



Effectiveness of Discipleship in Building Self-Concept of Ex-Convicts

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Abstract

Ex-convicts in Indonesia faced significant social stigmatization that hindered their reintegration into society and negatively impacted their self-concept. This study examined the effectiveness of Christian discipleship programs in developing positive self-concept among ex-convicts. The research was conducted at GKIN "Pemberita Damai" Semarang, where a structured discipleship program operated weekly from January to November 2024. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed, utilizing unstructured interviews, in-depth interviews, and observation. Six participants were purposively selected, including one pastor, two church council members, and three ex-convicts who had participated in the discipleship program. Data were analyzed using the Miles and Huberman model. The study found that spiritual mentorship through discipleship effectively addressed the identity reconstruction needs of ex-convicts by providing both spiritual foundations and a supportive community. Participants demonstrated improved self-perception, increased social confidence, and enhanced coping mechanisms. The integration of spiritual approaches with psychological rehabilitation offered a comprehensive framework for ex-convicts' reintegration. This research contributed to the development of more effective rehabilitation models that incorporate spiritual dimensions alongside traditional psychological approaches.

Keywords: discipleship, ex-convicts, self-concept, spiritual formation, stigmatization

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Introduction

Ex-convicts in Indonesia often encounter intense social stigma that significantly hinders their reintegration and adaptation into society. This stigma manifests in rejection, social isolation, and difficulty in securing decent employment. Such conditions create psychological pressure that disrupts the formation of a positive self-concept among ex-convicts (Nurkhalisah, 2019). As shown in various studies on the deradicalization of terrorism convicts, negative public perceptions continue to lead to rejection even after these individuals return to society (Indrawan & Aji, 2019). This phenomenon highlights the urgent need for a comprehensive approach—one that not only emphasizes the development of technical skills but also prioritizes the improvement of the psychological and spiritual well-being of ex-convicts.

The social stigma attached to the label “ex-convicts” often leads to the internalization of a negative identity, which significantly impacts one’s self-concept. Studies on how ex-convicts manage communication in response to social stigma reveal that they must develop specific communication strategies to navigate rejection and rebuild a positive self-image (Nurkhalisah, 2019). This challenge is further complicated by public policies and societal perceptions that do not always support the reintegration of ex-convicts. This issue is evident in research on the public's perspective and the Supreme Court's authority regarding the judicial review of regulations banning ex-corruption convicts from running for legislative office (Yakub & Khasanofa, 2019).

Self-concept is a fundamental aspect that shapes individual behavior, social interactions, and the ability to adapt within society (Rasyida et al., 2023). For ex-convicts, developing a positive self-concept is particularly crucial in preventing recidivism and enabling successful social reintegration (Subroto & Mukhlish, 2025). Self-concept is a complex psychological construct that refers to a person’s perceptions, beliefs, and evaluations of themselves (Dewi, 2021). For ex-convicts, this self-concept is often significantly disrupted by the experience of incarceration and the weight of social stigma. Research on identity reconstruction among ex-sex workers highlights that rebuilding one’s sense of self involves a complex psychological process that requires consistent social support (Puteri, 2016). Similarly, ex-convicts face comparable challenges in reestablishing a positive self-image upon release from correctional facilities. Previous studies have shown that rehabilitation and reintegration programs can positively

contribute to the self-concept development of ex-commercial sex workers (Ramadhan, 2019). These findings suggest the potential of similar interventions—particularly those grounded in spiritual formation, such as discipleship programs—as effective approaches for supporting the psychological recovery and identity reconstruction of ex-convicts.

Discipleship, as a spiritually based rehabilitative approach, offers a unique dimension in shaping self-concept. The discipleship process involves the introduction of spiritual values, character formation, and the development of a supportive community—all of which facilitate identity transformation and psychological recovery (Darmawan, 2019; Rugebregt, 2024). The effectiveness of Christ-centered discipleship has been widely acknowledged for its positive impact across various community contexts (Darmawan et al., 2024; Luhur, 2019).

Although several studies have examined deradicalization and rehabilitation programs for convicts in Indonesia, a significant gap remains in the literature regarding the specific role of spiritual approaches—particularly Christian discipleship—in the development of self-concept among ex-convicts. The deradicalization programs implemented by the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) since 2012 have encountered numerous challenges, including limited budgets, inadequate prison facilities, and the lack of comprehensive deradicalization materials for convicts (Indrawan & Aji, 2019). However, these programs have yet to thoroughly explore the role of spirituality and discipleship in the broader context of rebuilding the self-concept of ex-convicts in general.

The convicts' assimilation policy implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the early release of thousands of convicts from correctional institutions (*Lapas*) and detention centres (*Rutan*) across Indonesia (Marthaningtyas & Hidayatullah, 2022). This phenomenon underscores the urgent need for research on effective mechanisms to support the reintegration of ex-convicts into society. While studies on the communication strategies used by ex-convicts to cope with social stigma have highlighted the complexity of the challenges they face (Nurkhalisah, 2019), there has been limited exploration into the effectiveness of spiritually based programs as a potential solution.

This study's conceptual framework integrates self-concept development theory with the principles of Christian discipleship. Self-concept is interpreted as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, affective, and evaluative aspects of the self, which develop through social interaction and lived experience

(Habrat, 2013; Hoelter, 1985; Marsh & Craven, 2006). Christian discipleship, on the other hand, is viewed as a transformative process that emphasizes identity renewal, the cultivation of moral and spiritual values, and integration into a faith community. The integration of these two concepts offers a new perspective through which to understand identity transformation and self-concept reconstruction in ex-convicts from a spiritual standpoint.

This study was conducted at GKIN (Gereja Kristen Injili Nusantara) "Pemberita Damai" Church in Semarang, where a structured discipleship program for ex-convicts has been implemented regularly from January 2024 to November 2024. The program was held weekly, every Friday from 6:30 PM to 8:30 PM local time (WIB). It was led by the church pastor, who had previously served as a spiritual mentor at the Semarang Class 1 Correctional Facility. The unique combination of research setting, specific spiritual approach, and the targeted participant group contributes original insight to the body of literature on the rehabilitation of ex-convicts. This study on the effectiveness of Christian discipleship in shaping the self-concept of ex-convicts at GKIN "Pemberita Damai" Semarang offers a new perspective on social reintegration efforts for ex-convicts in Indonesia.

By integrating a spiritual approach with psychological insights on self-concept, this study holds the potential to offer significant theoretical and practical contributions to the development of a more effective and human-centered rehabilitation model for ex-convicts. Through an in-depth exploration of the key elements within the discipleship program and its impact on the transformation of self-concept, this research aims to formulate models and recommendations that can be implemented more broadly to support the sustainable social reintegration of ex-convicts in Indonesia.

GKIN "Pemberita Damai" Semarang has implemented a discipleship program for ex-convicts for several years, employing a holistic approach that combines spiritual guidance, counseling, and life-skills training. This church-based context provides a supportive environment in which ex-convicts can explore and reconstruct their new identities through the lens of the Christian faith. This experience can potentially shape and strengthen the development of a renewed self-concept.

The research problem addressed in this study is: How effective is the discipleship program in building a positive self-concept among ex-convicts at

GKIN "Pemberita Damai" Semarang? The primary objective of this research is to examine the effectiveness of the discipleship program in fostering the development of a positive self-concept among ex-convicts within the GKIN "Pemberita Damai" Semarang community in Semarang.

Through this study, a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of spiritual approaches in the rehabilitation of ex-convicts, particularly in promoting positive self-concept development, is expected to be gained through sustainable social reintegration. The theoretical and practical implications of this research are expected to make a meaningful contribution to the development of more effective and human-centered rehabilitation programs for ex-convicts in Indonesia.

Method

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design, focusing on the lived experiences of ex-convicts who have participated in a discipleship process. A phenomenological approach was chosen as it allows the researcher to explore the essence of participants' experiences within the context of discipleship and how those experiences have influenced the development of their self-concept.

The research was conducted at the GKIN "Pemberita Damai" Semarang, located in the city of Semarang, Central Java. GKIN "Pemberita Damai" Semarang was selected as the research site due to its specialized discipleship program, which serves ex-convicts by assisting them in reintegrating into society and developing a positive self-concept through a Christian spiritual framework. This setting provides a distinctive context for understanding the church community's role in the rehabilitation and social reintegration process of ex-convicts. The population in this study consists of ex-convicts who have participated in the discipleship program at GKIN "Pemberita Damai" Semarang, as well as individuals directly involved in facilitating the program. This research employs purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique that enables the researcher to select participants based on their in-depth knowledge of the studied phenomenon and their ability to provide rich, relevant information. The inclusion criteria for ex-convicts participants are as follows: 1) They have served a sentence in a correctional facility; 2) They have participated in the discipleship program for at least six months; and 3) They are willing to participate in the study. For church-

affiliated participants, the inclusion criteria include direct involvement in the discipleship program for ex-convicts and possessing a deep understanding of the program. Based on these criteria, the study participants include: 1) The Pastor of GKIN "Pemberita Damai" Semarang serves as the spiritual leader and overseer of the discipleship program; 2) Two church elders are involved in the implementation and supervision of the program; and 3) Three congregation members who are ex-convicts and have completed or are currently undergoing the discipleship process. These six participants are considered sufficient for a qualitative study focused on in-depth exploration of individual experiences. The sample size adheres to the principle of data saturation, where data collection is concluded once no new information or themes emerge from additional interviews.

Data collection in this study was conducted using three primary methods, enabling data triangulation to enhance the research's credibility: 1) Unstructured Interviews were employed in the initial stages of the study to gain a broad understanding of participants' experiences. This type of interview allows for flexibility and the spontaneous exploration of emerging topics during conversation. The unstructured interview protocol included open-ended questions about the participants' general experiences with the discipleship program and how it related to their self-concept; 2) In-depth interviews were used to explore specific aspects of participants' experiences in greater detail. These interviews focused on three main areas: a) the participants' experiences before joining the discipleship program, b) the process and experiences during the discipleship journey, and c) the changes in self-concept resulting from their participation. For the pastor and church elders, the in-depth interviews explored the philosophy, structure, and implementation of the discipleship program, as well as their observations of the transformations experienced by the ex-convicts. 3) Participatory observation was conducted to observe social interactions and group dynamics during discipleship sessions. The researcher attended at least 3-5 discipleship sessions as a non-participating observer, taking detailed notes on interaction patterns, participants' verbal and non-verbal responses, and program elements that appeared to have the most significant impact. These observations enabled the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the social context of the discipleship process and to witness firsthand how spiritual principles were integrated into the participants' everyday lives.

Data analysis in this study employed the Miles and Huberman model, which involves three key stages: 1) Data Reduction: In this stage, all data collected from interviews and observations were transcribed verbatim; 2) Data Presentation: The reduced data were then presented using thematic matrices, flow diagrams, and descriptive narratives that illustrated the relationships between emerging themes; 3) Conclusion Drawing and Verification: In the final stage, the researcher drew conclusions based on identified patterns and meanings that emerged from the data. To ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings, several strategies were implemented, including data source triangulation by comparing perspectives from multiple participant groups, such as the pastor, church elders, and ex-convicts; methodological triangulation by comparing data derived from both interviews and observation; audit trail by maintaining systematic documentation of the entire research process; and researcher reflexivity as the researcher actively reflected on personal biases and assumptions.

Findings and Discussion

This study explores how the discipleship program at GKIN "Pemberita Damai" Semarang contributes to the development of a positive self-concept among ex-convicts. Based on interview data analysis and triangulation with relevant literature, the findings indicate that discipleship plays a significant role in transforming self-perception, enhancing resilience against social stigma, and facilitating the effective social reintegration of ex-convicts.

Overview of the Discipleship Program at GKIN "Pemberita Damai" Semarang

The discipleship program at GKIN "Pemberita Damai" Semarang is designed as an ongoing spiritual mentorship initiative that has been conducted regularly since January 2024. The program, known as *Persekutuan Murid Kristus* (Fellowship of Christ's Disciples), is held every Friday evening from 6:30 to 8:30 PM and is led by the church pastor, who previously served as a mentor to convicts at Class 1 Prison in Semarang. What sets this program apart is its integration with the church's broader ministry, creating a comprehensive support ecosystem for ex-convicts.

Participant AW explained, "I learned about the discipleship program at GKIN "Pemberita Damai" Semarang from Pastor Daru." This statement highlights the crucial role of spiritual leaders in introducing ex-convicts to

discipleship initiatives. The motivation to join the program varies among participants, but is generally rooted in an awareness of the need for spiritual growth. Participant AW further shared, "Because I realized the need for spiritual growth, I knew I needed guidance and discipleship." This reflects a level of self-awareness that serves as a vital foundation for developing a positive self-concept.

The program is well-integrated into the church's broader ministry. Participant CL stated that the discipleship efforts and church ministry are "interconnected," indicating a holistic approach to supporting the reintegration of ex-convicts into the community. This integration is further reinforced through strong coordination between church leaders, the pastor, and the discipleship team—described by CL as marked by "unity and cohesion."

Ex-Convicts' Self-Concept Before Joining the Discipleship Program

The self-concept of ex-convicts before participating in the discipleship program was generally shaped by their incarceration experiences and the challenges of social reintegration. The "looking glass self" theory, proposed by Cooley (1902) and further developed by Lucksted & Drapalski (2015), suggests that an individual's self-concept is heavily influenced by how they believe others perceive them. As a result, negative societal judgments are often internalized, becoming part of their self-identity. This phenomenon closely aligns with the lived experiences of many ex-convicts, who frequently face social stigmatization and rejection, leading to diminished self-worth and a disrupted sense of identity.

The main challenges encountered by ex-convicts after their release from correctional facilities were revealed through participant interviews. Participant AW shared that the most pressing difficulties included "socializing with the community and finding a job." This statement aligns with findings from studies on convicts' self-reliance programs, which note that societal rejection and stigmatization often persist even when ex-convicts have acquired adequate vocational skills (Yaser & Muhammad, 2022). However, the experience of stigmatization varies among individuals. Participant AW further explained, "Praise God, I haven't faced rejection so far, because some people simply don't know." This highlights a common coping strategy: concealing their identity as ex-convicts to avoid social stigma. While this may offer short-term relief, it can also hinder the development of an authentic self-concept, as individuals are compelled to navigate social spaces without full transparency about their past.

A lack of spiritual understanding was also identified as an initial condition. Participant AW stated, “I felt I didn’t understand the Word of God well enough, so I decided to join.” This reflects a growing awareness of the need for spiritual growth as a foundational element in developing a more positive and meaningful self-concept. Before participating in the discipleship program, many ex-convicts struggled with low self-confidence. They often felt unworthy and carried a sense of shame about their past. Spiritually, they had not yet gained a deep understanding of the truth of God’s Word.

Key Elements of the Discipleship Program That Influence Self-Concept

Transformative Spiritual Teaching

One of the most essential components of the discipleship program is its profound and transformative spiritual teaching. Participant AW shared, “I really enjoy the teachings because they enrich my theological knowledge and life experience.” The theological instruction offers a new cognitive framework that enables ex-convicts to reinterpret and make sense of their life experiences through a spiritual lens. The curriculum used in the discipleship process is outlined in Figure 1. The same discipleship materials are applied in both the Fellowship of Christ’s Disciples and in Sunday Worship Services, all of which are strategically integrated toward one overarching goal: to equip the Congregation as Messengers of Peace (2 Corinthians 5:18–20).

Specific spiritual teachings have a significant influence on participants’ worldview. Participant AW noted that the material that most deeply impacted his perception of himself was “The teaching on being born again/repentance (John 3:3–6).” The Christian concept of repentance and rebirth offers a narrative of new identity, providing ex-convicts with a transformative framework through which they can reconstruct a more hopeful and dignified sense of self (Bonhoeffer, 2012; Dunn, 1992).

Church leaders also affirmed the importance of relevant spiritual content. Participant CL identified “the material on truth” as the most influential aspect in changing the self-concept of ex-convicts. This highlights how theological content centered on truth plays a crucial role in helping them overcome cognitive distortions and build a healthier, more grounded understanding of themselves.

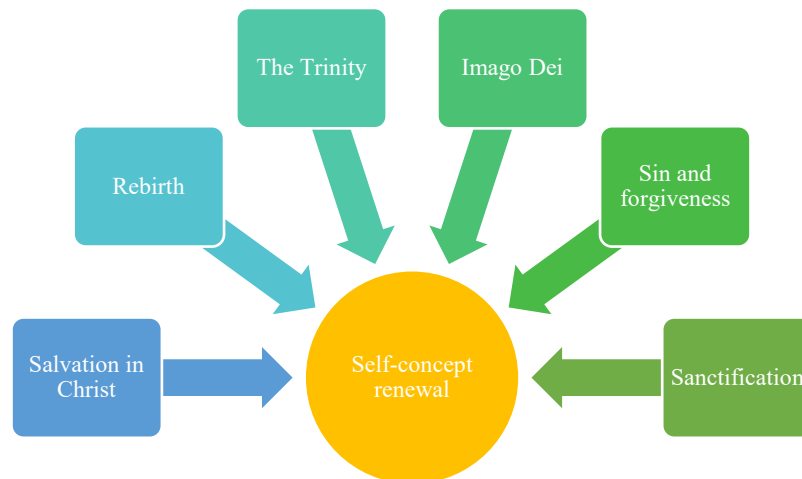


Figure 1. Material for the Fellowship of Disciples of Christ

Through the discipleship program, ex-convicts have developed a solid grasp of theological principles. This understanding has reshaped their perspective, resulting in a healthier and more stable self-concept. A strong theological foundation has enabled them to reconstruct their identity with renewed meaning and direction.

Dialogue and Experience Sharing

The discipleship program is not limited to one-way teaching; it also incorporates active dialogue and the sharing of experiences among participants. Participant AW emphasized the value of “the teaching and Q&A sessions that help us become more active in sharing God’s Word.” This participatory model encourages self-reflection and collective learning, both of which are vital for developing a self-concept. The dialogical process also motivates participants to express themselves more openly and share their spiritual journeys. Participant CL observed that ex-convicts in the program “are growing in faith and becoming more courageous in sharing God’s Word within the group.” This growing confidence in speaking and sharing is a strong indicator of improved self-esteem – an essential component of a positive self-concept.

By integrating a dialogical approach, the discipleship experience fosters meaningful engagement among participants. The participatory format facilitates deep self-reflection, while the collective learning environment plays a crucial role in helping ex-convicts reconstruct a healthier sense of identity. This is evidenced by the noticeable increase in their confidence and willingness to contribute.

Supportive and Inclusive Community

The presence of a supportive and accepting community is a key element in the discipleship program. Participant AW noted, "Our relationships are good, and we communicate often because we're also involved in ministry together." This statement highlights the importance of social acceptance and active community involvement in promoting a positive self-concept. The welcoming attitude of the church congregation toward ex-convicts also contributes significantly to creating a nurturing environment. Participant CL described the general attitude of the congregation toward ex-convicts in the church as "welcoming, open." This level of social acceptance is crucial, especially in contrast to the stigma and rejection that ex-convicts often experience in broader society.

The church community also plays a crucial role in supporting the social reintegration of ex-convicts. Participant AW described the church's role in facilitating his reintegration as "very good and empowering." This aligns with research on the use of self-concept theory as an intervention for addressing psychological challenges, which emphasizes that social interaction is a key factor influencing an individual's self-concept (Regyna, 2024). Discipleship becomes a community that supports and accepts each other for who they are, fostering a sense of self-confidence. It has become a community of mutual acceptance. Negative stigma can create feelings of rejection, but the church community provides support that fosters a healthy self-concept.

Involvement in Ministry

Active participation in church ministry offers ex-convicts the opportunity to cultivate a sense of belonging and contribute to their community. Participant AW noted that the relationship with his mentor/pastor and fellow participants was "good and communicative, because we are also involved in ministry." This involvement not only strengthens social connections but also allows ex-convicts to apply the spiritual values they've learned in practical, meaningful ways.

Active engagement in ministry helps shift the narrative of identity – from being labeled as an "ex-convict" to being recognized as a "servant of the church" who contributes positively to the community. This transformation aligns with research on the transformative impact of psycho-spiritual therapy on the psychological well-being of incarcerated individuals, which shows that a renewed perspective can help them build a new life after release (Fridari et al., 2022).

Through ministry, ex-convicts undergo a profound identity shift as they assume roles of God's servants. This transformation is rooted in the development of a healthy self-concept. Ministry involvement enables them to live out theological teachings in tangible action. The value system formed during discipleship empowers them with the confidence to serve God and others, fostering both spiritual maturity and social reintegration.

Transformation of Self-Concept After Participating in the Discipleship Program

Growth in Wisdom and Inner Peace

One of the most notable changes experienced by participants was an increased sense of wisdom and inner peace. Participant AW shared that the shift in his perspective after joining the discipleship program was, "I've become wiser and feel more at peace." This statement reflects an internal transformation involving a more thoughtful mindset and a calmer emotional state. The discipleship program also played a crucial role in helping ex-convicts confront and overcome negative self-perceptions. Participant AW stated, "Through the Word that is shared, it helps me overcome those negative feelings." This demonstrates how spiritual teachings function as effective coping mechanisms for the negative thoughts and emotions often embedded in the self-concept of ex-convicts. This transformation aligns with findings from studies on the impact of psycho-spiritual therapy on the psychological well-being of incarcerated individuals, which indicate that spiritual approaches can foster a shift in perspective that empowers individuals to rebuild their lives after incarceration (Anderson et al., 2020; Fridari et al., 2022).

This study reveals that the discipleship program has brought about significant changes for its participants, particularly ex-convicts, in terms of increased wisdom and inner peace. Participants reported an internal transformation reflected in a more discerning and peaceful self-perception, along with improved emotional stability. Moreover, the spiritual teachings embedded in the program have proven effective in helping participants overcome negative self-perceptions, functioning as a meaningful coping mechanism for dealing with intrusive thoughts and emotional struggles. These findings are consistent with prior studies highlighting that psycho-spiritual therapy can positively transform

convicts' psychological well-being, helping them develop new perspectives that support successful reintegration and a better quality of life after release.

Increased Courage and Self-Confidence

The discipleship program has also contributed to greater courage and self-confidence among ex-convicts in their interactions with society. Participant AW emphasized that the program helped him confront the stigma of being an ex-convict by making him "more courageous in life and wiser." He also shared that he now feels more confident engaging with the community, saying, "because I've gained a foundation in God's Word that makes me bold and motivated." Church leaders have observed similar changes in ex-convicts who participated in the program. Participant CL noted that they have become "more enthusiastic about serving and understanding the truth" and "more courageous in being a blessing to others." These findings suggest that the discipleship program fosters a transformation from a passive mindset (perceiving oneself as a victim of stigma) to an active orientation (becoming a blessing to others).

The discipleship program has made a significant contribution to enhancing the courage and self-confidence of ex-convicts in engaging with society. Participants reported feeling bolder and more discerning in confronting social stigma, and more confident as a result of being strengthened through the teachings of God's Word. Additionally, church leaders observed notable positive changes—ex-convicts displayed greater enthusiasm for serving, a more profound desire to understand spiritual truth, and the courage to become a blessing to others. These findings suggest that the discipleship program successfully facilitates a shift in attitude—from a passive stance of feeling like victims of stigma to an active role marked by social contribution and meaningful engagement with their communities.

Improvement in Family and Social Relationships

The discipleship program also had a positive impact on the family and social relationships of ex-convicts. Participant AW shared that the program influenced his relationship with his family, making him "more appreciative of my wife, children, and family life, with a strong Christian foundation in the Lord." This change indicates the development of a more positive self-concept, particularly in the context of his role as a family member. In relation to the surrounding

community, AW stated that the discipleship program enabled him to "interact more with society and share testimonies." His ability to engage with society and share his spiritual journey reflects a positive level of social reintegration and a growing self-concept rooted in his identity as a contributing member of the community. These improvements in social relationships align with the broader goals of social reintegration, where both family and community serve as essential support systems for ex-convicts. As highlighted in research on the development of convict independence, family and community support are key factors in achieving effective reintegration for ex-convicts (Yaser & Muhammad, 2022).

The discipleship program has had a significant positive impact on the family and social relationships of ex-convicts. Participants reported a heightened sense of appreciation and care for their families, particularly toward their spouses and children. These changes were grounded in strong Christian values and reflected a more positive self-concept in the context of family roles. Additionally, participants demonstrated improved ability to engage with the surrounding community and took a more active role in sharing their spiritual testimonies. This reflects not only successful social reintegration but also the development of a new identity as contributing members of society. Such improvements in relational dynamics support the broader goal of social reintegration, in which family and community serve as primary support systems. These systems play a critical role in helping ex-convicts transition into a new, independent, and effective life with purpose and dignity.

The discipleship program has had a positive impact on the family and social relationships of ex-convicts. Participants reported a growing sense of appreciation toward their families—especially their spouses and children—grounded in strong Christian values. This reflects the development of a more positive self-concept within their familial roles. On the social front, participants also demonstrated improved abilities to interact with their surrounding communities and actively share their spiritual journeys. This indicates successful social reintegration and the emergence of a renewed identity as contributing members of society. Such outcomes align with the broader goals of social reintegration, which emphasize the vital role of family and community as support systems in helping ex-convicts establish independence and begin a new chapter in life (Listopad et al., 2021; Towner, 2005).

Identity and Self-Worth Transformation

The discipleship program facilitates a profound transformation of identity and self-worth among ex-convicts. Participant AW explained, “Understanding the Word, which has now become the foundation of my life, has helped me transform the negative aspects of my identity.” This statement reflects a fundamental shift in self-concept grounded in spiritual values. Participant CL also observed that the program “inspires people to become a blessing, to be a role model for their children and families, and to be more courageous in becoming a blessing to others.” This shift from a posture of receiving to one of giving highlights a significant transformation in how participants view themselves – not as passive recipients of help, but as active contributors to the well-being of others. This identity transformation also influences how participants view their future. AW stated, “I entrust my future and continue to place my hope in God, so I no longer worry about what lies ahead.” This shift from anxiety to trust and hope represents a profound change in life orientation and self-concept.

The discipleship program plays a crucial role in facilitating identity and self-worth transformation among ex-convicts. Participants reported a fundamental shift in their self-concept—from a previously negative perception to one now grounded in spiritual understanding and the values of God’s Word. Moreover, there was a noticeable shift in orientation: from a passive stance as recipients of help to an active role as individuals who bring blessings and serve as role models for their families and communities. This identity transformation is also reflected in participants’ outlook on the future. Where once there was anxiety, there is now confidence and strong hope rooted in trust in God (Rugebregt, 2024; Zaluchu, 2021). Overall, these changes represent a significant process of both psychological and spiritual recovery, guiding participants toward a more meaningful life—one that is purpose-driven and marked by positive contributions to their social environment.

Challenges in the Implementation of the Discipleship Program

Participants’ Time Constraints and Busy Schedules

One of the primary challenges in implementing the discipleship program is managing participants’ time constraints and busy schedules. Participant AW acknowledged, “So far, there haven’t been many challenges—just occasionally

issues with time.” This statement indicates that while motivation to join the program is high, practical obstacles such as time management can affect the consistency of attendance. Church leaders also recognized time constraints as a recurring issue. Participant CL noted that a significant challenge in running the discipleship program for ex-convicts is “because of daily responsibilities, finding the right time to be consistently present at each meeting.” He further identified “busy schedules, work” as ongoing obstacles in maintaining the sustainability of the discipleship program.

These challenges align with findings from previous research on convicts’ rehabilitation programs, which highlight low participation due to a lack of awareness or engagement (Yaser & Muhammad, 2022). In the context of the discipleship program, even with high initial motivation and awareness, practical factors such as work commitments and time constraints can significantly impact ongoing participation and program continuity.

One of the main challenges in implementing the discipleship program for ex-convicts is the issue of time constraints and participants’ busy schedules. Although the participants demonstrate strong motivation and awareness of the program, practical factors such as time management and work commitments often affect their consistency in attending each session. Church leaders have also confirmed that this is a significant obstacle to sustaining the program.

These findings are consistent with previous research, which shows that even when initial motivation is high, practical challenges such as daily life demands often become a significant barrier to the successful implementation of rehabilitation programs. Therefore, time management and flexible scheduling are crucial aspects that need to be addressed to enhance both participation and the overall effectiveness of the discipleship program.

Stigma and Social Resistance

Although the discipleship program is designed to help ex-convicts confront social stigma, the stigma itself can act as a barrier within the discipleship process. Participant CL revealed that one of the initial obstacles was, “At first, we weren’t allowed to gather with ex-convicts, out of fear of being negatively influenced. But eventually, we joined in—praise God, amen.” This statement reflects the initial hesitation and resistance from the church community regarding engagement with ex-convicts.

Such resistance mirrors a broader pattern of stigmatization faced by ex-convicts in society. As discussed in research on self-stigma, stigma often leads individuals to internalize shame and experience social isolation (Lucksted & Drapalski, 2015). The study emphasizes that negative judgments from others are frequently absorbed into one's self-concept, making targeted interventions essential for healing and identity reconstruction.

Although the discipleship program is intended to help ex-convicts confront social stigma, the stigma itself often becomes an obstacle to its implementation. Participants reported initial resistance from the church community, who were concerned about being "contaminated" through close involvement with ex-convicts. This challenge reflects a broader societal pattern of stigmatization, where the stigma is not only fueled by others' negative judgments but can also be internalized by those being stigmatized—leading to feelings of shame and social isolation. Therefore, addressing stigma requires targeted interventions to reduce its harmful effects and to support the effective social reintegration of ex-convicts.

Limited Participation from the Church Community

Another challenge in implementing the discipleship program is the limited participation of the church congregation in supporting the initiative. Participant CL described the involvement of other church members in the discipleship program for ex-convicts as "Busy schedules, not everyone joins." This lack of broader support can impact the program's overall effectiveness and limit opportunities for social reintegration among ex-convicts.

This challenge is consistent with findings from previous research on efforts to enhance convicts' self-reliance programs, which highlight limited support and infrastructure as key obstacles (Yaser & Muhammad, 2022). In the context of discipleship, broader community involvement is crucial for facilitating meaningful and sustainable reintegration for ex-convicts.

Although the discipleship program aims to help ex-convicts overcome social stigma, the stigma itself has become a barrier to its implementation. Participants reported initial resistance from the church community, which expressed concern about being "contaminated" by engaging with ex-convicts. This obstacle reflects the broader phenomenon of stigmatization experienced by ex-convicts in society, where stigma is not only imposed by others' negative

judgments but can also be internalized by those affected – leading to feelings of shame and social isolation. Therefore, addressing stigma requires targeted interventions that go beyond surface-level inclusion. Such interventions must aim to mitigate the negative impact of stigma and provide ongoing support for the social reintegration of ex-convicts in a manner that affirms their dignity, fosters healing, and promotes full participation in community life.

Adaptation Strategies to Enhance Program Effectiveness

Flexibility in Scheduling and Approach

To address the challenges of participants' time constraints and busy schedules, the discipleship program implements a flexible scheduling approach. Participant CL emphasized the importance of "finding the right time to ensure consistent attendance at each meeting." This flexibility allows ex-convicts to continue participating in the program despite having limited availability.

This strategy also encompasses the ability to tailor solutions to the specific needs of each individual. Participant CL highlighted the importance of "entering into their world, understanding their needs to anticipate when they can't be present." This personalized approach enables the discipleship program to meet the unique needs of participants more effectively.

To address the challenges of participants' time constraints and busy schedules, the discipleship program adopts a flexible scheduling approach, allowing ex-convicts to continue participating even with limited availability. This approach is further supported by adaptations tailored to each participant's specific needs, including understanding and anticipating situations when they are unable to attend. Such personalized strategies make the program more responsive and effective in meeting individual needs, thereby fostering more consistent engagement and achieving optimal outcomes in the discipleship process.

Inclusive Approach and Acceptance

To address stigma and resistance toward ex-convicts, the discipleship program emphasizes an inclusive and accepting approach. Interviewed participants shared that overcoming prejudice or lingering stigma within the church community involves seeking wisdom from God and evaluating a person by their "fruit" – that is, by observing the transformation in their lives, including

those of ex-convicts. These individuals are viewed as people who once fell into sin but have since received God's grace. They are considered born again and are now growing in Christlikeness. This approach emphasizes the importance of evaluating individuals based on their current character and actions, rather than their past mistakes and misdeeds.

This inclusive attitude is also evident in the church congregation's acceptance of ex-convicts. One participant, CL, described the general attitude of the congregation toward the presence of ex-convicts in the church as "welcoming." Such social acceptance creates a supportive environment in which ex-convicts can develop a more positive self-concept.

To overcome stigma and resistance, the discipleship program implements an inclusive approach that emphasizes acceptance and evaluation based on present character and actions rather than past mistakes. This approach is rooted in wisdom and a willingness to see participants through the "fruit" of their transformation—observable changes in behavior and lifestyle. This inclusive attitude is further reinforced by the church community, which generally receives ex-convicts with warmth and openness. A supportive church environment plays a vital role in helping ex-convicts reshape their self-image and reinforces their social reintegration process.

Development of Relevant and Practical Materials

To maximize the impact of the discipleship program, developing materials that are tailored to the specific needs of ex-convicts has become a key strategy. Participant CL recommended, "Change the themes to something more interesting, for example, topics related to family," as a suggestion for future program development. This reflects the participants' desire to grow not only on a personal level but also within their family lives. Meanwhile, participant AW suggested, "It would be helpful if, after the teaching, we were also equipped with evangelism practice." This highlights the need for a more practical and applicable approach to discipleship—one that facilitates the integration of spiritual values into everyday life. Discipleship participants also expressed a deep longing to share their faith ("sharing faith"). They are no longer simply reconstructing a new self-concept; they are taking bold steps to live out and witness their transformation through evangelism. This approach aligns with findings from research on the transformative impact of psycho-spiritual therapy on the

psychological well-being of convicts, which emphasizes the importance of tailored interventions that address the specific needs of the target population (Fridari et al., 2022).

To maximize the impact of the discipleship program, developing materials that are relevant to the specific needs of ex-convicts has become a key strategy for enhancing its effectiveness. Suggestions from participants include revising themes to be more engaging and contextual—such as topics related to family—and incorporating evangelism practice following teaching sessions to offer a more practical and applicable approach. This strategy aligns with previous research findings that highlight the importance of tailored interventions designed to meet the unique needs of target populations, thereby enhancing the program's effectiveness in supporting the transformation and psychological well-being of ex-convicts.

Expanding Community Participation

To address the limited involvement of the church community, expanding participation has become a crucial strategy for enhancing its engagement. Based on interview results, participants suggested that inviting more people to join the discipleship program is an area that needs further development. This expansion would help strengthen community support and broaden the social networks of ex-convicts.

To address the limited participation of the church community in the discipleship program, expanding engagement has become a key strategy for increasing participation. One suggestion raised was to invite more people to join the program to strengthen community support. By increasing participation, the program is expected to broaden the social networks of ex-convicts, thereby supporting their social reintegration more effectively and fostering a more supportive environment.

Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the Discipleship Program

Based on the analysis of interview and observation data, the discipleship program at GKIN "Pemberita Damai" Semarang demonstrates significant effectiveness in shaping a positive self-concept among ex-convicts. This effectiveness can be evaluated through several key indicators:

Transformation of Self-Concept

The discipleship program has led to a substantial transformation in the self-concept of its participants. Participant AW emphasized that after joining the program, "I have become wiser and more at peace." This shift reflects a more profound, internal change in how individuals perceive themselves – an essential component of self-concept.

Church leaders also observed similar transformations among ex-convicts. Participant CL described the program as "highly effective, as it also fosters character growth." These observations indicate that the discipleship program not only enhances participants' theological understanding but also contributes to the development of character and behavior that reflect a healthier, more positive self-image. This transformation of self-concept aligns with the self-concept theory, as explained in research on the use of self-concept theory as an intervention. According to this theory, the use of self-concept theory can help individuals build awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, enabling them to function socially effectively (Regyna, 2024).

The discipleship program has successfully brought about a significant transformation in the self-concept of ex-convicts who participated in it. Participants reported a growing sense of wisdom and inner peace, reflecting a positive shift in their self-perception – an essential aspect of self-concept. Church leaders also observed character development that signaled both behavioral change and a deeper theological understanding. This transformation aligns with self-concept theory, which emphasizes the importance of individuals being aware of both their strengths and weaknesses to support better social functioning. These findings indicate that the discipleship program is effective in fostering a positive self-concept and facilitating the social reintegration of ex-convicts.

Resilience Against Stigma

The discipleship program has also proven effective in helping ex-convicts build resilience against social stigma. Participant AW shared that the program helped him confront the stigma of being an ex-convict by becoming "more courageous in life and wiser." This newfound courage and wisdom have empowered him to face challenging social situations more effectively.

This effectiveness aligns with findings in self-stigma research, which emphasize the importance of interventions that help stigmatized individuals

develop resilience and effective coping strategies (Lucksted & Drapalski, 2015). The discipleship program offers a spiritual framework that enables ex-convicts to reframe their life experiences in a more positive and constructive light.

The discipleship program has proven effective in helping ex-convicts develop resilience against social stigma. Participants reported increased courage and wisdom, which enabled them to face social challenges with greater confidence and discernment. This effectiveness aligns with the concept of self-stigma, which emphasizes the importance of coping strategies and resilience for individuals who experience stigmatization. The program provides a spiritual framework that facilitates a positive and constructive reinterpretation of life experiences, thereby supporting the recovery and social reintegration process of ex-convicts.

Effective Social Reintegration

The discipleship program has also demonstrated effectiveness in facilitating the social reintegration of ex-convicts. Participant AW shared that the program had a positive influence on his relationship with the surrounding community, allowing him to "interact more with society and share testimonies." This ability to engage socially and share spiritual experiences indicates a positive level of reintegration.

Church leaders likewise observed that the program supported the reintegration of ex-convicts into the church community, noting that they became "more interested and more eager to keep learning about God's Word." These findings highlight that the discipleship program successfully creates an environment where ex-convicts can rebuild social connections and develop a sense of belonging within the community.

The discipleship program has proven effective in facilitating the social reintegration of ex-convicts by enhancing their ability to engage positively with the surrounding community, including the ability to share their spiritual experiences. Participants reported improved social interactions, reflecting a successful reintegration process. Additionally, church leaders noted that the program encouraged ex-convicts to become more active and enthusiastic in studying God's Word and to become fully integrated members of the church community. These findings confirm that the discipleship program has successfully created a supportive environment that fosters the development of

social relationships and a sense of belonging – both of which are essential to the reintegration journey of ex-convicts.

Improved Quality of Life and Future Outlook

The discipleship program has contributed significantly to enhancing the quality of life and prospects of ex-convicts. One participant, AW, shared that the program helped him pursue employment and other productive activities by enabling him to become “wiser and find work more easily.” The ability to obtain and sustain jobs is a critical indicator of effective social reintegration.

The program also shifted the participants’ perspective on their future. AW expressed that after joining the discipleship program, “I entrust my future to God and continue to put my hope in Him, so I no longer worry about what lies ahead.” This shift—from anxiety about the future to confidence and hope—reflects a profound transformation in life orientation and self-concept.

This shift in perspective aligns with findings from research on the transformative impact of psycho-spiritual therapy on the psychological well-being of convicts, which highlights how spiritual approaches can facilitate meaningful changes in outlook, supporting individuals in building a new life after incarceration (Fridari et al., 2022).

The discipleship program has made a positive contribution to the improved quality of life and future outlook of ex-convicts. Participants reported gaining greater wisdom in seeking employment or engaging in productive activities—an essential indicator of successful social reintegration. Moreover, the program reshaped their view of the future—from anxiety to a deep sense of trust and hope in God. This profound transformation in life orientation and self-concept echoes the findings of psycho-spiritual therapy research, affirming that spiritual interventions can bring about positive psychological shifts and support the journey toward a new and meaningful life post-incarceration.

Implication

Research on the effectiveness of the Christian discipleship program in shaping the self-concept of ex-convicts at GKIN “Pemberita Damai” Semarang has significant theoretical and practical implications for academic development, church-based rehabilitation practices, and social advocacy alike.

Theoretically, this study contributes to interdisciplinary discourse across theology, psychology, and the social sciences, particularly in the areas of self-concept construction and identity reconstruction among ex-convicts. It also expands the framework of humanitarian rehabilitation by integrating the spiritual dimension as a key element in restoring identity and building resilience against social stigma—an area often underexplored in prisoner rehabilitation studies.

Practically, the findings offer a comprehensive discipleship model that churches and other organizations can adapt to provide a holistic approach—spiritually, psychosocially, and communally—for supporting ex-convicts. The research strengthens the argument for collaborative efforts between religious institutions, counselors, and local communities in sustaining effective reintegration programs for ex-convicts.

In the Indonesian context, which is rooted in a collectivist culture, this study offers a fresh perspective on church-led discipleship in prisoner rehabilitation. It enriches international literature that Western cultural contexts have mainly shaped. Moreover, it demonstrates the practical application of public theology and restorative spirituality in dismantling social stigma, making it highly relevant to the practices of the global Christian community.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study establishes a new conceptual framework that integrates Christian spirituality with the construction of a positive self-concept. Further research is required to investigate the extent to which discipleship programs facilitate participants' adaptation to life in the broader society. In addition, future studies should examine how strengthening community support contributes to identity transformation—not only in spiritual terms but also across social, familial, and mental health dimensions.

This study utilized a very limited sample (six participants within a single church community), which means the findings cannot yet be generalized to broader contexts or across different denominations. The observation period was relatively short (approximately 11 months), leaving the long-term sustainability of the program's impact untested. Furthermore, the research focused solely on one type of intervention—church-based discipleship—without comparing it to non-religious models or discipleship programs within other Christian denominations or institutions. Therefore, future research is recommended to expand both the

population and study settings. Similar studies should be conducted with a larger number of participants, across multiple cities and churches, including those from different denominations and cultural backgrounds. Longitudinal studies are also needed to assess the sustainability of self-concept transformation and the risk of recidivism among ex-convicts who participate in discipleship programs over several years.

Conclusion

The discipleship program at GKIN "Pemberita Damai" Semarang has demonstrated significant effectiveness in fostering a positive self-concept among ex-convicts. This effectiveness is evident through several key outcomes: the transformation of self-identity, increased resilience against social stigma, effective social reintegration, and an improved quality of life and future outlook for participants. Key elements contributing to the program's effectiveness include transformative spiritual teaching, open dialogue and experience-sharing, a supportive and inclusive community, and active involvement in ministry. Although the program faced challenges such as time constraints and busy schedules, social stigma and resistance, and limited church community participation, it has successfully developed adaptive strategies to address these challenges.

The findings of this study contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the role spiritual approaches can play in the rehabilitation of ex-convicts, particularly in building a positive self-concept that supports sustainable social reintegration. The theoretical and practical implications offer meaningful insights for the development of more effective and human-centered rehabilitation programs for ex-convicts in Indonesia.

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