



Reclaiming Humanity: Inner Journeys of Self-Forgiveness and Identity Restoration in Restorative Justice Rehabilitation for Offender Reintegration

Sofian Syaiful Rizal

Universitas Nurul Jadid, Indonesia

sofiansyaifulrizal@unuja.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Restorative justice is increasingly recognized as a transformative alternative to punitive criminal justice models. However, limited research addresses the inner journeys of individuals who experience such rehabilitative processes.

This study aims to explore how formerly incarcerated individuals make sense of their moral awakening, self-forgiveness, and identity restoration through participation in restorative justice-based rehabilitation programs.

Employing an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, the study involved eight participants who shared personal narratives of emotional confrontation, identity reconstruction, and renewed social belonging.

Findings indicate that rehabilitation is not solely about behavioral change or program compliance. Instead, it is a profound process of reclaiming one's humanity through reflective encounters, interpersonal support, and community reintegration. Participants identified self-forgiveness as the most difficult yet essential component of their transformation, often catalyzed by victim dialogues and facilitated support systems.

The study underscores the importance of viewing justice as a human-centered process that transcends institutional frameworks and emphasizes relational healing. These insights have meaningful implications for policymakers and practitioners in developing more empathetic, person-centered rehabilitation models. By emphasizing the subjective dimensions of reform, this study contributes to the discourse on restorative justice as a pathway for existential renewal rather than merely a strategy for recidivism reduction.



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INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of criminal rehabilitation has long occupied a central place in criminological discourse and penal policy (Dahlan dkk., 2023; Sukendar dkk., 2023). In recent decades, restorative justice has emerged as an alternative framework that shifts focus from punitive responses to healing, reconciliation, and social reintegration. This approach emphasizes dialogue, accountability, and the reparation of harm, offering a transformative space for offenders, victims, and communities alike (Tener dkk., 2021). Within this evolving context, programs rooted in restorative justice principles have been increasingly adopted in various correctional systems worldwide, including in Indonesia, as part of broader criminal justice reforms.

Despite the institutional recognition of restorative justice as a promising strategy for reducing recidivism and fostering rehabilitation, much of the discourse remains dominated by legal, procedural, or statistical evaluations of its effectiveness (Sinaga & Tanjung, 2024; "Widows' Rights and Customary Law: Addressing Responsive Law to Divorce Cases of Tolaki Community in Indonesia," 2023). The human dimension—the lived experiences of individuals undergoing such rehabilitative journeys—often remains underrepresented in scholarly literature. Yet, it is within these subjective realms that the transformative potential of restorative justice can be most deeply understood.

The need to explore how formerly incarcerated individuals make sense of their participation in restorative justice programs is particularly urgent in sociocultural contexts marked by stigma, moral judgment, and institutional marginalization (Fajruddin Fatwa, 2024; Tenrilawa dkk., 2022). Their inner struggles, reflections, and narratives of change are not merely ancillary to program outcomes but constitute the very substance of rehabilitation. A phenomenological approach offers the conceptual and methodological tools to access these experiences in their richness and complexity, thereby contributing to a more human-centered understanding of justice and reform.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals within the criminal justice system—particularly those engaged in rehabilitation and reintegration programs—has become a vital area of inquiry (Adipraya & Harahap, 2024; Rahmawati dkk., 2024). This subfield underscores the importance of understanding not only behavioral outcomes but also the personal narratives, emotions, and cognitive transformations that shape the reintegration process (Van Roekel & De Theije, 2020). Studies focusing on how individuals navigate the moral and social dimensions of post-incarceration life have highlighted the potential of qualitative inquiry to reveal layers of meaning inaccessible through conventional evaluative metrics.

However, much of the existing literature continues to rely on quantitative approaches, privileging measurable indicators such as recidivism rates, program completion statistics, or institutional compliance (Imanullah & Rachman, 2024; Zaidah dkk., 2023). While valuable, these approaches often fall short in capturing the complexity of personal change, particularly the internal processes of reflection, remorse, self-forgiveness, and identity reconstruction. The subjective essence of rehabilitation—the emotional and psychological journey that individuals undergo—remains insufficiently understood.

This methodological gap presents a significant challenge: without direct engagement with the voices and meanings constructed by the individuals themselves, research risks overlooking the core of what restorative justice seeks to transform (Faiz dkk., 2023; Yetta dkk., 2024). Descriptive and interpretative phenomenological methods provide a critical alternative by enabling an exploration of these deeper dimensions (Wood dkk., 2021). Such methods are uniquely suited to uncovering how individuals make sense of their experiences and attribute meaning to their involvement in restorative justice practices. In doing so, phenomenological inquiry enriches our understanding of rehabilitation not merely as an institutional process but as a profoundly human and relational transformation.

In addressing the rehabilitation of former offenders, conventional approaches have largely emphasized practical interventions such as behavior modification programs, vocational training, and compliance-based monitoring (Khalid dkk., 2024; Solehudin dkk., 2024). These strategies, while institutionally valuable, are predominantly guided by procedural outcomes and observable behavioral change. As such, they tend to rely on standard evaluative frameworks that overlook the internal dimensions of transformation experienced by individuals in restorative justice programs.

These practical frameworks often fail to capture the nuanced psychological and emotional processes that define the subjective journey of rehabilitation (Fikri dkk., 2023; Taman dkk., 2025). Concepts such as moral realignment, self-forgiveness, or the internalization of social accountability remain inadequately understood when approached through statistical or behaviorist paradigms. This has resulted in a body of research that, while rich in procedural analysis, provides a relatively impoverished account of how individuals experience and interpret their engagement in restorative justice from within.

A growing consensus among qualitative scholars suggests that in order to truly understand the rehabilitative process, attention must be directed toward the meanings individuals ascribe to their lived experiences (Insani dkk., 2023; Rachmadhani dkk., 2024). Phenomenological methods, particularly interpretative phenomenological analysis, offer a powerful alternative by foregrounding the first-person perspective and enabling a deep exploration of how individuals construct meaning in relation to personal change, justice, and reintegration. Yet, phenomenological studies in this domain remain scarce, especially in contexts where cultural, institutional, and interpersonal dimensions deeply shape the experience of justice. This gap underscores the urgent need for empirical research

that centers the voices of former inmates and explores the essence of rehabilitation as a lived, transformative phenomenon.

Several studies have examined the reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals, focusing primarily on program outcomes such as reduced recidivism, improved behavior, or compliance with post-release conditions. While these studies offer useful insights, they often overlook the internal, subjective experiences that shape the rehabilitation journey. Research by Agostinelli dkk. (2024) highlighted the role of personal narratives in reforming one's identity after prison, while (Ahmed & Gopi, 2024) explored how desistance involves deeper moral shifts. However, these studies seldom engage with the emotional and existential meanings individuals attach to restorative justice processes. As such, a gap remains in understanding how participants interpret their rehabilitation experiences as lived and embodied realities.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to address that gap. Phenomenology is well-suited to explore how people make sense of complex emotional and moral experiences (Khair & Sukti, 2025; Zaelani & Syukur, 2023). It allows for the examination of transformation not as an external outcome, but as an internal process rooted in self-awareness, social recognition, and meaning-making. The focus is on understanding how participants experience self-forgiveness, identity reconstruction, and moral reconciliation. By using this method, the study offers a response to the limitations of prior research and provides a more holistic view of rehabilitation.

This article is organized into six sections. The introduction outlines the context, background, and aims of the study (Kamila & Saepullah, 2022; Siregar dkk., 2023). The methodology section details the phenomenological framework, sampling, data collection, and analysis procedures. The results section presents the core themes that emerged from the participants' narratives (Arif dkk., 2024). The discussion interprets these themes in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Finally, the conclusion highlights the study's contributions and implications for restorative justice and criminal rehabilitation practices.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals who participated in a restorative justice-based rehabilitation program. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research design, emphasizes the exploration of subjective experiences and the meanings individuals ascribe to their life events. The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework was selected for its suitability in capturing the depth and complexity of personal narratives, particularly within the context of moral transformation and social reintegration (Deniša & Ude, 2024). This design allowed for a nuanced understanding of how participants internally negotiated their identities and moral positions in response to restorative interventions. The interpretative nature of the design facilitated the examination of how individuals made sense of their experiences within broader institutional and social contexts.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct engagement in a restorative justice-based rehabilitation program and their status as formerly incarcerated individuals. Inclusion criteria required that participants be over the age of 21, had completed a minimum of six months in the program, and had been released from incarceration for at least one year. Individuals with severe mental health conditions that impaired communication or memory were excluded to ensure the richness and clarity of experiential data (Frick dkk., 2024). A total of eight participants (six males and two females) took part in the study, with ages ranging from 27 to 51 years (mean age: 38.5 years). All participants had been convicted of criminal offenses and had undergone structured restorative interventions involving facilitated dialogues, counseling, and community engagement.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, guided by an interview protocol designed to elicit participants' personal reflections on their rehabilitation experiences. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in private, quiet locations chosen by the participants to ensure psychological comfort and confidentiality. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with informed consent. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations. Interviews were conducted over a span of four weeks and continued until data saturation was reached. The interview guide was developed based on core themes in restorative justice and revised following a pilot test with one former participant who did not take part in the main study.

Data Analysis

Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), following the six-step framework outlined by (Friebel dkk., 2024). Initial readings were conducted to gain familiarity with the content, followed by the identification of emergent meaning units and preliminary codes. These codes were then organized into higher-order themes through iterative comparison and abstraction. The analytic process prioritized the participants' perspectives while integrating interpretative insights to illuminate underlying structures of meaning. NVivo 12 software was used to assist with data management and thematic categorization, ensuring consistency and traceability throughout the analysis. The final themes were reviewed and refined to accurately reflect the shared and divergent aspects of participants' lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board of the affiliated research institution. All participants were informed of the study's aims, their rights to withdraw at any time, and the procedures for data confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to data collection. All identifying information was removed from transcripts, and pseudonyms were assigned to protect participants' anonymity. The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and complied with applicable national and institutional guidelines for human subjects research.

RESULTS

Moral Transformation and Self-Forgiveness

Participants consistently described a profound internal struggle that preceded their acceptance of the rehabilitation process. This transformation was not solely behavioral but was characterized by a moral awakening—often catalyzed by moments of reflection, confrontation with their victims, or engagement in restorative dialogues. The core of this transformation lay in the act of self-forgiveness.

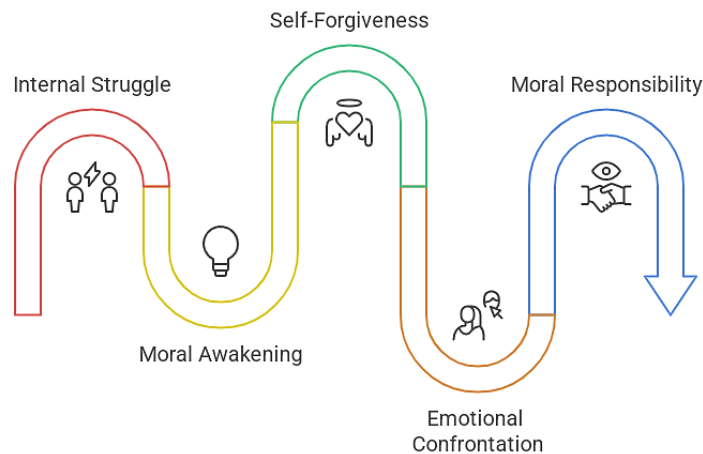
“I didn't feel truly free when I left the prison walls. Freedom came when I could finally forgive myself for what I had done. That was the hardest part.” (P5)

This internal reconciliation was described as more challenging than facing external judgment. For many, self-forgiveness became the entry point for deeper engagement in the restorative process.

“In the beginning, I thought the program was just another way to get out earlier. But when I saw my victim, when I heard her words, I couldn't hide from myself anymore. That's when I started to change.” (P3)

Such moments of emotional confrontation marked a turning point, enabling participants to take moral responsibility beyond formal guilt acknowledgment.

Moral Transformation and Self-Forgiveness Process



Reclaiming Social Identity and Belonging

A recurring experience among participants was the sense of social death upon incarceration—being forgotten or actively rejected by family and community. Participation in restorative justice programs, particularly those involving community dialogue or victim-offender mediation, offered a space for identity reconstruction.

“My family came to the circle. For the first time in years, I saw my mother cry not because she was ashamed, but because she believed I could be someone new.” (P1)

The program provided an environment in which participants could be seen not merely as offenders but as persons in the process of becoming. The reestablishment of belonging was a powerful force in sustaining their desistance from crime.

“It was not about paying back. It was about being welcomed again—being a father, a brother, a neighbor. That’s what made me want to stay out [of prison].” (P7)

This social reintegration, anchored in mutual recognition, was crucial to participants’ renewed sense of worth and purpose.

The Role of Institutional and Interpersonal Support

While inner transformation and social reintegration were key, participants emphasized the critical role of institutional facilitators, counselors, and mentors in guiding their journey. Programs that provided consistent, empathetic guidance were perceived as more effective.

“It wasn’t just the program—it was Mr. Dika, the counselor. He never treated us like numbers. He listened. He challenged us, but also believed in us.” (P6)

This relational dimension extended to peer dynamics as well. The solidarity among fellow participants helped normalize vulnerability and fostered a culture of mutual support.

“Some nights we just talked—no guards, no judgment. Just men trying to understand how we ended up here and how to stop it from happening again.” (P2)

Programs that failed to maintain continuity or were perceived as procedural had less impact, according to participant accounts.

The essence of participants’ experiences within restorative justice-based rehabilitation lies in the interplay of internal moral reckoning, reconstructed social identity, and sustained human connection. Rather than compliance with correctional expectations, genuine transformation emerged from dialogic engagement, emotional exposure, and contextual support. These themes reveal the deeply subjective, relational, and evolving nature of rehabilitation, which cannot be fully captured through traditional outcome metrics.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the lived experience of formerly incarcerated individuals in restorative justice-based rehabilitation is deeply rooted in moral transformation, identity reconstruction, and the importance of supportive human relationships (Latifani dkk., 2024; Widodo, 2022). These themes respond directly to the central research question by illuminating how participants make sense of self-forgiveness, social reintegration, and personal change through restorative processes.

The study contributes a nuanced answer to the question of how individuals experience and interpret their journey within restorative justice programs (Haris & Lisdiyono, 2024; Nur dkk., 2023). Rather than viewing rehabilitation as a linear process of behavioral reform, the findings suggest that it is experienced as an evolving and often non-linear moral and emotional reconstruction. Participants' narratives emphasize that true rehabilitation occurs not at the institutional level but through personal insight, relational healing, and social recognition. These results affirm the need to reframe restorative justice not only as a mechanism of accountability but also as a space for existential growth and meaning-making.

In relation to existing literature, the findings align with (Lan dkk., 2024) of a "redemption script." The emphasis on self-forgiveness and moral clarity echoes (Le dkk., 2023) exploration of desistance theory, which stresses the importance of internal motivation and moral repair. At the same time, this study extends prior research by grounding these transformations in the everyday language and emotions of the participants, thereby adding depth to (Li dkk., 2023) conceptualization of restorative justice as both a social and psychological process. Furthermore, the importance of interpersonal support found in this study complements (Le dkk., 2023) emphasis on moral performance within prison contexts, reinforcing the idea that rehabilitative change is deeply relational and contingent on human interaction.

The implications of these findings are both theoretically and practically significant (Musarofa dkk., 2024; Yuniar & Sudarmaji, 2023). From a sociocultural perspective, the study underscores that rehabilitation cannot be effectively understood or implemented without acknowledging the moral and emotional dimensions of reintegration. The participants' reflections reveal that healing and transformation are anchored not in procedural compliance but in deeply personal journeys of meaning-making, supported by authentic human connections. These insights are particularly relevant for post-incarceration support systems in societies where social stigma and moral exclusion continue to hinder reintegration. For practitioners and policymakers, the findings suggest the need to design programs that prioritize relational trust, emotional literacy, and opportunities for moral expression and acknowledgment within restorative justice frameworks.

Despite the depth of the findings, this study has certain limitations. The sample size was intentionally small and context-specific, consistent with the goals of phenomenological inquiry, but this limits the transferability of the insights to broader populations. The focus on individuals who had participated in structured restorative justice programs may exclude the perspectives of those without access to such interventions. Additionally, the emotional sensitivity of the topic may have influenced participants' openness or the depth of narrative shared during interviews. These factors should be considered when interpreting the findings and applying them in other sociocultural contexts.

Future research should continue to explore the inner experiences of former offenders across different cultural, institutional, and legal settings. Comparative phenomenological studies could reveal how social narratives, institutional structures, or religious and cultural beliefs shape the meanings individuals assign to justice, guilt, and rehabilitation. Moreover, longitudinal studies could examine how the meanings constructed through restorative justice evolve over time, offering a richer understanding of long-term desistance and identity reconstruction. By expanding the phenomenological lens, future research can deepen our collective understanding of justice as not merely a system of rules, but as a lived human process of reconciliation and renewal.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals who participated in a restorative justice-based rehabilitation program, focusing on how they made sense of self-forgiveness, identity reconstruction, and social reintegration. The findings revealed that moral transformation, personal reflection, and supportive relationships formed the core of their rehabilitative journeys. These insights provide a deeper understanding of rehabilitation as an internal and relational process rather than merely a behavioral outcome. By highlighting the subjective and emotional dimensions of restorative justice, this study addresses key gaps in previous research dominated by procedural and quantitative evaluations. The use of interpretative phenomenological analysis allowed for a rich portrayal of the participants' perspectives, offering valuable implications for justice practitioners and policymakers. Future studies may expand on these findings by exploring different cultural settings or by examining the long-term impact of restorative justice on personal and social change.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All procedures followed were in accordance with ethical standards, and no financial or personal relationships influenced the outcomes of this research.

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