



Forgiveness, Social Support and Psychological Distress Among Refugees in Benue State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Original Research Article

This study examined forgiveness, social support and psychological distress among refugees in Benue State, Nigeria. The study was necessitated by the increasing psychological challenges associated with forced displacement, including loss of homes, livelihoods, social networks, personal security, and exposure to traumatic experiences. Specifically, the study investigated the influence of forgiveness and social support on psychological distress among Cameroon refugees residing in Ikyogen Refugee Settlement, Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted for the study. The population comprised 6,536 Cameroonian refugees in the settlement, from which 384 respondents were selected using convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS), Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), and Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10). Multiple linear regression analysis was used to test the two hypotheses. Findings revealed that forgiveness significantly and negatively influenced psychological distress among the refugees, accounting for 23.1% of the variance in psychological distress, $R = -.481$, $R^2 = .231$, $F(3, 381) = 7.836$, $p < .01$. The dimensions of forgiveness-self, others, and situations also made significant independent contributions. Similarly, social support significantly and negatively influenced psychological distress, accounting for 30.9% of the variance, $R = -.556$, $R^2 = .309$, $F(3, 381) = 9.394$, $p < .01$. Friends' support made the strongest contribution, followed by significant others' support and family support. The study concludes that forgiveness and social support are important psychosocial factors associated with lower psychological distress among refugees. It recommends the integration of forgiveness-focused interventions, peer-support programmes, family and community support systems, and accessible psychological services into refugee assistance programmes in Benue State.

Keywords: Forgiveness, Social Support, Psychological Distress.

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Introduction

Background to the Study

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder -Fifth Edition (DSM-5), Psychological distress encompasses painful emotional symptoms such as stress, anxiety, depression and functional impairment (Jha & Lokesh, 2021). Refugees are vulnerable because displacement may involve loss of country, culture, language, employment, family, friends and future plans. Poverty, unemployment, poor housing, discrimination, insecurity,

limited healthcare, violence, torture, injuries and loss of loved ones may intensify psychological distress (Wealther et al., 2020; Nickerson et al., 2021).

Globally, forced displacement has reached unprecedented levels, with about 120 million forcibly displaced persons reported in 2024 (UNHCR, 2024). Research indicates post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety among displaced populations (Blackmore et al., 2020). Africa hosts refugees, who experience greater mental health challenges than the general population (Andsaleh et al., 2024). Nigeria

hosts refugees from neighbouring countries, including Cameroon, with many accommodated in Akwa Ibom, Benue, Cross River and Taraba States (UNHCR, 2024). The Anglophone crisis in Cameroon has exposed refugees to death, destruction, displacement, family disintegration, social isolation and loss of community structures (Chen et al., 2017; Dolezal et al., 2022).

Forgiveness may provide an important psychological resource by reducing resentment, anger and revenge while promoting acceptance, reconciliation and emotional healing (Raj et al., 2016). Evidence associates forgiveness with lower depression, anxiety, stress and rumination and greater well-being, resilience and adaptive functioning among refugees and asylum seekers (Kandemiri, 2019; Aziz & Yildirim, 2020; Long et al., 2020; Parveen & Pal, 2024).

Forgiveness might be a way to restore hope and increase resilience to overcome injustice (Enright, 2001). It is a process where people release their angry feelings and thoughts towards those who have hurt them and let go of revenge against them and start to have more understanding, compassion or even positive attitudes towards them (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Wade & Worthington, 2005). In this sense, forgiveness deals more with the change and improvement of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors towards hurtful people rather than ignoring or justifying their behaviors. The process of forgiveness can help individuals reduce negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors associated with interpersonal hurt thereby increasing subjective well-being and psychological functioning (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Lundahl et al., 2008; Wade et al., 2013).

Social support, including emotional, informational and material assistance from family, friends, religious groups and communities, is another protective resource. It can reduce psychological distress, strengthen relationships and improve refugees' quality of life (Kaniasty & Norris, 2009; Goodkind et al., 2020; Bisji et al., 2022).

Hence, positive social support makes one feel confident that help is forthcoming or the pain will heal, it also facilitates access to material resources such as food, clothing and shelter, and to financial, educational, medical and employment assistance (Taylor, 2011). Social support could also help facilitate restoration of family link using re union programs which could increase emotional well-being and is also associated with lowered symptoms of psychological distress, while also, intercultural exchanges designed to facilitate social support from host communities also decreases psychological distress and improves self-reported quality of life among refugees (Goodkind et al., 2020).

Statement of the Problem

Psychological well-being is important for effective coping and daily functioning; however, refugees are often exposed to

conditions that increase their vulnerability to psychological distress. Forced displacement may involve loss of homes, livelihoods, social networks, and personal security. Refugees in Nigeria may also experience poverty, unemployment, discrimination, insecurity, and uncertainty about the future. These challenges, alongside previous traumatic experiences, may contribute to psychological distress manifested in anxiety, persistent worry, cognitive difficulties, sleep problems, fatigue, social withdrawal, and impaired functioning (Schlechter et al., 2021). Among Cameroonian refugees in Benue State, adjustment to a new social and physical environment may further increase these challenges. Forgiveness may be relevant to their psychological adjustment because it can help individuals manage interpersonal wrongdoing, conflict, and perceived injustice. Evidence suggests that forgiveness is associated with responses to conflict and displacement among displaced populations (Ogunbamila, 2015). Social support is another important factor. Refugees may depend on family, friends, fellow refugees, host-community members, and humanitarian organizations for practical assistance, information, and social resources. Studies indicate that inadequate social support is associated with greater psychological distress among refugees (Schlechter et al., 2021; O'Donnell et al., 2023).

Despite increasing research on refugee mental health, limited studies have jointly examined forgiveness and social support as predictors of psychological distress among Cameroonian refugees in Nigeria, particularly in Benue State. This gap limits understanding of factors that may influence their psychological adjustment. Therefore, this study seeks to examine forgiveness and social support as predictors of psychological distress among refugees in Benue State, Nigeria.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to examine forgiveness, social support and psychological distress among refugees in Benue state-Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. Investigate the influence of forgiveness on Psychological Distress among refugees in Benue States- Nigeria.
2. Assess the influence of social support on Psychological Distress among Refugees in Benue State- Nigeria.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are denote to the study:

1. There will be a significant influence of forgiveness on psychological distress among refugees in Benue State Nigeria.
2. There will be a significant influence of social support on psychological distress among refugees in Benue State Nigeria.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Psychological distress is a multidimensional state of negative psychological functioning associated with stress and strain. It includes depression symptoms such as: sadness, hopelessness and loss of interest, anxiety: involving restlessness, tension, and somatic symptoms: such as headaches, insomnia and low energy (Mirowsky & Ross, 2002; Horwitz, 2002).

Psychological distress, sometimes described as emotional distress, refers to a state characterized by unpleasant emotions and feelings that may arise when individuals perceive themselves as overwhelmed by their circumstances. Such emotional experiences can interfere with everyday functioning and may influence how individuals respond to and interact with people within their social environment (Doran, 2004, as cited in Isah, Iman, & Abiso, 2024).

Forgiveness involves overcoming negative feelings and judgement towards an offender while replacing them with compassion, benevolence and goodwill (North, 1987). It may also reduce anger and promote psychological and physical well-being (Lee & Enright, 2019). While also notably, seen as a way to resolve anger, and in-turn leads to various psychological and physical health benefits Lee and (Enright, 2019). Forgiveness is also seen as a way to restore hope for the future.

Forgiveness is generally characterized by progressive decreases of vengeance and anger thoughts, feelings, and motives, and increases in positive affective and cognitive evaluations of the person or persons who have caused harm (Wade et al., 2014). Although forgiveness may coincide with reconciliation, the two processes are not synonymous. Likewise, forgiving deeds do not imply forgetting, endorsing, or excusing the wrongdoer's behaviors. Instead, forgiveness can be conceptualized as a process occurring within the context of a dyadic interaction (Cerci & Colucci, 2018; Worthington, 2019). Moreover, people often can forgive even the apparently most unforgivable of offenses.

Social support refers to emotional, informational, practical and companionship assistance obtained through relationships with family, friends and other social networks. It provides feelings of belonging, care and mutual assistance (House, 1983; Wills, 1991).

Social support may have multiple forms, ranging from emotional reassurance to practical help with day-to-day activities and provision of information that would assist the person in understanding the matter and choosing the right course of action (Kaniasty & Norris, 2009). Positive social support can enhance people's feeling of security because it makes them realize that they can rely on others' help and their distress is not permanent. Social support can also help people gain access to the material and socioeconomic resources that they need, such as food, clothing, shelter,

financial aid, education, health care, and job opportunities (Bisji et al., 2022).

Theoretical Review: Learning Theory

This study is anchored on Learning Theory, formulated from the principles of classical conditioning proposed by Pavlov (1927). The theory assumes that psychological distress may result from maladaptive learning occurring during and after traumatic experiences. Associative learning explains how neutral stimuli become associated with aversive experiences, subsequently eliciting fear and avoidance even when actual danger is absent (Lissek & Meurs, 2015). Resistance to extinction occurs when conditioned fear persists despite the removal of the threat, thereby maintaining psychological distress (Bouton, 2004). Similarly, deficits in fear inhibition may prevent individuals from suppressing fear responses under safe conditions (Jovanovic & Ressler, 2008). Overgeneralisation may also cause fear responses to extend from the original traumatic stimulus to other stimuli resembling it (Pavlov, 1927; Watson & Rayner, 1920). Non-associative learning further explains changes in reactivity that are not directly linked to an aversive outcome. It involves habituation and sensitisation (Lissek et al., 2010). Habituation refers to reduced responses following repeated exposure to a stimulus, whereas sensitisation involves increased responsiveness following repeated stimulation (Groves & Thompson, 1970). Failure of habituation and heightened sensitisation may therefore contribute to persistent fear and anxiety among trauma survivors.

The theory has considerable strength because it explains how environmental experiences can produce and maintain psychological distress. Neuroimaging evidence has also associated impaired fear extinction with dysfunction in brain circuits involved in fear inhibition, including the ventromedial prefrontal cortex (Milad et al., 2009). However, Learning Theory has been criticised for being reductionist because it places considerable emphasis on conditioning while giving insufficient attention to biological and pre-existing psychological factors (Verhaeghe & Vanheule, 2005).

Learning Theory is relevant to the present study because refugees' psychological responses may be shaped by experiences of trauma, loss, conflict and displacement. Repeated exposure to threatening experiences may result in learned fear, avoidance, anxiety and heightened psychological distress. Within this context, forgiveness may contribute to the modification of learned negative emotional responses by reducing persistent anger, resentment and retaliatory thoughts associated with previous experiences of harm. Similarly, social support may provide positive interpersonal experiences that help refugees learn and reinforce feelings of safety, trust, belonging and adaptive coping. Thus, forgiveness and social support may interrupt or weaken maladaptive learned responses associated with traumatic experiences and contribute to reduced

psychological distress. The theory therefore provides a basis for understanding how experiences and subsequent interpersonal processes may influence psychological responses among refugees in Benue State.

Methods

Design

The research design adopted for the study was a cross-sectional survey design. This design was adopted because the researcher is interested in obtaining data from a sub set of the representative population under study (refugees) at Ikyogen refugees settlement in Kwande LGA of Benue State within the 2024/ 2025 session.

Population

The population of the study comprised 6,536 Cameroonian refugees residing in the Ikyogen Refugee Settlement in Kwande Local Government Area of Benue State. Ikyogen is located about 35 km east of Adikpo and occupies part of the former Ikyogen Cattle Ranch. The settlement, allocated by the Benue State Government through the Benue State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) in 2019, accommodates Cameroonian refugees, including some relocated from Anyake. It comprises 12 communities, which are divided into clusters containing an average of four households each. Population records from SEMA and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2024 indicated a total population of 6,536 refugees. From this population, 384 respondents were selected for the study. All respondents were Cameroonian nationals and refugees.

Sampling Technique/ Sample Size Determination

A convenient sampling technique was adopted and used in this study for the selection of respondents for this study from Ikyogen refugees' settlement.

Sample size was determined using Yamena (1967) formula for sample selection,

Hence:

$$n = N / (1 + N(e)^2),$$

Where:

n = Sample size

N = Total population size

e = Significance level of precision = 0.05

N= Total population

Total Population of refugees at Ikyogen= 6536

Substitute the formula to determine the sample size for refugees:

1) Sample size for refugees of Ikyogen settlement =

$$n = 6536 / (1 + 6536 (0.05)^2)$$

$$n = 6536 / (1 + 6536 (0.0025))$$

$$n = 6536 / (1 + 16.34)$$

$$n = 6536 / (17.34)$$

$$n = 6536 / 17.34$$

$$n = 6536 / 17$$

$$n = 384$$

Sample size of refugee respondent used for the study = 384

Instruments

Three standardized instruments were employed to obtain the study data: the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS), the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS), and the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10). The instruments were arranged into Sections A–D. Section A collected respondents' demographic characteristics, whereas Sections B, C, and D were respectively devoted to measuring forgiveness, perceived social support, and psychological distress.

The Heartland Forgiveness Scale (HFS), developed by Thompson, Snyder, and their colleagues, was presented in Section B. It is an 18-item self-report measure designed to assess three dimensions of forgiveness: forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations, with six items representing each dimension. Responses are recorded on a seven-point scale from 1 = Almost always false of me to 7 = Almost always true of me. Direct scoring applies to items 1, 3, 5, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, and 18, whereas items 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, and 17 are reverse-scored. Overall scores can range from 18 to 126, with individual subscale scores ranging from 6 to 42. Higher scores reflect greater levels of forgiveness. Scores between 18–54 represent a generally unforgiving orientation, 55–89 indicate an approximately balanced tendency to forgive or not forgive, and 90–126 represent a generally forgiving orientation. Previous research has reported satisfactory internal reliability for the HFS, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging from .76 to .86, together with evidence supporting its construct and concurrent validity.

Section C comprised the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) developed by Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, and Farley (1988). The instrument contains 12 items designed to measure perceived support from three sources: family, friends, and significant others, with four items allocated to each source. Participants respond using a seven-point scale ranging from 1 = Very strongly disagree to 7 = Very strongly agree. The overall score is calculated by summing the responses to all 12 items, producing a possible range of 12–84, where higher values represent greater perceived social support. Scores of 12–35 indicate low perceived support, 36–60 indicate moderate support, and 61–84 indicate high support. Scores for each source-specific subscale are calculated by obtaining the mean of its four corresponding items. The MSPSS has demonstrated strong internal consistency, with reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from .85 to .91, in addition to evidence supporting its three-factor structure and concurrent validity.

The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) was included in Section D. Developed by Kessler and Mroczek, the 10-item instrument assesses non-specific psychological distress, particularly symptoms associated with anxiety and depression, experienced during the preceding four weeks. Each item is rated on a five-point response scale ranging from 1 = None of the time to 5 = All of the time. All ten items are scored in the same direction and summed to produce a total score ranging from 10 to 50. Higher scores indicate increasing levels of psychological distress. Based on the specified interpretation framework, scores of 10–15 represent low or minimal distress, 16–21 indicate moderate distress, 22–29 reflect high distress, and 30–50 indicate very high psychological distress. The K10 has demonstrated good internal consistency and construct validity, together with evidence of a clear unidimensional structure for measuring non-specific psychological distress.

Table 1: Summary of Multiple Linear Regression Showing Influence of Forgiveness on Psychological Distress among Refugees in Benue State.

DV	Predictors	R	R ²	df	F	P	β	t	p
Psychological Distress	Constant	-.481	.231	3,381	7.836	.000		-15.312	.000
	Forg-Self						-.381	-5.115	.000
	Forg-Others						-.359	-4.834	.000
	Forg-Situate						-.244	-3.731	.001

The result of Multiple Linear Regression in Table 1 shows that, there was a significant negative influence of forgiveness on psychological distress among refugees in Benue State [$R = -.481$, $R^2 = .231$, $F(3,381) = 7.836$, $p < .01$]. This suggests that, refugees with high levels of forgiveness are likely to experience low levels of psychological distress. The results further indicated that, forgiveness explained 23.1% of the total variance observed in psychological distress among the refugees. This indicates that, forgiveness has a 23.1% likelihood of mitigating psychological distress among the refugees. Based on this finding, hypothesis one was confirmed.

Data Analysis

Inferential statistics were used to analyse the hypotheses. Hypotheses One and Two were tested using multiple regression analysis because the independent variables were dimensional and their respective dimensions were examined in predicting the dependent variable.

Results

Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis one: This hypothesis stated that, there will be a significant influence of forgiveness on psychological distress among refugees in Benue State. The hypothesis was tested using Multiple Linear Regression and result is presented in Table 1.

Furthermore, findings on the independent contributions of the dimensions of forgiveness to psychological distress among the refugees indicated that, forgiveness of self ($\beta = -.381$, $t = -5.115$, $p < .01$) made the highest significant contribution, followed by forgiveness of others ($\beta = -.359$, $t = -4.834$, $p < .01$), and then forgiveness of situation ($\beta = -.244$, $t = -3.731$, $p < .05$) respectively.

Hypothesis two: This hypothesis stated that, there will be a significant influence of social support on psychological distress among refugees in Benue State. The hypothesis was tested using Multiple Linear Regression and result is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of Multiple Linear Regression showing influence of Social Support on Psychological Distress among Refugees in Benue State.

DV	Predictors	R	R ²	df	F	P	β	t	p
Psychological Distress	Constant	-.556	.309	3,381	9.394	.000		-20.885	.000
	Fam-Supp						-.273	-3.556	.000
	Frie-Supp						-.597	7.999	.000
	Sign-Supp						-.433	-4.282	.000

The result of Multiple Linear Regression in Table 2 shows that, social support had a significant negative influence on psychological distress among refugees in Benue State [$R = -.556$, $R^2 = .309$, $F(3,381) = 9.394$, $p < .01$]. This result suggests that, refugees in Benue State with high levels of social support are likely to experience low levels of psychological distress. The result also reveals that social support accounted

for 30.9% of the total variance observed in psychological distress among the refugees. This indicates that, social support has a 30.9% tendency of reducing psychological distress among the refugees. Based on this finding, hypothesis two was confirmed. Findings on the independent contributions of the dimensions of social support to psychological distress among the refugees indicates that,

friends support made the highest significant contribution ($\beta = -.597$, $t = -7.999$, $p < .01$), followed by significant others support ($\beta = -.597$, $t = -7.999$, $p < .01$), and family support ($\beta = -.273$, $t = -3.556$, $p < .01$) in that order.

Discussion of Findings

The first finding showed that there was a statistically significant negative relationship between forgiveness and psychological distress of Benue State refugees. Forgiveness accounted for 23.1% of the variance in psychological distress, meaning that the more one could forgive, the less psychological distress they exhibited. Of the dimensions of forgiveness, forgiveness of self had the greatest independent contribution, followed by forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations. The finding suggests that refugees who are able to cultivate forgiveness with themselves, people, and contexts around their displacement can have fewer psychological challenges. The result is similar to Kandemiri (2019) who found that forgiveness showed positive relationship with mental health of Congolese refugees and asylum seekers who had been facing experiences during the war. The study also captured a decrease in anger, anxiety, depression, stress and rumination for those who had more forgiveness. The current discovery aligns with the view that forgiveness can help with psychological adaptation after encounters with conflicts, losses, and interpersonal violations. Likewise, Aziz and Yıldırım (2020) in their study on forgiveness among IDPs found the relevance of forgiveness to psychological resilience.

The second finding indicated that psychologically distressed refugees in Benue State were negatively and statistically significantly influenced by the social support. Social support accounted for 30.9% of the variance in psychological distress, meaning that those who perceived that they had more social support were less likely to report psychological distress. When the difference in the sources of support was examined, the most significant source of support was found to be support from friends, followed by support from significant others, and family members. This result is in line with the results of Schlechter et al. (2021), which found that a lack of social support was a partial explanation for refugees' higher levels of psychological distress than that of German residents. Their results highlight the need for social support and resilience in the analysis of differences in psychological distress among refugees. Other findings also confirm the results of O'Donnell et al. (2023), who reported that in-group social support was inversely related to being a part of a clinically distressed group among resettled refugees. The findings underscore the need for enhanced social networks and community support structures, especially for more vulnerable refugees, and for greater investment in such avenues.

The finding further agrees with evidence showing that different forms of social support can influence psychological

distress among humanitarian migrants. Informational and practical support, for example, has been associated with reductions in psychological distress during resettlement. The stronger contribution of friends' support in the present study may reflect the importance of peer relationships within the refugee settlement. Friends and fellow refugees may provide companionship, practical assistance, information, and opportunities for social interaction, thereby helping individuals cope with the challenges of displacement.

Conclusion of the Study

The conclusions from the study indicate the significant role of forgiveness and social support in predicting psychological distress in refugees in Benue state, Nigeria. Forgiveness was found to have a significant negative association with psychological distress, with each of forgiveness of self, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations contributing to the negative association. Similarly, social support was negatively associated with psychological distress, with support from friends and significant others and family members all contributing significantly. A higher perceived ability to forgive and a greater perceived level of social support are associated with less psychological distress among refugees, suggesting that their capacity to forgive and perceived social support are protective. The study thus highlights the importance of psychosocial resources for supporting refugees to deal with emotional and social problems related to living in exile, adjusting to exile and settlement experiences.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Mental health professionals and humanitarian organisations should incorporate culturally appropriate forgiveness-focused programmes into psychosocial services for refugees. Such programmes should help refugees constructively address experiences of interpersonal conflict, loss, and perceived injustice.
2. Refugee settlement authorities and humanitarian organisations should establish peer-support groups, community activities, and social networks that encourage positive relationships among refugees, given that support from friends made the strongest contribution to psychological distress in this study.
3. Programs should strengthen family and community-based support systems by encouraging positive communication, mutual assistance, and community participation. Religious and community leaders can also be involved in providing appropriate support and facilitating social connectedness.
4. Government agencies, NGOs, and mental health professionals working with refugees should integrate psychological distress screening with social-support

services. Refugees experiencing high levels of distress should be identified early and referred for appropriate psychological and social interventions.

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