the effects of a life-skills program for long-term young adult male offenders to enable them to more effectively adjust themselves to the correctional setting they are sentenced to spend time in prison [16].

The aim of the present study was that the life-skills training in area of hope and its components is effective, and this effectiveness would persist for the follow-up study done one-and-half months later.

**Methods**

This research was a quasi-experimental study with pre-test, post-test, and follow-up test. Pre-test was administered for both groups under controlled conditions, but the intervention (skills-training) was performed in 18 sessions for the experimental group. After the end of the training sessions, a post-test was performed on the experimental group at intervals of one week to determine the effectiveness of the independent variable. Finally, six weeks after the post-test, a follow-up test was performed on both the experimental and control groups.

The statistical population of this study consisted of delinquent adolescent prisoners in Basra, Iraq. The sample size included 40 volunteered individuals, who were approached and invited through convenience sampling method. First, the researchers made a public announcement about this educational research opportunity in the adolescent prison section. They announced that inmates could volunteer to attend a training program. Total of 84 adolescents voiced interest to participate. They responded to Snyder's Hope Scale. Then, 40 individuals who had a lower score on the scale were selected and randomly assigned to two experimental and control groups.

The inclusion criteria for participation in this study included age (between 13-18), not to be sentenced to life imprisonment or execution, not having an acute mental disorder, a low score on the Snyder Hope Scale (lower than 36), willingness to attend sessions, and that at least 6 months had elapsed since the detention time. The exclusion criteria included absence for more than three sessions, and/or that they be released from prison for various reasons (including the plaintiff's consent) during the meetings. This means none of the participants had received leave of absent during the training sessions.

**Table 1. General Data in Sample Groups (experimental and control groups)**

Group	Duration the presence in prison(years)			The level of Education			crime				Years of Conviction						
	lower than 1	1	2	3	high school	low literacy	middle school	murder	robbery	disseminating drugs	sexual offenses	1	4	7	10	13	
Experimental	N	3	7	6	4	7	11	2	3	5	6	6	6	8	2	1	3
	%	15%	35%	30%	20%	35%	55%	10%	15%	25%	30%	30%	30%	0%	10%	5%	15%
Control	N	4	7	6	3	6	13	1	2	8	7	3	10	6	1	1	2
	%	20%	35%	30%	15%	30%	65%	5%	10%	40%	35%	15%	50%	30%	5%	5%	10%

The Snyder Hope Scale (SHS) is based on the Snyder's hope theory and evaluates people's hope as a relatively stable personality trait. The adult hope scale contains 12 items. Four items measure pathways thinking, four items measure agency thinking, and four items are fillers. Participants respond to each item using an eight-point scale ranging from definitely false, to definitely true. The range of grades in this test is between 8 and 64. Point 8 marks the lowest level and the 64th mark corresponds to the highest level of hope [17]. Snyder et al. [18] reported

that the scale is internally consistent (alphas in the range of 0.80 for several studies). Also, Alexandre and Onwuegbuzie found the pathways subscale between 0.63-0.80 (18). In the present study, the reliability of this tool (by Cronbach's Alpha) for the total score was 0.83, for the agency thinking subscale was 0.83, and for the pathways subscale was 0.80.

A summary of life skills training sessions for prisoners (participants) is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Summary of Life-skills Training Sessions**

Session	Outline
1	Familiarization and introduction of prisoners; Initial motivation; Familiarity with the curriculum of life skills; Familiarity with intellectual rainfall; Familiarity with the rules and regulations of the sessions.
2	Acquire relative awareness of their personality traits; identify dysfunctional thoughts; familiarity with the transformation of dysfunctional and negative thoughts into efficient and positive thoughts; the exact definition of an issue or problem
3	Finding different solutions to the problem; pay attention to the quality of solutions, not their quantity; increase creativity; avoid focusing on deficiencies; avoid any judgment; avoiding idealism
4	Identifying prisoners with a variety of irrational methods of decision making; training the different stages of decision making; understanding the importance and how to target; empowering prisoners to identify their own personal criteria for decision making
5	Training the components of a good and effective relationship and how each one influences the creation of a good relationship; training methods for establishing an effective and positive relationship; training specific ways of interpersonal communication in the prison environment - training ways of remove the obstacles of good and healthy communication; training methods for establishing, maintaining and ending the relationship
6	Training proper verbal and non-verbal communication with family and friends; training active listening skills
7	Training to defend their rights in social relationships; training self -assertiveness skills; practicing different ways of assertiveness skills and decisiveness
8	Empowering the participants to say "no" in social relationships; empowering the participants to resist individual and group pressure, if necessary; assisting participants to identify situations and conditions in which it is difficult for them to show assertive behavior
9	Training identifying positive and negative characteristics and options; empowering participants to determine the most important goals of life; a prisoner can draw a "life plan" for himself
10	Training the participants to identify the motivators of pleasant and unpleasant emotions in life; participants will be able to draw a life plan for themselves
11	Introducing the participants with the concept of "stress" - helping participants to identify and express their common stresses; training them how to cope with stress
12	Participants will be able to plan for a successful coping with their own stress
13	Training how to deal with sadness; empowering prisoners to recognize their negative feelings; empowering them to recognize the origin of their negative emotions; training the role of "Thoughts" in creating negative emotions; training ways to coping negative thoughts; training rebuilding negative thoughts; training participants to design a program for reduce depression and anxiety inside and outside the prison
14	Training how to deal with sadness; empowering prisoners to recognize their negative feelings; empowering them to recognize the origin of their negative emotions; training the role of "Thoughts" in creating negative emotions; training ways to coping negative thoughts; training rebuilding negative thoughts; training participants to design a program for reduce depression and anxiety inside and outside prison
15	Understanding the nature of anger or aggression; training the anger control methods; training constructive ways to express anger; training ways to deal with the anger of other people
16	Training prisoners to develop a functional plan to control their anger; training them to draw up a functional plan to coping people anger successfully
17	Definition of "impulsive behavior" and its types; Introducing the sources of impulsive behavior in life and its consequences; helping participants know the conditions and situations in which they have weak self-control
18	Training psychological, physical and emotional coping methods in situations where participants have weak self-control; summarizing and reviewing the sessions assignments

**Results**

Table 3 shows descriptive findings including mean and standard deviation of hope scores and its components (agency thinking and pathway thinking) in experimental and control groups (in pre-test, post-test, and follow-up test)

Then, MANCOVA method was used to determine significant difference between the scores of the experimental and control groups for the "hope" variable and its components (agency thinking and pathway thinking). First, to ensuring that the data of this research meets the initial assumptions of covariance analysis, they were examined. The assumptions included: linearity, multicollinearity, equality of variances, homogeneity of gradient of regression, and normality of distribution. All assumptions were approved.

Linearity: The significance level of "linearity" of the relationship between pre-test and post-test in the "hope" was  $r = 0.69$ , in the agency component was  $r = 0.77$  and in the pathway thinking component was  $r = 0.70$ . (All three correlation coefficients was significant at the level of  $p < 0.05$ ).

Multicollinearity: The correlation between pre-tests was 28%, which was not significant.

Equality of variances: Levine's test in the "hope" was not significant ( $F = 0.001$ ,  $P = 0.96$ ), also in the "agency thinking" was not significant ( $F = 2.77$ ,  $P = 0.10$ ) and in the "pathway thinking" was not significant ( $F=0.001$ ,  $P=0.98$ ), too. Therefore, the assumption of the homogeneity of variances was confirmed.

Homogeneity of gradient of regression: In this research, post-test of hope, agency thinking, and pathway thinking were considered as dependent variables and their pre-tests were considered as covariate variables. Table 4 shows the results of the assumption of homogeneity of gradient of regression.

As shown in the table above, the interaction between covariate and dependent variables (post-tests) is not significant. Therefore, the assumption of homogeneity of gradient of regression is confirmed.

Normality of distribution: the results of Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for this assumption showed that the significance level of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was greater than 0.05 in all variables (hope: 0.44, Agency thinking: 0/96, Pathway thinking: 0.23).

After it became clear that all assumptions were approved, multivariate analysis of covariance tests were performed. The table 5 shows the results of MANCOVA.

Table 5 shows that there is a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in dependent variables at the level of  $P=0.001$ . Therefore, it can be said that there is a significant difference between two groups in at least one of the dependent variables. Also, follow-up test shows that there is a significant difference between the experimental and control groups for the dependent variables at the level of  $P=0.001$ . Therefore, it can be said that there is a significant difference between at least one of the dependent variables between the two groups.

**Table 3. Descriptive Data of Group**

Variables	Statistical Indicators	Experimental Group		Control Group	
		Mean	standard deviation	mean	standard deviation
Hope	pre- test	32.35	4.67	33.68	4.30
	post-test	43.85	2.65	36.80	4.5
	follow-up	43.90	1.86	36.65	4.84
Agency thinking	pre- test	15.2	2.21	16.10	2.88
	post-test	22.90	1.61	18.05	3.57
	follow-up	22.95	1.43	18.15	2.96
Pathway thinking	pre- test	17.15	3/08	16.95	3.08
	post-test	20.95	2.06	18.15	3.21
	follow-up	20.95	1.84	18.05	3.42

**Table 4. Results of the Assumption of Homogeneity of Gradient of Regression**

	Post-tests	sum square	df	mean squares	F	Sig
Interaction of pre-tests at group level	Hope	13.33	2	6.67	0.33	0.1
	Agency thinking	16.26	2	8.13	1.3	0.28
	Pathway thinking	5.35	2	2.67	0.38	0.68

**Table 5. Multivariate Analysis of Covariance on "Post-test" and "Follow-up Test" of Variables in Experimental and Control Groups**

Test	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig	Partial eta Squared
Pillai's trace	0.657	33.52	2	35	0.001	0.657
Wilks' lambda criterion	0.343	33.52	2	35	0.001	0.657
Hotelling's trace	1.91	33.52	2	35	0.001	0.657
Roy's Largest Root	1.91	33.52	2	35	0.001	0.657
Follow-up						
Pillai's trace	0.642	31.42	2	35	0.001	0.642
Wilks' lambda criterion	0.358	31.42	2	35	0.001	0.642
Hotelling's trace	1.79	31.42	2	35	0.001	0.642
Roy's Largest Root	1.79	31.42	2	35	0.001	0.642

In the following, covariance analysis tests were performed. Table 6 shows the results of analysis of covariance in the variables and the "follow up" test.

According to Table 6, the F value for hope was 57.16, which is significant at  $P=0.05$ . Therefore, the first hypothesis (about effectiveness of skills training in the hope) was confirmed. Also, the F value for agency thinking variable was 56.15, which is significant at  $P = 0.001$ . Therefore, the research hypothesis (the significant effect of interventions on the agency thinking of prisoners) approved. Also, according to the table, the F value for pathway thinking variable was 75.16, which is significant at  $P = 0.001$ . Therefore, the research hypothesis (the significant effect of interventions on the pathway thinking of prisoners) was approved.

In addition, it is observed that the maximum effect size belongs to the agency thinking (0.60). It indicates that 60% of the total variance of the experimental and control group is in agency thinking caused by the independent variable effect (life skills training) and the minimum effect size

belongs to the pathway thinking (0.31) which indicates that 31% of the total variance of the experimental and control group is in pathway thinking caused by the independent variable effect.

According to the "follow up" part, the F value for hope was 53.11, which is significant at  $P=0.05$ . Therefore, our hypothesis about continuation of the impact of interventions on increasing prisoner's hope was confirmed. Also, F factor for the agency thinking variable was 58/98 which is significant at  $P=0.001$ . Also, F factor for the agency thinking variable was 14.06 which is significant at  $P=0.001$ . Therefore, our hypothesis was confirmed. As it is observed that the maximum effect size belongs to the agency thinking (0.62). It indicates that 62% of the total variance of the experimental and control group is in agency thinking caused by the independent variable effect (life skills training) and the minimum effect size belongs to the pathway thinking (0.28) which indicates that 28% of the total variance of the experimental and control group is in pathway thinking caused by the independent variable effect.

**Table 6.** Analysis of Covariance in the Variables and the "Follow up" Test

Variable	sum square	df	mean squares	F	Sig	Partial eta Squared
Hope	538.2	1	538.2	57.16	0.04	0.60
Agency thinking	292.17	1	292.17	56.15	0.001	0.60
Pathway thinking	71.43	1	71.43	16.75	0.001	0.31
<b>Follow up</b>						
Hope	561.67	1	561.67	53.11	0.02	0.59
Agency thinking	261.52	1	261.52	58.98	0.001	0.62
Pathway thinking	74.19	1	74.19	14.06	0.001	0.28

## Discussion

According to the research findings, our hypothesis on the effect of life skills training on hope and its components (agency thinking and pathway thinking) was confirmed in prisoner delinquent adolescents. Also, the results showed that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in the dependent variables (hope, agency thinking and pathway thinking) at the level of  $P \leq 0.001$  and the most effect was on agency thinking.

Some explanations can be provided in this regard. First, it can be stated that lack of life skills may lead to isolation and confusion in adolescents [19]. It may be that it reduces their self-efficacy and consequently decreases their level of hope. For example, a teenager, if not able to communicate effectively with other people due to lack of interpersonal skills, is exposed to negative thoughts and unpleasant feelings like shame and incompetence and incompetence and his/her self-esteem will decrease. Therefore, equipping an adolescent with life skills can make him feel competent and capable, and consequently more hopefulness [20]. This issue is more important for adolescent delinquents as they are more exposed to unpleasant labels and are usually blamed by others.

Life-skills training helps to facilitate adaptability and prevents the effects of psychological stress [21, 22]. In this method of providing the necessary and essential training, a set of skills needed to succeed in life was taught to adolescents and helped them to develop the abilities,

information, orientations, and skills necessary for a healthy and successful life. Life-skills training also makes individuals more aware of themselves and their surroundings and makes them more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, become aware of their facilities and limitations, accept the facts better and consequently they can adapt more successfully [21-23]. These trainings increase the hope and its components, especially agency thinking. As having a life skill makes a teenager feel "agency" and "acting" and takes them away from feeling "passive" and "being victimized."

Interestingly, adaptive power which included positive and efficient behaviors, is shown to increase through life-skills training. As a result, individuals become able to take responsibility for their social role without hurting themselves or others, and become able to face the challenges and problems of everyday life. Also, one of the major axes in the life skills training program is understanding anxiety and its control methods. As adolescence is usually associated with a variety of anxieties and disquietude, training anxiety control is considered to be important [24]. This is more important for adolescent offenders because their living conditions and the perpetration of delinquency cause them to be exposed to the negative labels and views of others. It increases their internal anxiety. In other words, offending acts are usually accompanied by emotional arousal and anxiety, and norm-breaker acts and antisocial behaviors which is in B cluster of personality disorders (dramatic,

emotional or erratic group), are usually accompanied by emotional arousal and anxiety. Therefore, one of the most basic trainings for such adolescents is teaching emotional control, especially the control of arousal and anxiety. Such trainings can improve their interpersonal relationships and increase their positive emotions and self-esteem in their lives. Self-esteem is one of the sources of hope; this is probably one of the reasons for the effectiveness of the training sessions through this study.

Additionally, one of the important defects in some people's life skills is that they are not self-assertive, while assertiveness skill training can increase the sense of competence in these individuals. Assertiveness training can increase the feeling of hope in a person, because it creates a sense of "agency". With low levels of assertiveness, a person does not consider him/herself as a determinant actor of his/her own life. On the other hand, an individual with an adequate level of assertiveness, is not passive and can write the scenario of his/her own life. Such an emotion plays an important role in shaping a positive feeling.

A prisoner is especially prone to negative thoughts and feelings of sadness and disappointment because of being away from the society and being isolated. One of the most important services that can be provided is to hold training sessions, because this will, in itself, make prisoners feel "being noticed and understood". They feel they are not neglected and their quality of life is important to others. The results of this study showed that prisoners, especially adolescent prisoners, could be trained to have a better version of life through such psycho-social trainings. These people are an important part of every society that should not be neglected and life skills training could help them rebuild their lives.

An important practical implication of this study is that young adults who for whatever reason have been incarcerated for some period of their life, are better off being trained with some skills, so that it not only help prevent more unfair damage to their ego state than is warranted for the crimes they have committed, but also to help prepare them for when they are released. Moreover, it is logical to think that those undergone life-skills training would experience lower levels of learned-helplessness that is an innate part of long-term incarceration experience. This objective is more in line with humane-treatment of these potential-rich individuals and the end goal of the justice-system.

## Conclusion

It is recommended that the effect of life-skills training on hope in a sample of female adolescents be conducted in order to compare the effects of this study with that of a female sample population. Also, a "survey research" is needed to measure the overall life-expectancy of adolescent prisoners. Other factors such as level of experienced trauma and the strength of the parasympathetic nervous system reactivity was shown to play an important role in predicting the quality of life during and post-detention in incarcerated juveniles [25]. Therefore, it is recommended that other variables may

also play as a mediating role in changing the effectiveness of any treatment that should be further studied.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors of this article declare that they have no competing or potential conflicts of interest.

## Ethical Approval

Participants in this study were initially presented with information and description of the survey and given an informed consent form, agreeing to voluntarily and willingly complete the given questionnaire. The important principle of confidentiality was respected throughout the research process.

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