

When Freedom Is Regained: The Life Experiences Of Persons Deprived Of Liberty After Incarceration

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Abstract

The study focuses on the experiences of Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs) after regaining their freedom. The transition to life outside prison can be challenging, potentially leading to reintegration or disintegration. Researchers used transcendental phenomenology to extract vital information from 10 PDLs, identifying significant themes to better understand their situations. The idea of living outside the jail can bring mixed feelings, with excitement and hope but also uncertainty and worry. PDLs struggled to fulfill their obligations to their families and faced social disapproval and the temptation to end their lives as a form of escape. Despite these challenges, their connection and faith in God prevailed, and they realized the importance of becoming a better person for reintegration. The PDLs' vision is to provide for their families and sacrifice their own happiness for a selfless life disposition. The vision of young PDLs living a happy life with loved ones, spouses, or marriage is equally important.

Keywords: Freedom, Regained, Persons Deprived of Liberty,
Transcendental Phenomenology, Reintegration

1. Introduction

"Life is full of uncertainties," goes the adage. To live a meaningful life means living every day without the intention of harming oneself and others. According to social scientists, the fate of every living being is to adjust to the expectancies of the social world. These expectancies guiding one's behavior and actions are in the form of norms, laws, or standards of conduct or behavior. Sociologically speaking, society has norms of conduct. Against these norms, one's actions are judged or

evaluated as conforming, disobeying, or deviating. A conforming action is seen as that which is in keeping with the approved societal norms. A deviating action, on one hand, violates the prescribed standards of conduct. The Penal Reform International (2021) reported that there are 11 million people in prison globally. Approximately, there was a rise of about 8% over the last ten years. This trend resulted in prisons operating above capacity in 119 countries, including the Philippines. The rising number of prison occupants, otherwise known as Persons Deprived of Liberty (PDLs), paved the way for crafting measures not only to reduce the prison population but more so for the rehabilitation or reformation of prison inmates. Since the start of the pandemic, over a million prisoners have reportedly been released worldwide. The largest-scale releases, according to Penal Reform International, have been reported in Turkey (more than 114,000 prisoners), Iran (104,000), the Philippines (82,000), India (68,000), Iraq (62,000), and Ethiopia (40,000). France and Norway reportedly released more than 15 percent of their prison populations. Jordan released 30%. Releases also occurred in the United States, but prison populations did not decrease significantly, although COVID-19 cases were at times 5.5 times higher in prisons than in the general population. In Canada, prisoners were freed across the country during the first wave, mainly from provincial jails, including the release of 2,300 prisoners in Ontario by April 2020. In the Philippines, 81,888 inmates were released from March 17 to October 16, 2020 (Khaliq, 2020).

The Revised Penal Code of the Philippines clearly contains provisions on the different crimes or offenses with corresponding punishment. From a legal point of view, any action construed as a violation of the laws of the land is thus considered a crime. As Navarro et al. (2023) mentioned, criminal activity can be resorted to in times of strong emotions like wrath, rage, vengeance, and the like.

A person who is proven guilty of a crime automatically becomes a "person deprived of liberty." Deprivation of liberty simply means taking someone's freedom away (Montanha et al., 2022). Persons deprived of liberty are confined in a jail, whether undergoing preventive imprisonment or serving sentence by reason of a final judgement of conviction, which is not under the authority of the Bureau of Corrections (BUCOR) and the Parole and Probation Administration (PCIJ, 2021). This shows that pretrial detention and punishment are the two most common reasons for liberty deprivation (UNODC, 2019).

Regardless of the reason for incarceration, a person deprived of liberty faces many challenges, like difficulties in adjusting to prison

life, the feeling of powerlessness, and adherence to unwritten laws, among others (UN, 2022).

The length of time of incarceration depends on the corresponding penalty promulgated in a court decision. To protect the rights of the PDLs, the Asian Human Rights Commission drafted a list of prisoner's rights. This was done in consideration that while their liberty is desired somewhere, the PDLs are still citizens who are entitled to the same basic rights enjoyed by the rest of the citizenry in a free society. PDLs, therefore, have the right to be free from abuse and against deprivation of their basic needs (Cahapay, (2020).

In the Philippines, just like in other countries, the welfare of the PDLs becomes a primordial concern. The BUCOR was created as an agency under the Department of Justice that is charged with the custody and rehabilitation of national offenders (OfficialGazette, 2013). Safekeeping and instituting reformation programs for national inmates sentenced to more than three years become the main mandate of the BUCOR (BUCOR, 2019).

Accordingly, there are available outlets or measures a Person Deprived of Liberty can regain freedom. One is through probation. According to Presidential Decree No. 968 or the Probation Law of 1976, probation is a disposition under which a defendant, after conviction and sentence, is released subject to conditions imposed by the court and to the supervision of a probation officer where the sentence does not exceed an imprisonment of six years (The Lawphil Project, 2023). The second is through parole. According to the Parole and Probation Administration, parole is the conditional release of a prisoner from the correctional institution after serving the minimum period of the prison sentence. Thirdly is through complete service of sentence.

Just recently, President Marcos ordered the DOJ to release PDLs who are qualified for parole to ease up the country's correctional facilities (Flores, 2023). The Department of the Interior and Local Government Secretary Benjamin "Benhur" Abalos Jr. announced the release of more than 103,000 PDLs in 2022. (DILG, 2022). In the same manner, at least 28 persons were released from detention in Leyte in time for the 2023 New Year celebration. According to Lt. Col. Joselito Villas, the provincial Jail Warden, those released passed the criteria as reviewed by the Leyte management, screening, and evaluation committee (Meniano, 2022).

Life inside the jail is much different from life outside. Countless possibilities can happen in the life of a former PDL. In the encounter of one of the researchers with a former PDL before this study, he

revealed that "staying inside is a better option than going back to my family." He mentioned that he no longer feels that his family wants him. His wife had another family, so he had no choice but to accept that he had to live a life separate from them. He further said that people outside the prison have become judgmental. "The prison is my home; I feel safe here. They looked at us as criminals. Life inside the prison is better." As cited in the article of Cabusao (2022), such is also true for the experience of "Pamela" that her release brought her anxiety. "My first thought was, where will I go? What will happen to me? Jail turned out to be a secure environment for me. There were rules, routines, and it was a safe place that allowed me to thrive; I did not have to hide who I was and what I had done to be accepted and cared for. I came to expect to be here for the long term," she said. To her, the prison is the safest place she can ever have. On the contrary, some claim that there is no place like home. To them, life inside the jail or prison is full of misery.

Given the above discussions, the researchers became interested in conducting a qualitative study on "The Life Experiences of the Persons Deprived of Liberty after Incarceration." The result of this study can be used as a basis for advancing plausible recommendations by concerned agencies in strengthening existing assistance programs for PDLs to become worthwhile or productive members of society. It can be used as input to improve existing rehabilitation programs in the psycho-spiritual preparation for the eventual release of PDLs. Similarly, findings can also be used by the DSWD to include in their clientele system released PDL as beneficiaries of their programs and services. Finally, the results can also be used by the UNP extension office in strategic ways to uplift the socio-economic condition of the PDLs and, at the same time, educate the men and women in the community in matters relating to the importance of developing sound moral judgment which is vital to a peaceful and happy life.

Research Objectives

The researchers had acquaintances who happened to be released PDLs. One claimed he was just a victim of circumstances, while the other admitted guilt. Both revealed turning points in their lives, the hardships, the sleepless nights, and the mental turmoil they experienced inside and outside of prison. The researchers wanted to explore the experiences of released PDLs in terms of their thoughts and feelings about their struggle to reintegration into their families and the community.

Literature Review

The researchers reviewed related literature in their desire for better direction in the process of conducting this investigation.

According to a recent study that attempted to explore the lived experiences of former PDLs, it was discovered that their reintegration after their incarceration is a process. It showed, among others, that the most common lived experiences of the participants were expressed through feelings of anxiety, sensitivity, trust issue, seeking fair treatment, job opportunity, and their life learnings (Reamico, 2022).

The above findings highlight a former PDL's struggle after incarceration. The feelings of anxiety and sensitivity are the natural emotional by-products of the perception of uncertainty. This can be so because once released; the former PDL has to go through life assuming all the responsibilities for himself and his loved ones. Added to this is the additional challenge of regaining the trust of others. Seeking fair treatment, to be treated with dignity, also becomes a difficult struggle. Still another is financial security. As Ahmed & Lang (2017) claimed, the lack of employment opportunities is the biggest problem among ex-PDLs. Leaving jail has proven more challenging because PDLs remain prisoners of the social stigma that stops them from living everyday life.

Universally defined, a stigma is a set of negative and unfair beliefs that a society or group of people have about something (Alvarado Parkway Institute, 2020).

According to Erving Goffman, a Canadian sociologist, stigma describes the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance (Fitzpatrick, 2008). Erving theory of social stigma explains how an individual who is stigmatized receives undesirable or unfavorable treatment from others.

In the same direction, in his labelling theory, Becker asserted that in certain acts labelled as crimes, majority create the perception that criminals are forever deviant. The negative effect of labelling on the released PDL makes reintegration somewhat difficult. Negative labels can adversely affect the PDL's mental attitude, which can influence his quality of life after incarceration (Skaggs, 2016).

In the experience of Francisco Santiago Jr., as featured on the news, who was known as the Philippine Drug War's Lazarus, the tricycle driver detained in Manila on Sept 13, 2016, and released later disclosed that finding a job is hard. This shows that former PDL like Santiago suffered discrimination (Regencia, 2016).

Pino et al. (2021), in their study on Life after Prison, wanted to describe the significant life experiences of former PDLs after being released from prison. The experience of happiness after being reunited with their families was noted. Going back as a member of the community, however, was quite challenging for them. The participants reported feelings of not being entirely accepted or trusted in the community where they reside, with the exemption of their family.

It becomes evident that the community has trust issues relating to a former PDL. The only entity that can give full acceptance and understanding is the family of the PDL.

From the foregoing, the researchers can postulate that while released PDLs suffer from societal discrimination, there is still hope for their full reintegration.

2. Methodology

The life experiences of PDLs after incarceration were investigated in this study using a qualitative-descriptive phenomenological research design. As cited by Gorospe (2018), phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience. Due to the fact that it revealed the PDLs' personal experiences, this design is the most suitable for the investigation. In this setting, the phenomenological approach's goal is to shed light on the particulars and uncover phenomena from the perspective of the research's main informants (Alipoyo, 2022). Transcendental phenomenology is a sort of qualitative research that enables the researcher to concentrate on participants' real experiences, as stated by Neubauer (2018) and described by Moustakas (1994).

The participants in this study were ten former persons deprived of liberty or PDLs. They were selected based on the number of years they were released from jail or prison within five years up to the time of the study. Incidentally, it was later discovered by the researchers that 7 participants were released for having completed their sentence, two on probation and one on parole.

This study employed the purposive sampling technique. As used by Agup and Agup (2021), Purposive sampling is a widely-used technique in qualitative research for identifying and selecting information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources. It involves identifying and selecting individuals especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon (Cresswell & Clark, 2011).

In order to gather the needed data, this study made use of the interview method. An interview is a qualitative research method that

asks questions to collect research data. Interviews usually involve two or more people, one of whom is the interviewer asking a series of questions, and the other is the interviewee who supplies or provides answers to the questions raised or asked.

In this study, the researchers took turns in interviewing the participants. An interview guide was used, and probing questions were also asked to validate and dig deeper into the unique or lived experiences of the participants.

In gathering the data needed, the researchers first asked or requested permission from the Office of the Provincial Governor for the conduct of the study with the participation of 10 former PDLs. The researchers were later referred to the office of the Provincial Warden of Ilocos Sur Provincial Jail as the latter has the records of released PDLs in the province of Ilocos Sur. Thus, a list of former PDLs was provided to the researchers.

Upon approval of the request, the researchers correspondingly informed the University President's office and requested permission to collect or gather data. When permission was granted, the researchers decided on purpose to consider released PDLs in nearby places like Vigan City and Sto. Domingo. Guided by the list provided by the Office of the Provincial Jail Warden, the researchers on foot visited the prospective participants in their homes after a courtesy call at the office of the Punong Barangay. The researchers were delighted that they did not encounter any difficulty in getting the consent of the participants. After the objectives or purpose of the study were explained, they gladly and willingly responded to all the questions in the interview.

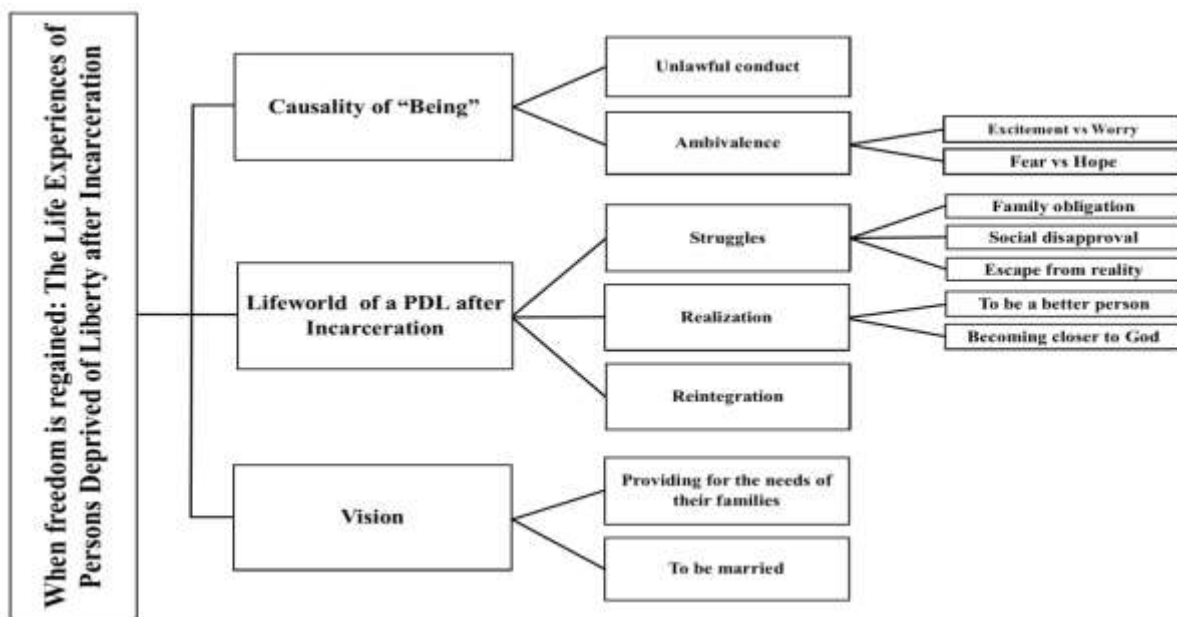
In order for the researchers to acquire a thorough and factual understanding of the expressed lived experiences of the participants, they went through an objective and careful analysis of the data. The researchers, aware of the possible bias in the interpretation of data, did all they could to prevent their personal biases, prejudice, or preconceived notions from coming in the way by strictly following the data analysis framework espoused by Moustakas (1994). Firstly, in horizontalization, significant statements were made parallel to each other, while at the same time, overlapping or repetitive statements were removed. Second was clustering the horizons whereby significant themes were identified. Writing the textural description came third. Here, the researchers used the verbatim excerpts to describe the participants' experiences. Fourth was writing the structural description. The Fifth was finding the essence. The researchers made a descriptive passage that focused on the common

experiences of the participants. A blending of the textural and the structural description was made.

This study was reviewed and approved by the University of Northern Philippines Ethics Review Committee. Ethical principles observed in the study include the conflict of interest, principle of informed consent, principle of privacy and confidentiality, principle of vulnerability, recruitment, benefits, compensation, and community considerations.

3. Results and Discussions

Concept Map



In this study, where former PDLs were the primary sources of data, the researchers, after having completed data collection through in-depth interviews, made use of the thematic method of analysis which resulted in the identification of the three significant themes together with their sub-themes that emerged from the experiences of the PDLs which include the following: (1) causality of “being”—unlawful conduct, ambivalence —excitement vs worry, fear vs hope; (2) lifeworld of a PDL after incarceration —struggles —family obligation, social disapproval, escape from reality; realization —to be a better person, becoming closer to God; reintegration; (3) vision —providing for the needs of their families, to be married.

Theme 1. Causality of “Being”

The released PDLs expressed their thoughts and feelings about the reasons for their incarceration. They also articulated their emotional experiences after knowing of their long-awaited freedom or release from jail.

Subtheme 1. Unlawful conduct. It refers to an action that grossly violates the laws on appropriate or legally accepted conduct or behavior based on the provision of the Philippine Constitution. Such acts have corresponding punishment or penalties as provided for by the Revised Penal Code of the Philippines and other special laws of the land.

In an interview with the participants, the researchers discovered that three of them were convicted of murder, 3 in violation of RA 9165, and four were sentenced due to rape. As the interview progressed, the participants disclosed the difficulty or hardship they experienced. Participant 9 stressed, "For the time I set foot in jail, I felt life was hell. I wanted to die. There was no more reason for me to live. I was in total disbelief that I can no longer do what I used to do." Participant 8 also expressed that he almost lost his sanity and that what he did was pray. Looking through the facial expressions of the other participants during the interview, the researchers felt the pain the participants went through emotionally. These revelations support the findings in the study conducted by Barolo & Vicente (2019), where the participants disclosed that they had trouble inside the prison, which included difficulties in adjusting to prison life, the feeling of powerlessness, adherence to unwritten laws, bearing the pain for the sake of the family, staying out of trouble, exploitation of the weak, and they feel that they are the forgotten victims. These difficulties led to the thought of self-destruction in the participants.

Subtheme 2. Ambivalence. It refers to the mixed feelings and reactions of the participants when they came to know about their eventual release from jail or prison. The responses of the participants at the time of the interview revealed a common frame of reference. All of them had ambivalent feelings. Positive feelings that were first experienced were eventually clouded by negative ones.

There is a saying that difficult or hard times are never permanent; challenges and trials of life while they have become inevitable, life also presents a lot of surprises, so to speak; while there are times of suffering due to misconduct, with perseverance and determination to change for the better, the course of life may change. Such has become the fate or case of the 10 participants of this study. Due to some reason or other, they were eventually released from prison. The

long-awaited freedom, however, brought the participants to ambivalent thoughts and feelings.

Subtheme 2.1. Excitement vs. worry. This ambivalent emotional reaction to participants' knowledge of their eventual freedom made them pause to examine their feelings during those times. Initially, all of them became excited. "Who is not excited to be reunited with a family you had been away from for several years?" said one participant. "However, my excitement suddenly disappeared when I thought of how others would react towards me," he continued.

Going beyond the verbal articulations of the participants, there was indeed a moment especially seeming indecision or ambivalent reactions of the participants. Below is a narrative of their mixed emotional expressions:

"When my case was heard and when I came to know that I will soon be released, I was extremely happy for I will already be with my family. After a few moments, I suddenly became worried. What kind of life awaits me outside jail or prison?"

"There was an overwhelming happiness that I could not explain. It feels like all thoughts of sadness suddenly disappeared. After quite some time, I was suddenly worried about what would happen to me outside? "

"There was extreme happiness and feeling of gratitude to the Supreme Being yet there was also a feeling that was very negative. I worried. Questions like, will my family and relatives accept me?"

"I was so happy. I jumped for joy. I was teary-eyed. Deep inside I told myself thank God I can already leave this place. This feeling was afterwards seconded by negative thoughts and I worried about whether or not I can go through with life after my release from jail. "

From the foregoing mixed emotional responses of the participants, a question on why an individual still worries about his freedom which was taken away from him for so long a time? Ideally, a PDL would be very happy without being taken aback by negative thoughts or feelings with the information of his eventual release from jail or prison.

The negative feeling felt by the participants in this study could be understood from the perspective of the theory on Social Stigma, which explains any others that once a "criminal will always be a criminal." From this viewpoint, released PDL suffers the stigma of being negatively judged. The participants, probably because of this

awareness of the tendency of most people to discriminate as well as prejudicial attitude, become worried. Too much worrying made the participants experience psychological distress. As asserted by Bautista et al. (2020), psychological distress is a form of mental uneasiness. It is an antecedent of multiple effects –personal, psychological, or behavioral disturbances.

These feelings were due to their perception of life's uncertainties outside prison. They were not sure about how they will be able to go through with life. They have no source of income either. A question like, “how will I go back to my family?” become a prominent thought. One participant even revealed that because of the enormous expenses pertinent to court hearings and the like, almost all of their properties were sold. As he said, “Life is hard; I want to start anew but how? I am even sick now. How can I look for a living?”

The revelation of feelings of the participants is indicative of more or less normal emotional states, considering that one of the essential natures of human beings is the capacity to feel both positive and negative emotions simultaneously.

Subtheme 2.2. Fear vs. Hope. In consideration of mixed emotional reactions, the participants also claimed to have experienced fear and hope at the same time. Fear is a feeling that is produced when an individual feels some uncertainty in situations he has to face. Former PDLs feared that others in the community, particularly those who knew them, might not accord them the usual respect they used to get before they were incarcerated. The thought of being judged made them fearful. Participant 7 disclosed being discriminated against. He learned about this through a friend who visited him before his release from jail. His friends before his incarceration were no longer his friends on Facebook. Some blocked him, and some unfriended him. Knowing all of these, however, did not deter the participant’s hope of a better life outside jail. Participant 4 even mentioned,

“I know people will judge me, I accept I was afraid of social rejection. I used to be with others, enjoying the company of my friends to the fullest before my incarceration. I have anticipated to be discriminated upon my release. It happened. I was so afraid of rejection. But this is my life now. I have to make a choice and that is to hope for the best. It doesn’t matter if people will not accept me. I have to stand firm because of my family especially mother. There is hope for a better life outside prison.”

As featured by Collier, L. (2016) in her article "Growth after trauma," post-traumatic growth (PTG) explains this kind of transformation following trauma and holds that people who endure psychological struggle following adversity can often see positive growth afterward where people develop new understandings of themselves, the world they live in, how to relate to other people, the kind of future they might have and a better understanding of how to live life.

Further analysis of the participants' responses seemed to explain that though negative emotions like sadness and fear were compelling, positive emotions took one leap forward by making them more concerned with thoughts of being reunited with their families. They struggled to overcome social ostracism, rejection, and discrimination by spending more time at home. As disclosed by one participant, "after I was released, I spent two weeks at home without going out. I was afraid to be judged. Gradually however, I got the confidence to go out in the neighborhood. It was indeed a journey of finding my self-worth after incarceration. I had no choice but to grapple with life."

The above observations validate that no matter how complex the situation is, there is always hope for a better tomorrow. Today one sheds tears. Tomorrow might be full of laughter. Indeed in the case of the research participants, although difficult, they tried each day to live "as normal beings" with their respective families. Going back to live with their loved ones gives them so much joy. However, this conflicts with the expressed feelings of one PDL one of the researchers happened to interact with while they had an educational tour at the NBP. The researcher recounted that the PDL, who was one of the facilitators in the welcome program of the NBP to the students and faculty for their educational tour, mentioned, "I am happy here, I have no more family to return to. The New Bilibid Prison has become my family. Here, I am accepted. I am treated with respect. I even feel happier here than when I was outside. This is now my home. "

It is also worth mentioning that one participant was released from jail through probation. He said he had no other way if he wanted to go back to his family. "I was forced beyond freewill to accept the crime I was accused of as that was the only way I can go home sooner. My family wanted to fight for my case in court because they know I was innocent. How can a homebody like me with no cellphone be involved into drugs? I was a victim. I nearly lost my sanity that I even wanted to end my life." Because of probation, I was released from jail after two years. I was extremely fearful that I would become a victim of injustice again. I cannot go out without my wife or any family

member. Thank God I am happier now. I still have an intense fear that I cannot go back to the place I was falsely apprehended, but I have high hopes that those behind my incarceration will also have their time of reflection/realization.

These expressions of feelings revealed by the participants are in keeping with the Broaden and Build Theory. According to this theory, positive emotions can have the effect of broadening awareness and response to events as well as building resiliency and coping skills. It helps to explain how we can move away from a survival mode of responding to situations into a more expansive and thoughtful approach to life (Cuncic, 2021).

Theme 2. Lifeworld of a PDL after incarceration

The lifeworld of a PDL after incarceration speaks about their lived experiences—the struggles they had to go through in their reintegration process.

Subtheme 2.1. Struggles. Struggles refer to efforts or actions to enable an individual to adjust to a perceived situational difficulty. The participants in this study, being former PDL, admitted that they went through a process of adjustment after they were released. They affirmed that there seemed to be difficulty reintegrating themselves into the family and community, mainly so that upon their return, they have to be engaged in productive activities to survive.

Subtheme 2.1.1. Family obligation. Family obligation refers to a set of duties that should be discharged by released PDLs, particularly the father, grandfather, or son, to provide for the family's physical, emotional, moral, and spiritual needs. According to Participant 3, the most significant challenge he has to face is how he can provide for his wife's and children's financial needs. He stressed,

“It is so difficult to be an ex-convict. It is even harder to find a job. That is why I am doing everything to earn a living by selling barbeque in the afternoon.”

In like manner, Participant 1 revealed that from the time he was released, all his time was spent looking for ways to help earn for the family's daily living needs through gourd hat making. Similarly, Participant 8 said, “I did a lot of things. I worked hard in the fields and did household activities like cleaning the surroundings. I accepted agricultural lands from my mother and from other people so I had relatively vast agricultural lands to cultivate just so I can provide for my family.”

Alongside with financial obligation of the PDL for them to provide emotional, moral, and spiritual support to their family, most especially to their children, Participant 3 stressed,

“I made it a point to share very honestly my experiences to my family with an intention of making myself their mirror for them not to follow my footsteps.”

Also, Participant 4 exclaimed, “While at home I did the best I can so my family can truly or fully accept me. I became as humble as possible and did everything my family requested from me.”

Subtheme 2.1.2. Social Disapproval. Social disapproval refers to a feeling of not being accepted due to negative evaluation or judgment from others. The study participants collectively expressed that when they were released from jail, they noticed a change in how others in the neighborhood treated them. They, however, reported that their respective families did not change. They even felt closer family relationships after their incarceration. While they found full acceptance from their families’ feelings of not being totally accepted by the community prevailed. As stated earlier by Participant 3, it took him weeks before he got the confidence to mingle with others in the community. Indeed for a released PDL, his community well-being, as described by Purisima et al. (2023), is a concept that refers to an optimal quality of healthy community life.

Regardless of intensity resides in every individual, the motivation to surpass or rise above a crisis or emotionally draining situation. Human beings have the inherent ability to become resilient no matter what.

Subtheme 2.1.3. Escape from reality. Escape from reality denotes desperate attempts of the person to run away or escape from a perceived crisis by committing suicide. This is the situation common to three of the research participants. Being a PDL has been very difficult for all of them. They all experienced excruciating emotional pain or distress, and three attempted to kill themselves.

As Participant 7 said, “It was the end of the world for me. I wanted to die by hanging myself.”

Participant 8 also expressed, “What is the use of living if I have to be in jail all my life.”

These statements made by two of the released PDLs concretely illustrate how desperate they had been, “Life has no meaning,” added Participant 8. While Participant 7 said, “to die is better than to be accused of a crime I am not guilty of.”

Apparently, the expressions made by the participants seemed to indicate admission and non-admission of guilt. The two who attempted to kill themselves did not in any way express that they were guilty of the crime they were incarcerated for. The other one, throughout the interview, was consistent in saying he was not guilty. He was falsely accused. In his words, "There was no more hope for me."

The above presentation of interview data boldly explains the difficult struggle for a person deprived of liberty. While it is true they were already out of jail; they suffer the stigma of being a "criminal." There seems to be an influence of the social stigma "once a criminal will always be a criminal."

Subtheme 2.2. Realization. Realization results when an individual who went through a difficult event in his life acquires objective or factual mental representations of reality, enabling him to learn lessons instrumental to his becoming a better version of himself and ultimately living a meaningful life.

The PDLs were found to have realized two important things in life: to become a better person and develop a closer relationship with God. This runs parallel to what Tamayo & Rodillas (2023) had discovered as the result of the trauma experienced by COVID-19 survivors, where they claimed to have become more prayerful, thus, developing a closer relationship with God.

Subtheme 2.2.1. To be a better person. With an in-depth contemplation of what life was like in jail or prison, the participants all mentioned in the course of the interview that they were able to realize many things in life. They all revealed a difficult transition from being totally free, where they could do everything they wanted to do, to an absolute loss of freedom. They disclosed further that "when they were put behind bars, they were less of a human being, that there is no more hope for them to be back to normal. Their release from jail made them learn a very important life lesson. To live a meaningful life entails many obligations and reasonable self-control and discipline," says the youngest participant. "We need to be very careful with our actions to avoid offending others. Never in my wildest dream to go back in jail," said another participant. "When I left prison, I couldn't stop thanking God for a second chance. I need to resolve not to go back to my usual self. I want to become a role model to my family, who suffered so much emotionally because of my misconduct," another participant shared.

A closer look at the participants' responses, the researchers concluded that all the participants had forced upon themselves to live

a new life. A renewed life to all of them is a life where one can be at peace with oneself as well as others. "When I was out of jail, though I had still some doubts on whether or not other could accept me, I told myself, once I stepped out of this place, I will never come back. I will always remind myself to have discipline and a sense of control."

Further scrutiny on how the participants responded to things they realized in life, the researchers were moved or taken aback by what one participant had expressed. It is noteworthy that throughout the interview, this participant stood firm in his declaration that he was not guilty of the crime he was accused of, "I was a victim of circumstances; I was forced to plead guilty," he expressed. "Nevertheless, thanks for the lesson I learned, karma is real. I know someday the people behind my suffering in jail will experience the same in the future", he expounded. This participant also disclosed that he has become extra careful in all his undertakings and in how he treats his family and others so as not to be falsely accused again in the future.

The foregoing seems to validate the findings of Barolo & Vicente (n.d.) that the PDLs decided to become submissive, accept the consequences of their actions, keep themselves busy, and continue participating in religious activities as a way to deal with the prison atmosphere. Challenges can also lead to self-reflection and self-renewal, faith in God, seeing prison as a safe haven, and having an optimistic outlook on life.

Overall, the participants lacking experiences indicate that the drive to a better "self" is sometimes facilitated by unfavorable experiences. The desire to actualize oneself seems innate in most, if not all, human beings. Truly, the drive for self-actualization is the most challenging task for everyone. In Maslow's words from the hierarchy of needs, self-actualization represents the highest-order motivations, which drive us to realize our true potential and achieve our "ideal self" (Komninos, 2021).

Subtheme 2.2.2 Becoming Closer to God. Becoming closer to God is an attitude which refers to a tendency wherein the PDL's faith in a supreme being becomes the sole source of upliftment or spiritual empowerment. In difficult times "praying to God" became their number one source of strength.

In this study, the researchers discovered that the participants noticed instances wherein their families became more prayerful. As Participant 4 said, "Upon my release from jail, I noticed that my father and grandmother always go to church. They were thankful to the Lord for my release and, at the same time, continued praying for the

welfare of everybody in our family. Participant 8, on the other hand, also said, "While I was in jail, I prayed every day. When I was released, the more I pray. I pray not only for myself but for the entire family. I always ask God to guide me and help me overcome evil. More specifically, I ask God every day to always be with me wherever I go."

The confessions of the participants indicated that "belief in divine intervention" is the ultimate source of comfort for individuals in difficult circumstances. Such holds true with what Participant 8 said, "I did not pray this hard before. Only when I was jailed and after my release did I learn to seek God's help and protection." In another revelation by Participant 7, "Life for a PDL like me is difficult to survive. I learned not to trust myself or anybody for my protection. There is only one who can really protect me. From the time I moved out of prison, I looked up with tears in my eyes and said, 'Thank you'. God has never forsaken me."

Subtheme 2.3. Reintegration. Reintegration refers to the process whereby an individual like the PDL can return to the normal way of life outside prison. Essentially it is going back to the family and the community without experiencing a pinch of discrimination or disapproval. In its fullest sense, it means living life normally as if nothing happens in the past.

As discussed previously, the release of the participants from jail created ambivalent or mixed emotions. The challenge of reintegration for a released PDL is indeed great. While their freedom made them happy, they were also worried at the same time because of feelings of uncertainty, but because "life must go on" though difficult, they all resolved to think in the end that there is life after incarceration. They tried so hard to overcome feelings of rejection as well as being judged by developing or shifting to a positive mindset. The support of their respective families added to their coping in reintegrating themselves, most significantly into the community. While they felt discriminated against by others, the love they felt from their families dominated as their source of inspiration. Turning to God also enabled them to develop a stronger character. It is worth mentioning that all of them eventually were able to go out and mingle with others in their respective places of origin. More importantly, all of them except one who is suffering from a stroke are engaged in income-generating activities.

The following is a narrative of the declarations of the participants:

Participant 1: "From the time I was released, we live each day as if it would be my last on earth with my family."

Participant 2: "I could feel the sincerity of other people treating me right. Thanks God people are nice to me."

Participant 3: "From the time I was at home, I noticed the extraordinary joy and vitality in my mother."

Participant 4: "My father and grandmother became very prayerful. They always go to church to pray for me so I can start anew."

Participant 5: "My old friends showed their sincerest gesture of acceptance. I felt I was not judged."

Participant 6: "I was happy that I was given the chance to go back to work as a carpenter and that I do not notice any discrimination from my companions at work."

Participant 7: "Though I still felt at times some elements of discrimination, I just tell myself to ignore and move on with my life."

Participant 8: "My live-in partner did not leave me."

Participant 9: "While at times I still have doubts, I can immediately regain my self-confidence because of the way my wife and children treat me."

Participant 10: "I was so happy with the way my family and others treat me. This is because they knew I was innocent."

The account presented seems to be in keeping with the findings of Reamico (2022) that having the feeling of acceptance from the community, mind-shifting, support from the family members, and being hopeful of positive eventualities were very important coping mechanisms in the reintegration process of any former PDL, for them to gain back and boost their self-confidence and live a normal life.

Evidently, while the reintegration process was affected by the participants' uncertainty about social approval, it is interesting to note that one of them had a different experience. His release from jail brought joy to others who knew him because he was innocent. Thus, he seemed not to have experienced much hardship adjusting to life outside prison.

Theme 3. Vision

According to social scientists, the development of an individual in social, spiritual, and mental is, in a way or in part, a function of one's experiences in the environment. "Experience as most people say is the greatest teacher." However, without reflection or realization, it does not always result in learning or self-enhancement. In the case of the participants in this study, their valuable realizations in life led them to a life's vision.

Vision refers to what a person would like to see himself in the future in terms of the quality of life as well as his intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. According to the participants, as they revealed in the interview, their experiences in jail gave them a lot of lessons in life. They all claimed to have the internal motivation for a renewed life. Participant 2 said, "If I would be lucky enough, I want to be a renewed person." Also, Participant 3 exclaimed, "To me, I have high hope for the future for I know I can be a better or renewed person for the sake of my family."

It is interesting to note that Participant 7 has discovered the true meaning of life. He shared the following context of his conversation with a priest friend, "Outside jail there will always be people who will hate you particularly those whom you might have hurt intentionally or unintentionally. Some people may even judge you. They will even discriminate you. Worse they will not trust you. But look can you control them? Can you tell them, wait this is me, I am a better person now? You cannot do that. There is only one who understands you, who loves you unconditionally. He is looking at you right now. He is your God and my God. Rise above; remember your mother, your family and you. From now on make God the center of your life." Gradually, he was able to recover, and as of the time of the interview, he was a picture of a man with high hopes for the future.

Clearly enough, there is life after incarceration. By the same token, as shared by Participant 8, "From this time I was released from jail, I became prayerful. I always thank God every day and always ask Him to protect me and my family so we can have a brighter future. I look at the future positively, that is why I always remind myself to have self-control. My goal is to have a peaceful life, a life full of meaning and with contentment."

Interestingly, all the other participants share the same dream of having a peaceful life in the future. The following are accounts of their revelations during the interview:

Participant 5: "I want to see a peaceful life in my future."

Participant 7: "I see life to be a happy one. I project myself to be a happy person, neither materialistic nor aiming for any luxury in life, to be able to eat, 3-square meals a day and have peace of mind would be enough for me."

Participant 9: "The only thing I wish is to have peace of mind so I can concentrate to work for my family so I can help my wife to support the education of my children."

Subtheme 3.1. Providing for the needs of their families. Providing for the family emerged to be one of the major aspirations of the participant. They all expressed their motivation towards the selfless act of love and said that their welfare becomes their second priority. They don't care about their own needs because their everyday life is already spent serving and working hard for their families.

According to Participant 8: "To provide for the welfare of my family, my children and my grandchildren is all that matters to me. To the best I can I will work hard for me to give them what they need so they will be happy."

Similarly, Participant 1: "I could not see myself in the future anymore especially so that I am already old. My only concern in the future is my family, the welfare of my children and grandchildren."

The above utterances of the participants are clear manifestations that no matter how far an individual may go or to whatever extent one might have been into, "family is and will always be a family." Indeed, the saying "charity begins at home" is exemplified in the future aspirations of the participants.

The exceptional desire and concern of the participants in providing for the families could be better explained by some biblical passages, especially from 1 Timothy 5:8, that providing and caring for the family becomes the ultimate expression of faith in God. As previously stated, the participants who have become more prayerful and have developed a closer relationship with God, thus, have a common aspiration of making their families a priority.

In their quest for an in-depth understanding of the situations of released PDLs in this area, the researchers gathered related literature, particularly on the testimonies of former PDLs. In one episode of ToniTalks (How Pastor Danny Found the true meaning of a Father's Love, January 1, 2023), a former PDL turned pastor made a shocking revelation about how he was transformed into a loving father and good provider. In an interview with Toni, Pastor Danny narrated his struggle inside and outside prison. It was only when he became closer to God that he transformed into a better person. At the time of the interview, Pastor Dany disclosed that he had built a closer relationship with his wife and children after his renewed relationship with God.

Subtheme 3.2. To be married. The desire to be married and build a happy family in the future was clearly expressed by two of the participants in this study. This revelation reminded the researchers about the stages of psychosocial development proposed by Erik Erickson. According to Erikson, one crisis an individual passes through

during the early adult years is building intimacy. Intimacy is the ability to be able to open up romantically and emotionally to those closest to the individual (Slifer, 2022). Similarly, Intimacy is a feeling of closeness and connection in an interpersonal relationship. It is an essential part of intimate relationships, but it also plays an important role in other relationships with friends, family members, and other acquaintances (Loggins, 2022).

However, getting married is not the ultimate expression of intimacy. Interestingly, this has become one of the ultimate dreams of the participants who were not yet married at the time of the interview. At the time of the interview, one participant claimed he wanted to be married to his live-in partner. "I want to build a happy family of my own," he said. "Once I have enough savings, I would propose for our church wedding with my girlfriend," he continued. Truly, developing romantic relationships is vital to an individual's well-being. Navarro et al. (2020) cited that romantic relationships may impact key developmental tasks such as family relationship transformation, close relationships with others, and career planning.

The above clearly shows that "marriage" does not exempt anyone; the right to marry is for everybody regardless of status as well as background.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

A person becomes deprived of his liberty on the ground of unlawful conduct. Eventually, liberty is regained when the corresponding penalty is completed, or any legal reason for that matter. The thought of living outside jail or prison, however, can bring ambivalent or mixed feelings to a PDL. While there is excitement and hope for another life outside prison, worry and fear can come about because of perceived uncertainties. The PDL's life after incarceration is not easy. They had to struggle to fulfill their obligation to their family while battling some impediments, from social disapproval to the tendency to end one's life as a form of escape. Their relationship and belief in God, however, dominated over all the negativities they encountered. They finally realized that towards their reintegration, they need to become a better person. The valuable component of PDL's vision is to provide for their respective families. Aspiring for a selfless life disposition, they are willing to sacrifice their personal happiness. Of equal importance as well is the vision of young PDLs for a happy life with a loved one or a spouse or to be married someday.

Concerned government and non-government agencies may consider providing development-oriented activities like mental health awareness, self-enhancement, and resiliency to PDLs to support their

psychosocial adjustment toward effective reintegration. Whenever or wherever possible, released PDL should be given assistance in the area of economic productivity. TESDA, for instance, can be tapped to provide released PDL with livelihood skills for them to realize their dream of becoming gainfully employed for the sake of their families. In like manner, concerned agencies like the University of Northern Philippines (UNP) can design an extension program or activities for the benefit of released PDLs. The Department of Social Welfare and Development, an arm of the government in providing services to vulnerable groups and individuals for their empowerment, can consider making the released PDLs one of their clientele groups. If so, activities like family development sessions and life-skills training will be provided to sustain the PDLs' motivation and desire towards self-direction and a sense of positive disposition. A follow-up study emphasizing the emotional well-being of released PDLs can be undertaken as an offshoot of this investigation.

Study limitations

While the researchers are convinced as to the importance of their research findings to add up to the literature that would lead to a better understanding of released PDLs' situations, they took notice of several limitations in the overall generalization. One important consideration would have been an in-depth analysis of the participants' emotional and mental well-being.

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