



Understanding the Lived Experience of Social Reintegration After Imprisonment: Perspectives of Former Inmates

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ABSTRACT

The study is situated within the field of criminal justice and social reintegration, exploring how post-incarceration experiences reflect broader transformations in legal reform and human rehabilitation. Within this context, existing knowledge has primarily focused on institutional and behavioral outcomes, offering limited insight into the lived experiences of former inmates as they navigate reintegration within reformed justice systems. What remains unclear is how these individuals experience and assign meaning to their reintegration—how they reconstruct identity, negotiate stigma, and redefine freedom within societal and moral frameworks. Using a phenomenological approach, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study uncovers the essence of reintegration as a deeply personal and moral process shaped by consciousness and social context. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with twelve (12) former inmates—nine males and three females—aged between 27 and 54 years, who had been released from correctional facilities within the past five years. These participants represented diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds to capture a wide spectrum of reintegration experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns of meaning and experience. The results reveal five core themes: identity reconstruction, institutional barriers, family support, paradox of freedom, and moral reform. Together, these themes illustrate reintegration as a dynamic interplay between personal transformation and societal perception. The findings highlight that reintegration is not merely a policy outcome but an existential journey of reclaiming humanity, emphasizing the moral and relational dimensions of justice reform. This study broadens the understanding of reintegration by integrating phenomenological insights into socio-legal discourse and offers a foundation for more humane and reflective approaches to justice policy and rehabilitation practice.



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INTRODUCTION

The process of social reintegration following imprisonment represents one of the most complex dimensions of criminal justice reform (Tournés, 2024). Across diverse cultural and legal systems, the transition from incarceration to community life is not merely a matter of policy or legal status but a deeply human and existential experience. Individuals who have undergone imprisonment often encounter a profound disruption in identity, belonging, and social participation (Valk & Versluijs, 2024). Upon release, they face the dual challenge of rebuilding personal meaning and negotiating their place within a society that frequently continues to define them by their past offenses. This phenomenon extends beyond criminological discourse, touching upon moral, psychological, and sociological domains that shape how justice, punishment, and rehabilitation are experienced and understood.

Within contemporary legal scholarship, criminal justice reform emphasizes a paradigm shift from punitive models toward restorative and rehabilitative approaches (Semigina & Stoliaryk, 2024).

However, the lived reality of this transformation is often fraught with contradictions. While reforms aim to humanize correctional systems and promote reintegration, many former inmates report persistent stigmatization, systemic exclusion, and internalized shame that hinder their capacity for social participation. Such experiences underscore the gap between institutional ideals and everyday realities (Mukhlis, 2025a). The reform of justice systems, therefore, cannot be fully comprehended through legal frameworks alone—it requires an understanding of how these changes are experienced subjectively by those most affected.

Exploring these lived experiences is crucial to advancing both theoretical and practical dimensions of justice reform (Chuldun et al., 2024). A phenomenological approach allows for the uncovering of the essence of reintegration as a human experience, revealing how individuals make sense of freedom, stigma, and moral reconstruction in post-incarceration life (Steinmetz, 2024). By attending to the subjective meanings embedded in personal narratives, phenomenology bridges the distance between policy rhetoric and human reality. In doing so, it provides insights that inform not only the refinement of reform policies but also the moral and cultural understanding of justice in society.

In recent years, scholarly attention toward the lived experiences of individuals undergoing social reintegration after imprisonment has grown substantially, reflecting an increasing recognition that justice reform cannot be fully understood through legal or policy analysis alone (Helleputte et al., 2025). Studies have sought to uncover how former inmates perceive their return to society, how they navigate stigma, and how they reconstruct personal and social identities within the shifting landscape of criminal justice reform (Mukhlis, 2025b). This sub-area of inquiry, situated at the intersection of criminology, legal reform, and human experience, aligns closely with the phenomenological pursuit of understanding meaning as lived and embodied rather than abstractly defined.

Despite the growing body of research, methodological challenges persist in capturing the depth and complexity of such experiences (Hollósvölgyi, 2025). Quantitative and survey-based studies, while valuable for identifying general trends, often fail to illuminate the subjective meanings and emotional nuances that define the reintegration process (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023). The reduction of human experience to measurable variables risks obscuring the internal transformations, moral struggles, and existential reflections that shape how former inmates interpret freedom and belonging (Noorda, 2024). These limitations have led to an increasing call for qualitative and interpretive methods capable of addressing the invisible dimensions of human experience—the perceptions, meanings, and lived realities that cannot be adequately quantified.

Traditional qualitative approaches, though insightful, have also faced criticism for their tendency to prioritize thematic categorization over experiential depth. Many such studies have focused on social outcomes—employment, recidivism, or community attitudes—without delving into the essence of reintegration as a phenomenological process (Özdemir et al., 2024). Consequently, existing methods have struggled to reveal how individuals internalize and interpret their post-incarceration realities, leaving critical aspects of meaning-making unexplored (Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). Within this gap, phenomenology emerges as a methodologically and philosophically coherent approach to grasp the essence of reintegration by attending to the lived world (*Lebenswelt*) of former inmates. Through this lens, understanding shifts from describing what reintegration looks like to uncovering what reintegration means for those who live it.

Existing approaches to post-incarceration reintegration have primarily emphasized policy implementation, behavioral rehabilitation, and socio-economic reintegration programs as practical solutions to criminal justice reform (Amadio & Sakhi, 2025). While such initiatives have contributed to measurable improvements—such as reduced recidivism rates and increased employment opportunities—they often overlook the subjective dimensions of reintegration, including the emotional, moral, and existential struggles that define how individuals experience freedom after confinement (Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Most studies in this domain rely heavily on quantitative indicators or surface-level qualitative accounts, which provide valuable data but fail to capture the inner meaning and lived essence of reintegration as experienced by former inmates.

The limitation of these approaches lies in their instrumental orientation, where human experience is treated as an outcome to be managed rather than a phenomenon to be understood (López-Armijos & Romero, 2025). Such perspectives risk reducing reintegration to administrative or sociological categories—neglecting the psychological transitions, identity reconstruction, and moral reasoning that accompany an individual's re-entry into society (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023). As a result, current research provides an incomplete picture, unable to account for how individuals make sense of their past incarceration and present existence within the moral and social frameworks that shape their lives.

Addressing this gap requires a methodological and philosophical shift toward an approach that prioritizes the exploration of lived meaning over the measurement of behavioral outcomes (Prosen & Lukić, 2024). The phenomenological method offers a pathway to this deeper understanding by uncovering the essence of reintegration as a human experience—how it is felt, perceived, and made meaningful within the broader context of criminal justice reform. Through phenomenology, reintegration is reframed not as a procedural phase following release but as a continuing process of identity, morality, and belonging, interpreted through the consciousness of those who live it. This interpretive depth is essential for developing a more holistic and human-centered understanding of justice reform.

Previous studies on post-incarceration experiences have explored various dimensions of reintegration, including social stigma, employment barriers, and institutional reforms (Ojok, 2025). Research in criminology and psychology has often described reintegration as a behavioral or social adaptation process, focusing on external indicators of success rather than inner transformation (Mukhlis et al., 2024). Theoretical perspectives on restorative justice and moral rehabilitation have contributed to understanding societal dynamics but have rarely illuminated the subjective meanings of freedom and redemption. A few qualitative studies have touched upon emotional struggles and personal resilience but lacked the interpretive depth necessary to uncover the essence of lived experience. Consequently, the internal world of former inmates—their reflections, fears, and moral negotiations—remains underexplored within the existing literature.

This study adopts a phenomenological approach, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to investigate how former inmates experience and assign meaning to social reintegration after imprisonment (Engström et al., 2025). The method allows for an in-depth exploration of how individuals perceive their identity reconstruction, moral accountability, and social acceptance within the context of criminal justice reform. By prioritizing subjective experience, the study responds to the knowledge gap identified earlier, revealing reintegration as an evolving and meaning-making process rather than a fixed outcome (Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). The phenomenological framework facilitates the interpretation of lived realities beyond institutional narratives or quantitative representations (Cheney et al., 2025). Through this lens, the research aims to articulate the essence of reintegration as both a psychological and moral journey toward reclaiming selfhood.

The article is structured as follows: The introduction presents the conceptual background, contextualizing reintegration within broader legal and social frameworks (Latino et al., 2025). The methodology section explains the phenomenological design, participant selection, data collection through in-depth interviews, and interpretative data analysis procedures (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025). The results section details the emergent themes that capture the lived meanings of reintegration. The discussion interprets these findings in relation to existing theories of justice, rehabilitation, and identity reconstruction (Thebe & Malan, 2025). Finally, the conclusion synthesizes the study's contributions to advancing phenomenological inquiry in criminal justice reform and outlines implications for policy and practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of former inmates during their process of social reintegration following criminal justice reform. The phenomenological approach was chosen to capture the subjective meanings embedded in personal experiences, enabling a deep understanding of how individuals interpret and make sense of their post-incarceration realities. This design aligns with the ontological assumption that reality is constructed through individual consciousness and that understanding a phenomenon requires uncovering the essence of human experience.

An interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) guided the study, emphasizing the hermeneutic process of interpreting participants' narratives within their social and institutional contexts. The IPA framework was considered appropriate as it allows for an in-depth exploration of how participants perceive, process, and attribute meaning to reintegration experiences shaped by stigma, institutional structures, and family support. Through this approach, the study sought to reveal both the psychological and socio-legal dimensions underlying the phenomenon.

Participants

Participants consisted of former inmates who had been released within the past five years and were undergoing reintegration into their respective communities in Indonesia. Selection followed purposive sampling, ensuring that each participant had direct, relevant experience with post-incarceration reintegration under the ongoing criminal justice reform framework.

Inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) have completed a sentence in a correctional facility, (2) be legally free at the time of participation, and (3) be actively involved in reintegration efforts, whether through employment, education, or community engagement. Individuals with ongoing legal proceedings or severe psychological distress were excluded to preserve data reliability and ethical consideration.

A total of twelve participants were involved, consisting of nine males and three females, aged between 26 and 48 years. Participants represented diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, contributing to a rich understanding of reintegration as a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by both individual and structural factors.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, conducted in person to facilitate openness and trust. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was held in a neutral, comfortable setting, such as community centers or rehabilitation offices, to ensure participants' psychological ease and privacy.

An interview guide was developed to explore participants' perceptions, emotions, and interpretations regarding their reintegration experiences. The guide covered topics including identity reconstruction, family and community acceptance, institutional support, and perceived barriers. Probing questions were used to encourage detailed reflection and authentic expression.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim in the native language before being translated into English for analysis. Field notes were also maintained to capture contextual observations and nonverbal cues. To enhance data richness, the collection process continued until thematic saturation was reached—when no new themes or meanings emerged from additional interviews.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework, following a systematic, multi-stage process to identify and interpret essential themes. Transcribed texts were first read repeatedly to achieve immersion in participants' accounts. Meaning units were then identified and coded, focusing on expressions that conveyed significant experiential insights.

Subsequently, initial codes were clustered into broader emergent themes that reflected shared meanings across participants. Relationships among themes were examined to construct a

comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. NVivo software facilitated data organization but did not substitute the interpretative role of the analysis.

The interpretative stage involved moving between the participants' individual meanings and the researcher's contextual interpretation—a double hermeneutic process central to IPA. The analysis culminated in the identification of five superordinate themes: identity reconstruction, institutional barriers, family support, paradox of freedom, and moral reform, representing the essential structure of the reintegration experience.

RESULTS

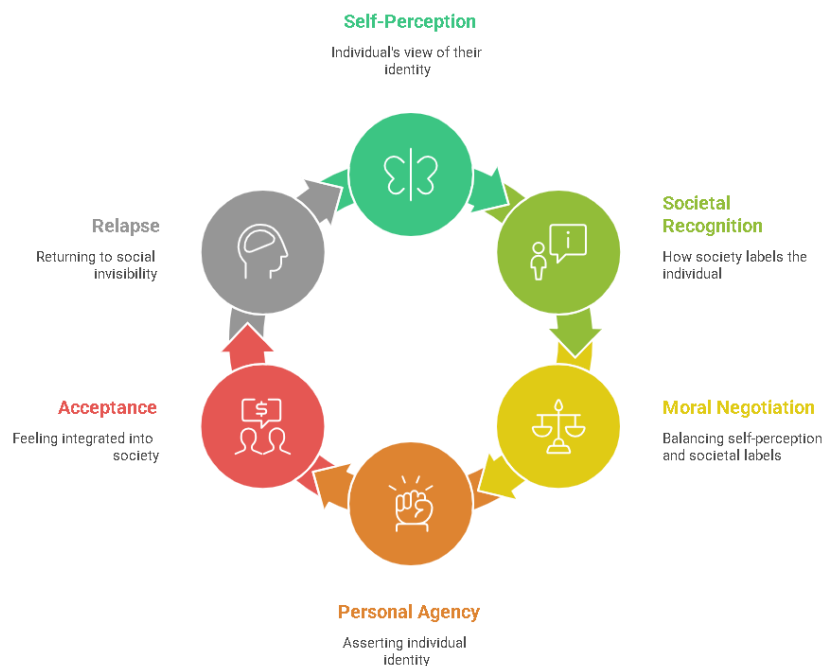
Reconstructing Identity Through Social Reintegration

Participants described the period after release from prison as a complex process of reconstructing self-identity within a society that often stigmatizes their past. Reintegration was not merely physical freedom but an existential effort to regain personal dignity. One participant expressed:

“I am free, but sometimes I still feel imprisoned by people’s judgment. Every time I apply for a job, they look at my past more than who I am now.”

This reflection encapsulates the struggle between the individual's sense of transformation and the external societal labels that continue to define them. Beyond individual emotion, this struggle illustrates how identity reconstruction functions as a moral negotiation between self-perception and societal recognition. Participants' accounts revealed that the act of reintegration demanded the redefinition of moral worth, where personal agency became a form of resistance against stigma. The analytical pattern suggests that identity reconstruction is not linear but cyclical—oscillating between moments of acceptance and relapse into social invisibility. The theme highlights how social stigma shapes former inmates' identity reconstruction, positioning reintegration as an ongoing journey rather than a final state.

Cycle of Identity Reconstruction



Institutional Barriers and the Fragility of Reform

A recurrent experience across participants was the tension between the ideals of legal reform and the practical realities of institutional resistance. Despite the rhetoric of rehabilitative justice, participants often encountered bureaucratic indifference and structural exclusion. One participant noted:

“They told us about the prison reform, about giving us second chances. But once outside, the system forgets us. There’s no real bridge to connect us back to society.”

This theme underscores the dissonance between policy intent and implementation. Analytically, this dissonance reveals how institutional reform remains performative when unaccompanied by systemic follow-through. Participants’ narratives collectively expose a gap between macro-level reform discourse and micro-level lived experience. The findings suggest that reintegration efforts often collapse under fragmented coordination, where institutional inertia reproduces exclusion under the guise of reform. The fragility of post-reform institutions was evident in the participants’ narratives, where reintegration programs lacked consistency and coordination. The experiences reveal that criminal justice reform remains incomplete without mechanisms that ensure social continuity after incarceration.

Family Support as a Catalyst for Redemption

The role of family emerged as a central factor in restoring hope and purpose. Participants consistently described emotional and moral support from family as the foundation of their motivation to reintegrate. One participant shared:

“If it weren’t for my mother, I would have gone back to crime. She reminded me every day that I could still change.”

Family acceptance not only provided psychological stability but also functioned as a moral anchor that countered societal rejection. From an interpretative standpoint, the family operates as a primary site of moral reconstruction, where forgiveness functions as a counter-narrative to public condemnation. The presence of familial support symbolized the re-entry of former inmates into relational networks of trust, allowing them to rebuild moral identity through intimate social bonds. The data reveal that redemption was experienced less as institutional rehabilitation and more as emotional reciprocity within kinship structures. This theme illustrates how familial relationships serve as microcosms of restorative justice—where forgiveness, trust, and acceptance become transformative forces beyond the formal justice system.

The Paradox of Freedom and Social Exclusion

While legal freedom marked the end of incarceration, participants’ experiences revealed a paradoxical sense of continued confinement within social boundaries. Many felt that their “freedom” was conditional, constrained by prejudice, limited employment, and lack of institutional support. One participant summarized this sentiment:

“Outside, I am free by law, but inside, I’m still trapped by fear and rejection.”

The paradox of freedom unveils a deeper ontological dimension of reintegration, where liberty is reinterpreted as both emancipation and burden. Participants’ accounts show that freedom devoid of social acceptance reproduces internalized surveillance—an invisible imprisonment sustained by collective memory and moral suspicion. Analytical interpretation suggests that this paradox embodies the tension between structural emancipation (release) and existential liberation (belonging). This paradox highlights the psychological and sociological dimensions of post-release reintegration, emphasizing that freedom without social inclusion remains incomplete. The participants’ reflections demonstrate that reform in criminal justice must extend beyond legal mechanisms to address deep-rooted cultural perceptions of ex-offenders.

Reform, Responsibility, and the Search for Meaning

Amid challenges, several participants articulated a renewed sense of moral responsibility and personal transformation. Reform was not only a policy objective but a lived experience marked by introspection and resilience. One participant stated:

“Prison changed me, but not because of the system—because I finally understood what freedom means. It’s about taking responsibility, even when no one trusts you.”

This theme reveals how participants internalized reform as a personal journey of moral reconstruction. Interpretatively, this finding emphasizes that reform transcends structural adjustment—it becomes an ethical awakening. Participants reframed justice not as an imposed discipline but as a self-directed pursuit of moral coherence. This shift from external control to internal accountability represents the deepest layer of reintegration: the transformation of justice from punitive ideology into an existential practice of meaning-making. Their narratives transform the notion of justice from punitive correction to reflective self-redemption, bridging the philosophical ideals of restorative justice with lived human experience.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that the essence of post-incarceration reintegration lies in a continuous negotiation between identity reconstruction, moral responsibility, and societal acceptance. The lived experiences of former inmates demonstrate that reintegration is not a finite achievement but an evolving process shaped by internal transformation and external stigma—directly addressing the central question of how individuals experience freedom and belonging after imprisonment.

Contribution of Findings to the Research Question

The study provides a nuanced understanding of reintegration as a multidimensional and deeply subjective phenomenon. By foregrounding participants’ narratives, it reveals that social reintegration is less about structural reinsertion and more about the reconstitution of selfhood in a morally and socially complex environment (Tuaf & Orkibi, 2025). The lived accounts illustrate how former inmates reinterpret their freedom, not merely as legal emancipation but as moral accountability—a personal reawakening shaped by reflection, remorse, and hope.

This interpretation directly answers the research question posed in the Introduction: How do individuals experience and assign meaning to their reintegration after imprisonment within a reforming justice system? The findings show that participants’ sense of reintegration depends heavily on their ability to redefine identity in relation to persistent social stigma and institutional barriers. Importantly, the study expands the conceptual scope of justice reform by illuminating how human experience mediates the effectiveness of reintegration policies. In doing so, it repositions reintegration as a human process of reconciliation rather than a technical objective of correctional management.

Relationship to Existing Literature and Theoretical Perspectives

The interpretative findings resonate strongly with existing phenomenological and criminological scholarship that views reintegration as a moral and existential journey rather than a procedural transition. They align with theories of restorative justice (Braithwaite, 2002) that emphasize the relational and emotional dimensions of reparation, as well as Maruna’s (2001) desistance theory, which highlights the narrative reconstruction of identity as central to avoiding reoffending. However, the study extends these frameworks by uncovering the inner moral discourse that underpins participants’ sense of transformation—a dimension rarely captured in policy-oriented research.

While prior studies have described post-release challenges in terms of stigma, unemployment, or social exclusion, few have examined how these external realities are internalized and made meaningful through consciousness. This study complements the work of (Willis-Esqueda & Gilbert, 2024) hermeneutic phenomenology by demonstrating how being-in-the-world (Dasein) is disrupted and reconstructed through the experience of imprisonment and release. The results also refine existing rehabilitation models by emphasizing the importance of subjective agency—the capacity of individuals to find meaning within systemic constraints (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). Thus, the phenomenological interpretation bridges the gap between structural analyses of reintegration and the deeply personal, lived experience of moral renewal.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study hold significant implications for both theory and practice within the field of criminal justice reform (He & Liu, 2025). From a theoretical standpoint, they reaffirm the importance of understanding reintegration not as a policy endpoint but as a lived moral experience that unfolds within the interaction between individual consciousness and social structures (Arxer et al., 2025). This perspective challenges conventional frameworks that treat rehabilitation as a purely administrative process, instead emphasizing the human capacity for transformation through meaning-making.

Socially, the study underscores the need for reintegration programs that recognize the subjective and existential dimensions of recovery, including identity reconstruction, emotional healing, and moral reconciliation. Such recognition calls for restorative justice initiatives that move beyond institutional reintegration metrics toward creating spaces for narrative reflection, empathy, and community acceptance (Enderle et al., 2025). Culturally, the study's insights reveal how collective perceptions of crime and redemption shape the lived experiences of former inmates, suggesting that effective reform requires not only structural change but also societal re-education about the meaning of justice, forgiveness, and human dignity. These implications position phenomenology as a bridge between academic theory, policy development, and humane practice.

Limitations of the Study

As with all qualitative and phenomenological research, the findings of this study are contextually bound and should not be generalized to all populations or settings (Steinberg & Wade, 2025). The participants' experiences were drawn from a specific sociocultural and legal context—post-reform Indonesia—where community perceptions of ex-offenders and institutional responses to reintegration may differ from those in other societies (Gulaya & Asthana, 2025). Moreover, the reliance on self-reported narratives, while central to phenomenological inquiry, may reflect subjective selectivity influenced by memory, emotional states, or social desirability.

The study's interpretative framework, rooted in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), prioritizes depth over breadth, which means that the analysis captures the richness of lived experience but may not encompass the full diversity of reintegration pathways (Buranajoenkij & Hayes, 2025). Finally, while the translation of interview data was carefully verified, subtle nuances of meaning may have been influenced by linguistic and cultural interpretation (Olszewski-Strzyżowski, 2024). These limitations, however, do not diminish the value of the findings but rather delineate the situated nature of phenomenological truth—truth as experienced, not universalized.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

Future research can build upon these findings by exploring cross-cultural variations in the lived experience of reintegration, comparing how different legal, religious, and social systems shape the moral consciousness of former inmates (Querol & Lerner, 2025). Longitudinal phenomenological studies could also trace the evolution of identity and belonging over time, offering insights into how sustained social interactions influence moral transformation (Gandhi & Visaka Devi, 2025). Furthermore, interdisciplinary collaboration between criminology, psychology, and sociology could enrich the understanding of reintegration as both a personal and collective phenomenon.

In practical terms, future inquiries may examine how phenomenological insights can inform restorative policy frameworks, particularly in designing reintegration programs that incorporate narrative therapy, community dialogue, and value-based rehabilitation (Shiferaw & Wedi, 2025). Expanding the lens beyond former inmates to include perspectives of families, law enforcement officers, and community leaders could illuminate the broader ecosystem of reintegration and its moral dynamics (Plimley, 2024). By pursuing these directions, future research can continue to strengthen the bridge between lived human experience and the evolving ideals of justice reform.

CONCLUSION

The present study explored the lived experiences of former inmates in their process of social reintegration within the context of ongoing criminal justice reform. The findings revealed that

reintegration is a dynamic and deeply moral experience shaped by identity reconstruction, social stigma, and the search for personal redemption. Through a phenomenological lens, the study illuminated how freedom after imprisonment is experienced not merely as legal emancipation but as a process of reclaiming humanity and belonging. These insights fill a critical gap in previous research that often reduced reintegration to structural or behavioral outcomes, overlooking its existential and emotional dimensions. By emphasizing the subjective meaning of reintegration, the study contributes to developing more human-centered and restorative approaches in justice reform.

Building on these findings, several practical implications emerge. First, correctional institutions and community-based reintegration programs should incorporate post-release mentoring and psychosocial counseling designed to support identity reconstruction and stigma management. Second, policymakers should strengthen inter-agency coordination between justice, social welfare, and employment sectors to create structured pathways for ex-offenders to access jobs, housing, and legal aid. Third, family-inclusive rehabilitation initiatives should be institutionalized, recognizing the pivotal role of familial support in sustaining moral recovery. Additionally, public education campaigns and media narratives should be developed to challenge persistent stereotypes about former inmates, reframing reintegration as a collective social responsibility rather than an individual burden.

These recommendations translate the phenomenological insights of this study into actionable policy directions that align moral reform with institutional practice. By integrating empathy, dignity, and relational accountability into justice frameworks, criminal justice reform can move beyond symbolic restoration toward genuine social inclusion. Future studies are encouraged to evaluate the impact of these integrated interventions across different cultural and legal settings, ensuring that reintegration policies are both context-sensitive and human-centered.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the design, execution, or publication of this research. All procedures were conducted independently, and no external party influenced the study's findings or interpretations.

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