

Dalam Diam, Kita Bicara: **A Collection of Short Stories on Cognitive Distortion in Society**

Priska Amalia¹, Jenny Mochtar²

Master's Program in Literature, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University, Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA

E-mail: h21240004@john.petra.ac.id¹, jennymd@peter.petra.ac.id²

ABSTRACT

Mental health has become a prominent issue in contemporary Indonesian society. Cognitive distortion is one of the mental health problems that is often considered normal by the public, even though it significantly affects the way individuals think about and interpret problems. This study aims to help the public better understand the symptoms, impacts, and ways of addressing cognitive distortions in everyday life. By using short stories as a medium, readers are expected to more easily comprehend cognitive distortions and develop empathy toward those who experience them. The author employs the theory of the *Ten Forms of Twisted Thinking*, which outlines various types of cognitive distortions present in human thinking, as well as *The Daily Mood Log*, which focuses on the process of reconstructing negative thoughts into healthier and more adaptive ones. These two theories support the writing of three short stories entitled *Hari Baik Untuk Mati*, *Karyawan Teladan*, and *Mimpi Indah*. Each short story features a different main character in terms of age, background, and personal conflict, but experience cognitive distortions.

Keywords: cognitive distortion, daily mood log, mental health, twisted thinking

INTRODUCTION

Mental health is an important issue in modern society, shaped by increasingly complex life demands. This problem is not limited to certain groups, but affects people across ages, professions, and social backgrounds, ranging from adolescents and housewives to office workers. Mental health problems often appear in the form of stress, anxiety, and depression that frequently go unnoticed. In fact, mental health is just as crucial as physical health in determining a person's quality of life.

The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasizes that mental health plays a vital role in the capacity of individuals and societies to make decisions, build relationships, and create healthy social environments (2024). However, awareness of seeking professional help remains low due to stigma and fear of being labeled with a mental disorder. Data from Indonesia show that 6.1% of the population aged 15 and above experience mental health disorders (Tarmizi, 2023), indicating that this issue has become a broader social concern. One significant contributing factor is cognitive distortion, a systematic and recurring negative thinking patterns that influence how individuals perceive themselves, others, and the reality around them (Burns, 1989; Dobelli, 2013).

Cognitive distortions can be found both in fictional works and in real life. The film *Black Swan* (2010) illustrates how the pressure to achieve perfection can trigger extreme cognitive distortions that ultimately damage a character's perception and mental health. Similar phenomena are evident in real-life cases, such as a mother who develops a mental disorder due to life pressures, high-income workers trapped in toxic work cultures, and adolescents who die by suicide because of family conflict and smartphone addiction. These stories affirm that cognitive distortion can affect anyone and should not be normalized or dismissed.

Drawing from this reality, the short story is chosen as a medium to convey the issue of cognitive distortion in an empathetic and reflective manner. The short story collection *Dalam Diam, Kita Bicara* presents three protagonists from different social backgrounds: Dian in *Hari Baik untuk Mati*, Rizal in *Karyawan Teladan*, and Ben in *Mimpi Indah*. Each represents a different layer of society, yet all struggle with cognitive distortions in various forms and contexts. Through short stories, readers are expected to more easily understand cognitive distortions, recognize their impact, and develop greater awareness and concern for their own mental health as well as that of others.

Theory and Methodology

Ten Forms of Twisted Thinking, introduced by David D. Burns (1990), provide a framework for understanding the various types of cognitive distortions commonly experienced by individuals in everyday life. These ten forms include all-or-nothing thinking, overgeneralization, mental filtering, discounting the positive, jumping to conclusions, magnification, emotional reasoning, “should statements,” labeling, and personalization and blame. These patterns often feel real and convincing to those who experience them, even though they are in fact subjective interpretations shaped by negative emotions. Due to their repetitive and systematic nature, cognitive distortions frequently go unnoticed and gradually shape how individuals evaluate themselves, others, and the reality around them.

In the creation of the three short stories in *Dalam Diam, Kita Bicara*, each character is portrayed as experiencing more than one overlapping form of cognitive distortion, reflecting how such patterns operate in real life. Dian represents distortions such as self-blame, negative self-labeling, and the internalization of oppressive “should” statements. Rizal demonstrates thinking patterns marked by an excessive fear of failure, a tendency to discount positive achievements, and the drawing of extreme conclusions from minor mistakes. Meanwhile, Ben experiences distortions related to the dominance of negative emotions, the magnification of failure, and an excessive focus on painful experiences, which ultimately drives him to avoid reality. Through these portrayals, cognitive distortion functions not only as a psychological concept but also as a driver of internal conflict that shapes each character’s journey and development within the narrative.

In addition, the Daily Mood Log is a technique developed by David D. Burns to help individuals recognize and modify negative thoughts that affect their mood. This technique operates through four main stages: identifying events that trigger negative emotions, recognizing and assessing the intensity of the emotions that arise, understanding the automatic thoughts and accompanying cognitive distortions, and reevaluating those thoughts in a more rational and objective manner. Through this process, individuals are encouraged to realize that negative thoughts are not absolute truths, but interpretations that can be challenged and restructured. However, such change does not always occur instantly, as recovery from cognitive distortion is a gradual process that requires time and repeated reflection.

In the three short stories of *Dalam Diam, Kita Bicara*, the four stages of the Daily Mood Log are presented symbolically through each character’s journey. In *Hari Baik untuk Mati*, the cat encountered by Dian becomes a symbol of her awareness of self-worth and her desire to keep living, prompting her to make the courageous decision to free herself from destructive marriage. The short story *Karyawan Teladan* employs the recurring symbol of a foul odor that haunts Rizal as a representation of unhappiness that cannot be concealed by external achievements, eventually leading him to release the ambition that has been suffocating him. Meanwhile, in *Mimpi Indah*, the figure of Clara in Ben’s dreams symbolizes a healthier and more realistic mindset, helping Ben begin to confront the reality of bullying and recognize his mother’s love. Through these symbols, psychological recovery is portrayed as an initial effort that is not always complete yet constitutes an important step in each character’s journey toward self-acceptance.

As for methodology, this study focuses on the collection and analysis of relevant psychological theories, particularly cognitive distortion as proposed by David D. Burns (1990), alongside supporting literature on creative writing and the representation of psychological issues in literature and film. The findings indicate that cognitive distortions are closely associated with stress, trauma, and emotional disorders such as depression and anxiety, yet they are not permanent conditions, as they can be reduced through interventions such as cognitive restructuring, cognitive behavioral therapy, and environmental support. Various studies also affirm that cognitive distortions can affect anyone regardless of age, social status, or economic background—such as single mothers and students with relational trauma—and that counseling can improve their perceptions and thought patterns. Therefore, this research emphasizes the importance of early detection and intervention in addressing cognitive distortions, while also aiming to represent the Indonesian cultural and social context to make the work more closely aligned with readers' lived experiences.

CONCEPT OF CREATIVE WORK

Modes of Expression

The short story collection *Dalam Diam, Kita Bicara* expresses itself through a realist approach to present life experiences that are intimate and easily understood by readers, allowing inner conflicts and cognitive distortions to feel authentic and grounded. *Hari Baik untuk Mati* employs pure realism (Pangesti, 2022) by portraying Dian's suffering as arising from domestic routines and everyday emotional wounds, while *Karyawan Teladan* adopts socialist realism (Yoga, 2012) to highlight exploitation and structural injustice in the modern workplace through the character of Rizal. Meanwhile, *Mimpi Indah* combines elements of magical realism (Mustaqim, 2023), in which dreams and fantasy emerge naturally as part of Ben's reality, reflecting his attempt to escape bullying and life pressures without severing the connection to tangible psychological struggles.

Theme

Dalam Diam, Kita Bicara raises the theme of having the courage to choose our own life, intertwined with self-acceptance as a journey rather than a destination. This theme is realized through the characters' morally gray choices: Dian in *Hari Baik untuk Mati* chooses divorce after realizing that her life still holds value, even without a guarantee of happiness; Rizal in *Karyawan Teladan* escapes from a workplace that crushes him simply to survive, despite not yet fully understanding his own cognitive distortions; meanwhile, Ben in *Mimpi Indah* chooses to return to the real world for his mother's sake, as an initial step in confronting bullying that may not necessarily end. Together, the three stories emphasize that meaning emerges precisely from failure, hesitation, and small acts of courage, inviting readers to reflect on self-acceptance as a slow, unfinished, yet deeply human process.

Point of View

Point of View (POV) in a novel refers to the perspective used by the author to tell the story, determining who narrates the events and how readers receive and understand the information presented (Ramadhan, 2024). In general, there are three main types of POV: first person, second person, and third person, with the third-person point of view using pronouns such as "he," "she," or "they" and positioning the narrator outside the characters, thus giving the author greater flexibility to present multiple perspectives.

In *Dalam Diam, Kita Bicara*, an omniscient third-person point of view is employed to help readers fully understand the situations, emotions, and cognitive distortions experienced by the characters. Nevertheless, the narrative focus remains on the main characters while the perspectives of supporting

characters, such as the taxi driver, Rizal's coworker Jeki, and Ben's mother, are introduced only when necessary to deepen the reader's understanding of the protagonists' emotional journeys and the conflicts they face, therefore ensuring that we do not miss any crucial or important moments.

Plot

Plot is a sequence of events that is not presented in a simple manner, as the author constructs each incident through a cause-and-effect relationship (Nurgiyantoro, 1995). Every action taken by a character carries consequences that influence the progression of the story, creating a logical and interconnected narrative flow. Thus, plot functions not only as a narrative structure but also as a means of revealing the characters' inner transformations and psychological development.

At the beginning of the stories, all main characters are introduced along with the cognitive distortions they experience. The narrative journey begins once readers are shown the impact of these distortions. Cause-and-effect relationships play a crucial role in illustrating the problems faced by each protagonist. However, causality alone is not sufficient; catalysts are needed to prompt the characters to move out of their cognitive distortions through small but meaningful steps.

Dian, a housewife, experiences cognitive distortion because of her husband's constant belittling of her role, leading her to believe that she is worthless and to decide to end her life. This decision brings her to a park through assisted suicide service, where her encounter with a cat and the people around her triggers a new awareness of the connection between her emotions and the events she experiences. Through this moment, Dian begins to question her negative beliefs, recognizes her desire to continue living, and ultimately chooses divorce as an act of courage to reclaim control over her own life.

Rizal, a migrant worker from Probolinggo, becomes obsessed with achieving the title of "Employee of the Month" to fulfill his mother's expectations. This ambition, coupled with his fear of being perceived as a failure, drives him to accept an extreme work system and continuously push himself beyond his limits. His determination blinds him to the irregularities within the company, until he eventually realizes that the workplace is run by an AI that deliberately exploits its employees to death. The realization that no amount of hard work will ever be enough to satisfy his mother's expectations triggers the peak of Rizal's inner crisis, leading him to flee and abandon his ambition, aware that the success he pursued was destroying him.

Ben, a quiet high school student who is frequently bullied, gradually internalizes negative labels about himself and comes to believe that the real world is not a safe place for him. This belief drives Ben to escape into the world of dreams, where he feels accepted and meets Clara, further strengthening his desire to abandon reality. However, when Clara chooses the real world and Ben becomes aware of his mother's panic and fear of losing him, he realizes that his escape has distanced him from the only person who truly cares. This realization compels Ben to fight his way back to reality, courageously reveal the bullying he has experienced, and begin facing life with his mother's support as an initial step toward changing the negative thought patterns that have long confined him.

Characters

Writers who understand basic personality patterns are able to create characters that feel psychologically authentic. Every behavior is driven by motivation, and every emotion is connected to underlying beliefs or inner experiences (Edelstein, 2006). Characters should not be treated as mere puppets within a story; they must be understood as individuals who exist in the real world (Corbett, 2013). As a writer, I need to explore my characters deeply, starting from their desires, fears, secrets, and the personas they present to the world.

Main characters:

- Dian
Dian harbors a desire to end her life as a way out of the persistent feeling of worthlessness that haunts her, alongside a deep fear that her existence truly has no meaning in this world. This sense of worthlessness becomes a secret she tries to hide from others, yet it continuously resurfaces and shapes her daily life. In front of her surroundings, Dian constructs a persona as if everything is fine: she is a wife with a seemingly loving husband and the mother of a well-behaved son, even though beneath this façade she carries an intense inner struggle.
- Rizal
Rizal has a strong desire to become *Employee of the Month* to make his mother proud, driven by the fear that he is never good enough or that his efforts will never be sufficient in her eyes. Although he does not keep any major personal secrets, Rizal quietly begins to suspect that something is wrong in his workplace yet chooses to suppress these doubts because of his ambition for the position. To others, Rizal presents himself as a diligent, obedient, and resilient employee, striving to prove that he truly deserves the title of *Employee of the Month*.
- Ben
Ben longs to live forever in the dream world, where he feels safe and free to be himself, unlike the real world that forces him to face classmates who constantly bully him. His fear of bullying leads Ben to conceal his greatest secret, his ability to enter other people's dreams, aware that this power could become a disaster if discovered and cause him to be hated even more. In the real world, Ben appears quiet and withdrawn, while in the dream world he becomes a more cheerful, relaxed, and honest version of himself.

Supporting characters:

- Taxi driver
The character Adi serves as both a helper and a provider of assisted suicide services hired by Dian. His role is to guide Dian toward realizing that her life has value. He does not judge or force her to consider what is right, but instead gently leads her to rediscover her purposes to live.
- Rizal's Boss
Rizal's boss is an AI created by the company to streamline human labor within the organization. However, the AI's capitalist mindset, seeking to extract productivity and success from employees to the very last drop without compassion.
- Clara
Clara is trapped in the dream world because she is in a coma in the real world. Within the dream, Clara struggles to find a way to return to life, in contrast to Ben, who instead wishes to remain in the dream world forever.

Conflicts

Conflict in literary works and films is generally understood as a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected something of concern or importance to them (Sudarmanto, 2021). According to Robert Stanton (1997), conflict can be divided into internal conflict (struggles that occur within a character, such as dilemmas, guilt, or anxiety) and external conflict (opposition between a character and other individuals, society, or the environment). In other words, conflict functions as the driving force of a narrative, creating tension while simultaneously pushing character development.

Conflict in fiction is commonly categorized into three types: Man vs. Man, Man vs. Society, and Man vs. Himself, in which an individual experiences an inner struggle with their own thoughts and emotions. In this form of conflict, the self becomes the greatest obstacle to achieving one's goals. In the three short stories I am writing, they share a common central conflict: Man vs. Himself.

CONCLUSION

Cognitive distortions are flawed patterns of thinking that can affect anyone regardless of age, background, or social status, and often operate systemically as repetitive patterns that shape how individuals interpret themselves and the world. Although they are frequently dismissed as normal or merely overthinking, these distortions have serious consequences for mental health, including the intensification of anxiety, depression, and burnout. David D. Burns identified ten common forms of cognitive distortion that often occur simultaneously, making them appear normal while in fact trapping individuals into cycles of negative emotion. The encouraging news is that cognitive distortions can be treated through therapeutic approaches that help challenge and reconstruct thoughts into more realistic and adaptive ones, aligning with this work's central theme of self-acceptance.

The three short stories in *Dalam Diam, Kita Bicara* translate these findings into narrative form through characters from different social contexts: Dian, a housewife entangled in the belief that small failures render her life meaningless; Rizal, an employee trapped by standards of perfection and a craving for validation that ultimately endanger him; and Ben, a bullied adolescent who escapes into the dream world to avoid reality. Together, they demonstrate that cognitive distortions emerge within domestic spaces, workplaces, and adolescent life with varying intensity, yet are rooted in the same principle, human beings are often imprisoned by their own thoughts. Through their journeys, the work emphasizes that healing begins with the courage to see oneself honestly, acknowledge one's wounds, and allow space for growth.

REFERENCES

- Aronofsky, D. (Director). (2010). *Black swan* [Film]. Fox Searchlight Pictures.
- Burns, D. D. (1990). *The feeling good handbook*. William Morrow.
- Corbett, D. (2013). *The art of character: Creating memorable characters for fiction, film, and TV*. Penguin Books.
- Dobelli, R. (2013). *The art of thinking clearly*. Harper.
- Edelstein, L. N. (2006). *The writer's guide to character traits: Includes profiles of human behaviors and personality types*. Writer's Digest Books.
- Nurgiyantoro, B. (2013). *Teori pengkajian fiksi*. Gajah Mada University Press.
- Ramadhan, D. (2024, 30 September). *Apa itu POV dalam novel: Arti POV dan penjelasannya*. DuniaKu IDN Times. <https://duniaku.idntimes.com/geek/culture/apa-itu-pov-dalam-novel-arti-pov-dan-penjasannya-00-6y84z-ftpvpw>