



## Exploring the Emotional and Professional Identity of Advocates during Legal Reforms: A Phenomenological Study

**Ade Risna Sari**

Universitas Tanjungpura, Indonesia

[aderisnasari73@gmail.com](mailto:aderisnasari73@gmail.com)

### Article Info

#### **Article history:**

Received 28-02-2025

Revised 23-03-2025

Accepted 17-04-2025

#### **Keyword:**

Criminal Justice System, Legal Reforms, Advocates, Phenomenological Study, Professional Identity, Emotional Challenges.

### ABSTRACT

The criminal justice system is undergoing continuous reforms aimed at improving fairness and efficiency. However, little is known about how these legal changes impact the personal and professional experiences of legal practitioners, particularly advocates. Specifically, there is a gap in understanding the emotional and professional challenges that advocates face during such periods of reform. This phenomenological study reveals how advocates navigate professional uncertainty and emotional distress caused by legal reforms. In-depth interviews were conducted with ten experienced advocates, and the data was analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The results indicate that advocates struggle with feelings of professional uncertainty and emotional distress as they adapt to new regulations, yet they also develop strategies to manage these challenges and continue to provide effective legal defense. These findings contribute to the understanding of the emotional toll of legal reforms and highlight the importance of supporting legal professionals during times of change. The implications for future research include the need to explore the role of institutional support in alleviating these challenges and to examine the long-term impact of legal reforms on professional identity.



©2025 Authors. Published by PT Mukhlisina Revolution Center.. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

### INTRODUCTION

The criminal justice system plays a fundamental role in upholding justice within society, offering mechanisms through which laws are enforced and disputes are resolved. However, this system is not static; it undergoes continuous changes through reforms aimed at improving fairness, accessibility, and efficiency. Legal reforms, such as modifications in sentencing, procedural rules, and broader criminal justice policies, are often implemented to address societal concerns and to ensure that the legal process remains equitable (G. L. Clark & Monk, 2010). Despite these efforts, the subjective experiences of individuals working within this system, particularly those who are advocates defending clients, have been underexplored. These legal professionals are constantly faced with adapting to new regulations and navigating a system that is in flux, which presents an important area of inquiry.

The relevance of this phenomenon extends beyond legal practitioners alone—it touches on broader societal and cultural dimensions, where the intersection of law and personal experience shapes the very fabric of justice. Legal reforms are often designed to enhance transparency and fairness, yet the subjective experiences of advocates within the system can reveal gaps and challenges that are not captured by formal policy analyses. Understanding how advocates experience these reforms and the ways in which these changes affect their professional practices and emotional well-being is crucial, especially as their role involves not only interpreting the law but also engaging with clients who are often vulnerable and in need of compassionate legal guidance.

This study emphasizes the need to explore these experiences in-depth, as they offer a unique perspective on the impacts of legal reforms. Phenomenology, as an approach, is particularly well-suited for this purpose because it focuses on understanding the lived experiences of individuals. By delving into the meanings that advocates ascribe to their work in a time of legal change, the research aims to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of how these professionals navigate the complexities of their role (Wittman & Blesh, 2017). This exploration of meaning is essential for comprehending the profound effects of legal reforms on both the practitioners and the clients they serve, thereby offering a critical contribution to the field of criminal justice reform.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals within the criminal justice system has emerged as a crucial field of inquiry, particularly when considering how systemic reforms impact the day-to-day realities of those working within it. The focus on understanding how professionals, such as advocates, experience legal reforms in their practice has become a significant area of study in recent years. While existing research has shed light on various aspects of the criminal justice system, it often overlooks the subjective experiences of legal practitioners, especially when it comes to adapting to reforms. Legal reforms are implemented with the intention of improving justice, but the personal and professional challenges faced by advocates—who are at the forefront of implementing these changes—remain underexplored. Thus, this gap presents a need for deeper exploration into the meanings these professionals ascribe to their evolving roles within a transforming system.

One of the methodological challenges when studying the meaning and experience of these legal professionals is that many existing approaches, particularly quantitative ones, fail to capture the subjective nuances of individual experiences (Castán Broto *et al.*, 2018). Traditional research methods often focus on measurable outcomes, such as case success rates or procedural changes, but they fall short of delving into how practitioners feel, interpret, and react to these reforms. This limitation arises from a lack of sensitivity to the personal, emotional, and interpretative dimensions of legal work, particularly in times of change. Consequently, while existing studies provide valuable data about reform effectiveness and procedural outcomes, they do not fully encompass the profound ways in which reform influences the advocates' professional identities, emotional states, or their relationship with clients.

These methodological limitations further suggest that the richness of the phenomenon of legal reform, especially as it is experienced by those directly involved in the process, cannot be adequately captured through traditional approaches. This underscores the need for an alternative approach—one that allows for a deeper, more holistic understanding of the experiences of criminal defense advocates in the context of legal reform. The phenomenological approach offers the most appropriate methodology to explore the essence of these experiences in their full complexity. By focusing on how advocates make sense of their experiences and the meanings they attach to them, phenomenology can provide a more detailed and authentic portrayal of the challenges they face in a rapidly changing legal landscape.

While practical approaches have been widely used to examine the effectiveness of legal reforms within the criminal justice system, these methods often fall short in capturing the deeper, subjective experiences of legal professionals navigating these changes. Much of the existing research focuses on measurable outcomes such as case success rates or procedural changes, which provide valuable insights into the operational aspects of legal reforms (Nguyen & Dinh, 2024). However, these studies do not fully explore the emotional and professional impact that such reforms have on the individuals directly involved, particularly advocates who play a key role in defending clients. The existing literature does not address how these professionals interpret, make sense of, and emotionally respond to the shifting landscape of legal practices.

This gap in understanding arises because practical approaches often overlook the rich, nuanced experiences that shape the way advocates engage with their work and clients. By failing to capture the personal and emotional dimensions of their experience, these methods produce a limited understanding of the true impact of legal reforms. In particular, the subjective meaning of these reforms, as experienced by advocates, remains unexplored. How do legal professionals internalize the

changes in their practice? What challenges do they face in balancing their professional duties with the emotional toll that these reforms may take on their clients and themselves?

Given these limitations, it is clear that adopting a phenomenological approach offers a more comprehensive solution. Phenomenology allows for a deep exploration of the lived experiences of individuals, focusing on how they perceive and make meaning of their professional and emotional encounters within the context of legal reform. This method provides an opportunity to understand the essence of the challenges faced by advocates, allowing researchers to capture the rich, subjective layers of meaning that are absent in traditional studies. By focusing on experience and meaning, phenomenology will provide a more holistic and authentic account of how legal reforms affect those working within the system, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of the transformative power of these changes.

Several studies have explored the experiences of legal professionals within the criminal justice system, particularly in relation to how they respond to systemic changes. Previous research has focused on the operational aspects of legal reforms, such as the efficiency and effectiveness of new policies and regulations (Marshall, 2022). However, fewer studies have examined the personal and emotional impacts these reforms have on legal practitioners, especially advocates. The existing literature, while valuable in understanding the procedural dimensions, lacks depth in addressing the subjective experiences of advocates, their interpretation of the reforms, and the challenges they encounter. The theoretical foundation of this research draws on phenomenological approaches, which allow for an in-depth exploration of personal experience and meaning-making, essential for understanding the advocates' responses to legal reform.

The phenomenological approach, particularly interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), was selected for this study to explore the subjective experiences of advocates. This method is well-suited to uncover the rich, nuanced meanings that advocates attach to their professional experiences and emotional responses to legal reform. By focusing on personal meaning and interpretation, IPA allows for a deeper understanding of how advocates make sense of their changing roles within a transforming legal system. This approach directly addresses the knowledge gap identified earlier, as it moves beyond surface-level outcomes to delve into the lived experiences of those affected by reform. Through this method, the study aims to provide insights into how legal professionals adapt and make meaning of their evolving roles.

This article is structured to first provide an introduction to the context of the phenomenon under investigation, outlining the challenges faced by advocates in a reforming criminal justice system. The methodology section follows, describing the phenomenological approach employed, including the data collection and analysis processes. The results of the study are then presented, exploring the themes that emerged from the data. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of the findings, reflecting on their implications for the understanding of legal reforms and the emotional and professional experiences of advocates. The structure aims to provide a clear and coherent understanding of the research journey, from context to findings and conclusions.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

The research employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of advocates in the criminal justice system, particularly focusing on their role during legal reforms. Phenomenology was chosen as the research design due to its capacity to provide deep insights into the subjective experiences of participants, allowing for an understanding of how they interpret and make sense of their reality within a changing legal environment (T. C. Clark dkk., 2021). This approach is particularly relevant to the research question, as it prioritizes personal experience and meaning, facilitating the uncovering of nuances in the advocates' perceptions and emotional responses to the reform process. The specific phenomenological method applied in this study was interpretative

phenomenological analysis (IPA), which seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences in the context of their social and professional lives.

### **Participants**

Participants in this study were selected based on purposive sampling to ensure that they had relevant experiences related to the research focus (Pilyasov dkk., 2015). The criteria for inclusion involved being a practicing advocate within the criminal justice system who had direct experience with legal reforms. The study specifically sought participants who had been practicing law for at least five years and had been involved in criminal defense cases during the reform period. The total number of participants was ten, with a gender balance of five males and five females, aged between 30 and 55 years. The age range and professional experience of participants were considered critical in providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by advocates during legal reforms.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, allowing for a personal and detailed exploration of each participant's experience. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and took place in a quiet, comfortable setting, ensuring that participants felt at ease to share their experiences openly (Deledda, 2006). The interview protocol, which was adapted from existing guidelines in legal studies, was designed to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences of legal reform and its impact on their practice. Modifications were made to include specific questions related to the emotional and professional challenges faced by advocates. In addition, the interview guide allowed flexibility for participants to explore themes relevant to their individual experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), a method that involves identifying and interpreting key themes and patterns in the data. The analysis process began with transcribing the interviews verbatim, followed by repeated readings to immerse in the participants' narratives. Meaning units were extracted from the data, and initial codes were generated based on recurring concepts and themes (Tetteh dkk., 2024). These were then grouped into broader thematic categories, which were further refined to capture the essence of the experiences shared by participants. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data, with particular attention paid to the meanings participants ascribed to their experiences in the context of ongoing legal reforms. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing the data, but the primary focus remained on manual thematic coding to ensure an in-depth interpretation.

### **Ethics**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee, and all participants provided written informed consent prior to their involvement in the study. The participants were assured of their anonymity and that their data would be kept confidential. Pseudonyms were used in the transcription and reporting of data to ensure that individuals could not be identified (Lin dkk., 2023). The study adhered to the ethical guidelines set forth by international standards for research involving human subjects, ensuring that the rights and dignity of participants were fully respected throughout the research process.

## **RESULTS**

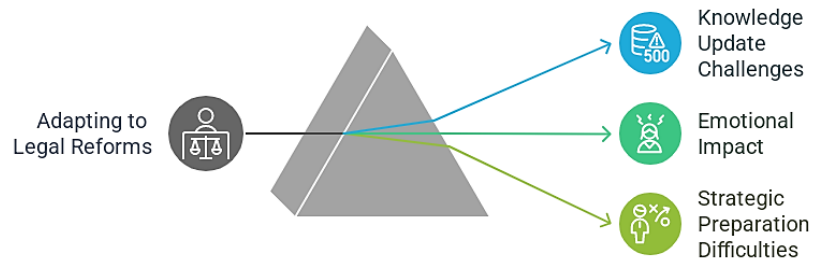
### **The Challenge of Adapting to Legal Reforms in Criminal Defense**

The experiences of the advocates revealed a significant challenge in adapting to the evolving landscape of the criminal justice system due to ongoing legal reforms. One participant, an advocate with over a decade of experience, described the shifts in legal practices with frustration: "It feels like every time I prepare for a defense, a new regulation or rule comes up that I need to learn on the fly. It can be overwhelming." This sentiment was echoed by several other participants, highlighting the

constant need to update knowledge and practices. The theme of unpredictability emerged strongly, where the lack of stable legal foundations created an environment of constant adaptation.

The reformative changes, although aimed at improving justice, often left defense lawyers in a reactive position, adjusting to new regulations without sufficient time to prepare strategically. One advocate shared, "I used to have confidence that I knew the system inside out, but now, I'm always playing catch-up." This narrative underscores the emotional toll that such constant changes have on the practitioners within the legal system, leaving them feeling inadequately supported in their role.

### Navigating the Turbulent Waters of Legal Reforms



### Navigating Client Expectations Amidst Legal Uncertainty

Another prominent theme emerged regarding the way advocates navigated their clients' expectations during times of legal uncertainty. Many participants described how their clients, already vulnerable due to the criminal justice process, often struggled to comprehend the shifting nature of legal reform. One interviewee mentioned, "Clients expect a clear path to justice, but the reforms make it feel like we're always lost in a maze. It's difficult to assure them when I don't have clear answers myself." This challenge in managing client expectations was a recurring theme, where advocates were forced to balance the legal realities with the emotional and psychological needs of their clients.

Despite these challenges, some advocates found ways to use the evolving reforms to their clients' advantage. One participant explained, "The reforms can be frustrating, but there are also opportunities hidden within them—like alternative sentencing options. It's about finding the silver lining for the client." This theme reflects the adaptive strategies that some lawyers have developed to turn the uncertainty of the legal system into a potential benefit for those they represent.

### The Impact of Legal Reforms on Professional Identity

A third significant theme was the impact of the legal reforms on the professional identity of advocates. Participants reported a sense of diminished authority within the legal process due to the lack of consistency in the law. "We used to be the trusted experts, but now, with constant changes, we're not as certain, and clients can see that. It affects how they view us," one advocate revealed. This loss of confidence in their role not only affected the advocates' professional identity but also impacted their interactions with clients and colleagues. The participants shared that the need for continuous learning and adaptation led to feelings of inadequacy and frustration.

Despite these challenges, some advocates found that their role had evolved in response to the reforms, requiring them to adopt a more collaborative and flexible approach. "We've had to embrace a more flexible model of advocacy. It's no longer just about knowing the law; it's about working with clients to navigate the ambiguity," one interviewee stated. This shift in professional identity reflects how legal reforms are reshaping the advocacy role, emphasizing the importance of adaptability and client-centered practices.

In summary, the experiences shared by the advocates highlight the significant challenges posed by ongoing legal reforms in the criminal justice system. These challenges include adapting to a constantly changing legal landscape, managing client expectations amidst uncertainty, and grappling with the evolving role of the advocate in this reformed system. The findings underscore the emotional and professional toll of these reforms on legal practitioners, while also pointing to the strategies that some advocates have employed to navigate these challenges effectively. The impact of legal reforms

is profound, reshaping both the practice of criminal defense and the professional identity of the advocates involved.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Summary of Key Findings**

The findings of this study revealed that advocates in the criminal justice system face significant challenges when adapting to legal reforms, both professionally and emotionally (Yurchenko, 2017). The research highlighted that these legal professionals navigate a landscape of continuous change, which demands constant adaptation to new laws, procedures, and client expectations. These challenges, particularly the emotional toll of dealing with these ongoing reforms, significantly influence their role and sense of professional identity.

### **Contribution of Findings to the Research Question**

This study provides valuable insights into how advocates make meaning of their experiences within a reforming legal system. By focusing on the personal experiences of these professionals, the research uncovers the emotional and professional dimensions of working in a system that is constantly evolving. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how legal reforms impact advocates not only at a procedural level but also on a personal, emotional level. The study's results suggest that while reforms aim to create fairness, they often leave advocates struggling to cope with the shifting nature of their roles, which sometimes diminishes their professional confidence. The research emphasizes the need for greater attention to the emotional experiences of legal professionals, suggesting that their adaptation strategies are shaped by both their professional knowledge and personal resilience.

### **Relationship to Existing Literature and Theory**

The findings of this study align with and extend existing literature on the emotional challenges faced by professionals in reforming systems. Previous research on legal professionals in reform contexts often focuses on procedural or operational changes, neglecting the personal experiences and emotional toll of these changes (Aare dkk., 2021). This study, however, provides a more nuanced understanding by focusing on the lived experiences of advocates, supporting the arguments made by Nakano (1989), who emphasize the psychological stress faced by professionals working in volatile environments. Moreover, the emotional and professional struggles identified in this study correspond with the theory of professional identity transformation in the context of organizational change (Ibarra, 2003). The results suggest that, like other professions undergoing significant reform, legal advocates face a process of professional identity reconstruction, which is both challenging and transformative. However, the study also highlights that the lack of stability in legal reforms complicates this process, making it more difficult for advocates to adjust compared to other professions that experience more gradual transitions.

### **Explanation of the Implications of Findings**

The findings of this study have both practical and theoretical implications for the understanding of legal reforms and the experience of legal professionals. On a practical level, the emotional and professional challenges identified in this research highlight the need for support systems within the criminal justice system. Advocates, often under significant stress due to continuous reforms, would benefit from institutional initiatives that address their mental health and professional identity during times of systemic change. These support systems could include training programs, peer support groups, and counseling services aimed at helping advocates manage the emotional toll of their work. From a theoretical perspective, the study reinforces the importance of understanding professional identity transformation in the context of legal reforms. By providing a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of legal practitioners, this research contributes to a more comprehensive view of how reform not only impacts legal processes but also reshapes the professionals' sense of self and their relationship with clients.

The findings also have broader implications for understanding the cultural and social dynamics of legal work. In many societies, legal professionals are seen as upholding justice and fairness; however, the study shows that ongoing reforms may undermine their sense of professional confidence. This highlights a social tension where the ideal of justice may clash with the realities of working within a constantly evolving system. Such a gap calls for further reflection on how legal professionals' emotional and social needs are met within these systems. These findings are relevant not only to the criminal justice system but also to other fields undergoing reform, where professionals face similar identity and emotional challenges during times of change.

### **Study Limitations**

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of advocates within a reforming criminal justice system, there are limitations that must be acknowledged. One key limitation is the relatively small sample size, which may not fully represent the diversity of experiences within the broader population of legal practitioners. The study focused specifically on advocates who had been practicing for at least five years, and while this ensured that participants had sufficient experience, it may have excluded newer professionals who may have different perspectives. Additionally, the study's focus on a single legal context—one in which reforms are ongoing—limits its generalizability to other regions or legal systems where reforms may be less frequent or have different characteristics (Goodman, 2013). The use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) also means that the findings are based on subjective interpretations, which may not fully capture the complexity of the experience for all practitioners.

### **Prospective Statements for Future Research**

The findings of this study open up several avenues for future research. One important direction would be to expand the sample to include a more diverse range of legal professionals, including those from different regions, legal backgrounds, or stages in their careers. Additionally, future studies could explore how other professionals, such as judges, clerks, and public defenders, experience legal reforms, to provide a more comprehensive view of how these changes affect various stakeholders within the criminal justice system (Oh, 2018). Another avenue for research would be to investigate how institutional support systems, such as training and mental health services, can mitigate the emotional challenges faced by legal professionals. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could track how advocates' professional identities evolve over time, particularly as they adapt to sustained legal reforms, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the long-term effects of legal change on professional practice.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the experiences of advocates within a reforming criminal justice system, focusing on how legal reforms affect their professional identity and emotional well-being. The findings revealed that ongoing reforms present significant challenges, forcing advocates to adapt continuously to new legal procedures, which often impacts their confidence and emotional state. This research fills a gap in the literature by highlighting the emotional and professional struggles that have been overlooked in previous studies, which focused primarily on procedural outcomes. By using phenomenological analysis, this study provides a deeper understanding of how advocates navigate these challenges and make sense of their evolving roles. The findings contribute valuable insights into the need for emotional and professional support for legal practitioners during periods of reform. Future research could expand this study to include other legal professionals or explore the long-term effects of reforms, offering further guidance on improving support structures within the justice system.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article. All funding sources and relevant affiliations have been disclosed, and the study was conducted with full transparency and integrity.

## REFERENCES

- Aare, A. K., Egmoose, J., Lund, S., & Hauggaard-Nielsen, H. (2021). Opportunities and barriers in diversified farming and the use of agroecological principles in the Global North—The experiences of Danish biodynamic farmers. *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems*, 45(3), 390–416. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2020.1822980>
- Castán Broto, V., Baptista, I., Kirshner, J., Smith, S., & Neves Alves, S. (2018). Energy justice and sustainability transitions in Mozambique. *Applied Energy*, 228, 645–655. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apenergy.2018.06.057>
- Clark, G. L., & Monk, A. (2010). Government of Singapore investment corporation (GIC): Insurer of last resort and bulwark of nation-state legitimacy. *Pacific Review*, 23(4), 429–451. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2010.495997>
- Clark, T. C., Best, O., Bearskin, M. L. B., Wilson, D., Power, T., Phillips-Beck, W., Graham, H., Nelson, K., Wilkie, M., Lowe, J., Wiapo, C., & Brockie, T. (2021). COVID-19 among Indigenous communities: Case studies on Indigenous nursing responses in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. *Nursing Praxis in Aotearoa New Zealand*, 37(3), 71–83. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.36951/27034542.2021.037>
- Deledda, A. (2006). Afghanistan—The end of the bonn process. *Transition Studies Review*, 13(1), 155–171. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11300-006-0097-9>
- Goodman, J. (2013). Humanitarian collective security: Restoring order? *Global Networks*, 13(3), 345–362. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12026>
- Lin, Z., Meng, F., Wang, D., Liao, D., Sun, Y., Hou, J., Liu, G., Giannetti, B. F., Agostinho, F., & Almeida, C. M. V. B. (2023). Unfolding carbon inequality across Belt and Road Initiative countries and regions under a global trade network. *Ecological Modelling*, 482. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolmodel.2023.110411>
- Marshall, A. (2022). Digital Colonialism and the Fourth Industrial Revolution—Preventing Exploitative Bio-economies. *Journal of law and medicine*, 29(3), 866–887. Scopus.
- Nakano, C. (1989). Principles of humanistic enterprise in Japan. A new economic system of the future. *Futures*, 21(6), 640–646. Scopus. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0016-3287\(89\)90048-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0016-3287(89)90048-7)
- Nguyen, T. D., & Dinh, H. T. (2024). Economic structural transformation: The Vietnamese case for developing nations in a globalization context. *Journal of Infrastructure, Policy and Development*, 8(4). Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.24294/jipd.v8i4.4261>
- Oh, S. J. (2018). Historical Injustice and its Implications on International Law in East Asia. *Pacific Focus*, 33(3), 390–413. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pafo.12125>
- Pilyasov, A. N., Kuleshov, V. V., & Seliverstov, V. E. (2015). Arctic policy in an era of global instability: Experience and lessons for Russia. *Regional Research of Russia*, 5(1), 10–22. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1134/S2079970515010086>
- Tetteh, B., Baajike, F. B., Baidoo, S. T., & Nuamah, E. (2024). Women’s economic empowerment in Africa: Is economic globalization friend or foe? *International Social Science Journal*, 74(253), 1011–1031. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1111/issj.12493>
- Wittman, H., & Blesh, J. (2017). Food Sovereignty and Fome Zero: Connecting Public Food Procurement Programmes to Sustainable Rural Development in Brazil. *Journal of Agrarian Change*, 17(1), 81–105. Scopus. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joac.12131>

Yurchenko, S. B. (2017). Logic of order: State hierarchy, law, sovereignty, and war. *International Review of Sociology*, 27(2), 291–318. Scopus.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2016.1261500>