

Stigma and Distorted Self: A Sociological Study of Internal Shame and Identity Reconstruction among Released Prisoners According to Irving Goffman's Theory

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Received: December 10th, 2025

Accepted: January 29th 2026

Published: February, 06th 2026

Volume: 4

Issue: 1

DOI: 10.61424/issej.v4i1.685

KEYWORDS

Stigma, distorted self, internal shame, identity reconstruction, released prisoners, Irving Goffman theory

This study analyzes the experiences of released prisoners from a sociological perspective, focusing on the concept of stigmatized identity and internal shame, through the application of Erving Goffman's theory of "distorted identity." The study employs a single-case study methodology, selecting an individual case that highlights the psychological and social struggles faced by released prisoners in their attempts to rebuild their sense of self amidst negative societal stigma. The findings highlight that the social stigma associated with repeated negative perceptions of released prisoners leads to a heightened sense of inner shame, weakening self-confidence and hindering social reintegration. The study also explores the interconnected effects of this stigma on family and professional relationships, demonstrating how these challenges contribute to deepening social isolation. The research underscores the importance of providing sustained psychosocial support to released prisoners, as well as the need for community awareness campaigns to reduce stigma and empower these individuals to rebuild their identities and find their place within society.

1. Introduction

The social stigma associated with those released from prison is one of the most prominent sociological issues where issues of crime, justice, and identity intersect. For these individuals, the criminal punishment does not end with their release from prison; rather, another phase of "social punishment" begins, characterized by exclusion, discrimination, and symbolic and social ostracism practiced against them in daily life. Here, the stigma is not merely an individual moral judgment, but a social structure that reproduces marginalization and hinders the possibilities of reintegration (Link & Phelan, 2001).

In his classic analysis of the concept of "stigma," Goffman (1963) provides a framework for understanding how certain attributes associated with an individual—such as release from prison—become "tainting marks" that diminish a person's social value and distort their image in the eyes of others. Stigma alters the nature of social interactions, trapping released individuals within preconceived negative perceptions, regardless of their desire for change or their

ability to adapt. This leads to what is known as a "distorted self," where the individual adopts society's negative view of themselves and begins to experience inner shame and self-alienation.

This internalized shame is not merely an isolated psychological state, but rather the product of ongoing social processes of discrimination and exclusion. Maruna (2000) noted that many released prisoners experience an internal conflict between their desire to start afresh and their resistance to the stereotypes that haunt them. Some succeed in adopting what is termed a "rehabilitative scenario," where they reframe their past within a positive narrative that emphasizes learning and growth, while others remain trapped in a cycle of failure and repetition due to the lack of social and institutional support.

Studies show that social structures—including the family, media, workplaces, and civil society—play a crucial role in either reintegrating released prisoners or perpetuating their stigma. In contexts where policies supporting restorative justice are absent and replaced by systems of surveillance and punishment extending beyond prison walls, marginalization is entrenched and opportunities for change are diminished (Western, 2006). Conversely, engaging the community in reintegration programs and empowering released prisoners to regain their dignity and status helps to mitigate the impact of stigma and transform the "damaged self" into one capable of recovery and reconstruction.

Comparative studies also confirm that society's view of released prisoners varies according to legal and cultural contexts. In some environments, criminal punishment is seen as a transcendent experience, after which the individual is given a genuine second chance. In other societies, however, the punitive view is entrenched, and the person is reduced to their criminal past, thus widening the gap between them and opportunities for reintegration (Uggen et al., 2004).

Overall, the issue of the social stigma of those released from prisons is a central topic in criminal sociology, because it reveals power relations between the state and society, how social classifications are produced, and the challenges that individual identity faces when it clashes with collective judgments.

The issue of stigma associated with released prisoners is of particular sociological importance due to its complexities concerning identity, integration, and social interaction. The matter extends beyond mere legal punishment, reaching beyond release, where the punishment is socially reproduced through prejudice and symbolic and material discrimination against these individuals. In this context, Erving Goffman's theory of stigma offers a rich analytical perspective for understanding how individuals are labeled and how their social identity is reshaped based on a "mark" or characteristic deemed "shameful" by society.

Goffman argues that stigma is not merely a condition imposed on the individual, but a social process exercised through interaction, producing a "distorted self" in the eyes of society, and sometimes even in the individual's own eyes. Released prisoners clearly exemplify this model: they are often perceived as "untrustworthy" or "former criminals" even after serving their sentences, which restricts their employment opportunities, hinders their social relationships, and threatens their psychological stability. This leads to an internal sense of shame and a continuous struggle between the identity imposed by society and the identity the individual seeks to rebuild.

Therefore, studying this issue from a sociological perspective, in light of stigma theory, allows for an in-depth analysis of the links between the symbolic construction of stigma and the social structures that reproduce exclusion. It also sheds light on the role played by societal institutions—such as the media, the labor market, and religious institutions—in either reinforcing or resisting this stigma, thus giving the research an important applied dimension in understanding the obstacles to social reintegration.

This study addresses the problem stemming from the observation that social stigma is not merely a fleeting reaction to past criminal behavior, but rather a persistent pattern of negative interaction practiced by the social environment towards the released individual, leading to the reproduction of feelings of rejection and self-deprecation. The internal shame resulting from societal perceptions does not remain external but is integrated into the structure of the self, affecting the individual's sense of self-worth and ability to change. Therefore, this study attempts to unravel the complex relationship between stigma and the self, and to reveal the ways in which individuals strive to reclaim their social identity within a context that often perpetuates exclusion.

In this context, the sociological theory of stigma—as developed by Erving Goffman—acquires particular importance. It provides a framework for understanding how the attributes ascribed to an individual are incorporated into a "distorted identity" upon which they are treated, regardless of their subsequent actions. According to Goffman, the

danger of stigma lies not in the criminal act itself, but in the symbolic and social consequences that accompany the process of labeling and categorization. This makes stigma a social construct in its own right, reproducing itself through daily interactions and social institutions, and leading to what is known as a "stigmatized identity," which individuals strive to negotiate or shed on their journey toward reintegration.

Accordingly, the study seeks to answer a number of fundamental questions, including:

- a- What are the manifestations of the internal shame felt by those who are released?
- b- What strategies do those released use to rebuild their social identity?
- c- How does the identity conflict manifest itself among those released from prison between their criminal past and their reformed present?
- d- How do social structures help or hinder released individuals in rebuilding themselves?

Based on these questions, this study seeks to achieve a set of objectives that contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of social stigma as a structural factor in shaping the post-prison experience. The study aims to analyze the impact of this stigma on the self-formation of released prisoners and to explore how individuals attempt to reconstruct their social identity despite the rejection and distortion they face. It also seeks to employ Erving Goffman's theory to explain the dynamics of daily interaction between released prisoners and their social environment, revealing the symbolic and institutional dimensions that perpetuate exclusion or enable its transcendence.

This study gains its scientific importance from its contribution to deepening the sociological understanding of social stigma as a symbolic mechanism that reproduces the social exclusion of released prisoners. It also employs a qualitative theoretical framework—namely, Erving Goffman's theory—to analyze the subtle interactions between the distorted self and the social context, thus enriching the literature on identity reconstruction and the interpretation of the symbolic dynamics associated with internalized shame.

At the societal level, the study focuses on the complex and interconnected structural challenges individuals face after release, and it clarifies the role of social actors in either reinforcing or undermining the stereotypes associated with them. From this perspective, the study provides a framework for understanding the non-legal barriers that limit opportunities for reintegration, which may contribute to the development of more inclusive and humane policies toward this group.

This study employs several central concepts that form the theoretical framework for the analysis: stigma, internal shame, identity, self-reconstruction, and symbolic interaction. These concepts are explained below:

a- Stigma: The concept of stigma, as formulated by Goffman (1963), refers to a characteristic or mark that diminishes an individual's value in the eyes of society. This characteristic is classified as a flaw that obscures or distorts social identity, leading to marginalization and exclusion. This concept is considered the cornerstone of understanding social interaction with those released from prison.

b- Internalized shame: This is a psychological feeling stemming from an individual's integration of social stigma into their self-perception, where the stigma is no longer merely external criticism but becomes part of their internal identity. This concept has been explored by numerous researchers, such as Lewis (1971) and Scheff (1966), who linked internalized shame to feelings of inadequacy and self-rejection that hinder social adjustment.

c- Identity: Identity is defined as an individual's self-perception within a social framework, encompassing the affiliations and attributes that the individual acknowledges and recognizes. This study of identity relies on the theories of Erikson (1968) and Goffman (1959), who highlighted the role of identity in self-construction and social interaction.

d- Self-reconstruction: This refers to the processes an individual undergoes to recover or reshape their social identity after experiencing stigma or an identity crisis. This process focuses on adaptation and positive change. Contemporary

sociologists have addressed this within the framework of identity studies, such as Giddens (1991), who considers self-reconstruction as part of the continuity of identity in the face of challenges.

e- Symbolic interactionism: This is the theoretical framework that posits meaning is formed through social interaction and the symbols exchanged between individuals. Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969) are considered founders of this approach, which Goffman relies on to explain the mechanisms of stigma and identity reconstruction.

In light of the above, this study represents a step towards deconstructing the symbolic and social structures that contribute to the continued marginalization of released prisoners. It does not merely describe reality, but rather seeks to analyze it from a critical sociological perspective, revealing the hidden dimensions of stigma, shame, and identity. Starting from symbolic interaction, the study focuses on understanding the lived experiences of individuals after release and how they redefine themselves in the face of an environment that often perpetuates exclusion. Therefore, it aims to provide scientific knowledge applicable to rehabilitation and reintegration efforts by supporting policies that promote social acceptance and mitigate the effects of stigma.

2. Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is a cornerstone for understanding the social dynamics surrounding those released from prison, particularly concerning the formation of stigma and its impact on individual identity. Since this research adopts a sociological approach, Erving Goffman's theory of stigma forms the cornerstone of this focus, providing an analytical lens through which to understand how society produces "internal shame" through everyday interactions and prevailing norms.

In this context, stigma is not merely a label attached to an individual, but a complex social process that leads to a fracture in self-perception and a reshaping of identity under the shadow of exclusion and rejection. Therefore, this section examines the classical conception of stigma as presented by Goffman, focusing on the dichotomy of "actual self" and "virtual self," as well as how a distorted identity is formed through social interaction and attempts to manage impressions.

To enrich this analysis, some complementary theories will also be used, such as symbolic interactionism, which highlights the role of shared meanings in producing social reality, and social identity theory, which may contribute to understanding the mechanisms of belonging and exclusion within the group.

In this context, the theoretical framework will be discussed as follows:

2.1. Irving Goffman's theory of stigma

In light of the sociological approach adopted by this research, stigma theory, as formulated by Erving Goffman, forms a central axis for analyzing the experience of those released from prison. It helps in understanding the mechanisms through which internalized shame is reproduced and individual identity is framed within rigid societal categories that lead to marginalization. This theory demonstrates how stigma is produced within everyday social interactions, not as an individual characteristic, but as a symbolic construct that burdens the individual with negative connotations, thus preventing full social recognition.

The significance of this theory lies in the fact that it does not merely describe stigma as a social condition, but rather explains how it affects an individual's self-perception through central concepts such as "actual self" and "virtual self," and the mechanisms of interaction that reshape identity in the context of rejection or implicit rejection. The theory also contributes to understanding the "impression management" strategies employed by stigmatized individuals to mitigate the effects of social exclusion and reframe their identities within the social context.

In line with the above, this section is presented by analyzing the basic concepts put forward by Goffman, which are essential for understanding the relationship of released prisoners to stigma and the distorted self, as follows:

2.1.1. The classical concept of stigma

The concept of stigma, as developed by Goffman (1963), is one of the most prominent sociological concepts explaining how social exclusion is reproduced through everyday interaction. Goffman does not view stigma as an individual condition or psychological disorder, but rather as a social construct produced through an unequal relationship between the "normal" and the "stigmatized," whereby the community projects a specific characteristic onto the individual, making it the defining factor of their entire being. When this characteristic is considered a

deviation from prevailing norms—such as a criminal record or a past incarceration—it becomes a stigma that obscures the individual's full recognition, regardless of their personal identity or actual behavior.

Goffman explains that stigma doesn't end with the moment the trait is revealed, but continues as a lived social experience that reproduces exclusion in every interaction. The stigmatized individual suffers not only from a revealed past, but also from a social reality that insists on fixating this trait as the source of their identity. Instead of moving beyond it or acknowledging their transformation, they are treated as a permanent bearer of the mark of deficiency or deviance. Here, social interaction becomes an arena for reactivating the stigma, where the individual is forced to justify, withdraw, or accept the imposed stereotype.

In this context, Goffman distinguishes between three types of stigma: bodily stigma, personality stigma, and group stigma. All three express social mechanisms that redefine difference as a deficiency or a threat, contributing to the erosion of an individual's social identity. Bodily stigma includes physical deformities or disabilities, while personality stigma relates to moral or psychological traits perceived as deviations from acceptable behavior. Group stigma, on the other hand, is linked to belonging to specific social, religious, or ethnic groups, which are treated as undesirable or inferior within the prevailing context.

What makes this process complex is that it doesn't occur in a vacuum, but rather within everyday social situations where meanings and values are defined through interaction. This places the stigmatized individual in a constant state of negotiation between their self-image and the image imposed upon them by others. Stigmatization here is not merely a negative label, but an interactive process that reproduces the individual's social reality within a structure that doesn't acknowledge their changes or achievements, but insists on fixing their image within a fixed, negative category.

In this context, later researchers have pointed out that stigma is closely linked to broader social structures involving power relations, control, and the reproduction of conformity, making it a mechanism that not only locates the individual but also perpetuates their reduction within a stereotypical identity used to classify them within an unequal hierarchy that gives dominant groups the power to impose standards of social recognition and determine who is allowed to integrate and who is pushed to the margins (Link & Phelan, 2001).

Wacquant (2009) presented an approach demonstrating how prevailing social structures contribute to the reproduction of exclusion, particularly among groups such as released prisoners, who find themselves trapped by a social gaze that fails to acknowledge their transformations or attempts at integration. In societies fueled by stereotypes, an individual's past continues to dictate their present, closing doors of opportunity and reinforcing their alienation from society.

Analysis of this process reveals that stigmatization is not merely a transient act of discrimination, but extends to establish an alternative social reality in which the stigmatized individual lives on the margins of recognition. Society does not simply define the individual based on their past, but rather rearranges their position within the social structure through that stigma, transforming it into a "reductive identity" that eclipses all other aspects of their being. Herein lies the danger of stigmatization: its capacity to produce a coercive identity that does not reflect the true self, but is imposed from the outside through prevailing stereotypes and public discourse.

Several researchers indicate that what is known as "internal stigma" occurs when an individual internalizes society's negative view of them, weakening their self-confidence and reinforcing their isolation and withdrawal. Corrigan and Watson (2002) highlight that this process is not simply about society's rejection of the individual, but rather the individual's internalization of this rejection and its transformation into a self-conviction that limits their ability to interact and take initiative. The stigmatized individual not only faces the judgmental looks of others, but begins to see themselves through these looks, which produces social withdrawal and a fragmented self-image, making attempts at integration more difficult.

As social experience accumulates in an environment that does not grant recognition, this identity transforms into a psychological and social burden that is difficult to escape. Therefore, understanding stigma not merely as a negative attribute attached to the individual, but as a social process that reshapes the individual's relationship with their

community, is key to understanding the isolation that affects marginalized groups such as those released from prison. The danger of stigma lies not only in its direct impact, but also in its ability to reproduce itself within every interaction, thus perpetuating exclusion and undermining opportunities for recognition and reintegration.

For those released from prison, the stigma is clearly manifested in society's perception of them through their criminal past, preventing their full recognition and reinforcing their role as "stigmatized." This reproduces their internal shame and reinforces their sense of alienation, amidst repeated interactions that confirm their negative labeling. Therefore, understanding this process is essential to comprehending the psychological and social trauma they experience and to supporting the reconstruction of their identities, thus facilitating their reintegration into society.

2.1.2. Distinguishing between the "actual self" and the "virtual self"

Goffman's (1963) distinction between the "actual self" and the "virtual self" is a key analytical tool for understanding the effects of stigma on individual identity. The actual self represents the individual's lived experiences and behaviors, while the virtual self refers to the imagined or expected image that others project onto them based on their cultural backgrounds or prejudices. This tension arises when an individual is socially evaluated not based on their actual reality, but rather through a preconceived stereotype that becomes the standard by which they are judged.

When examining the situation of those released from prison, the centrality of this discrimination becomes clear. These individuals are often confronted with a social perception that reduces them to a fear- and suspicion-laden "virtual self," ignoring their newfound potential or genuine attempts at reintegration. Instead of considering their current trajectory, they are treated as if they possess an unchanging, fixed characteristic, thus perpetuating the gap between who they truly are and what is socially expected or feared of them.

The impact of this perception extends beyond external observation, influencing an individual's self-perception. In an environment that insists on reinforcing this virtual self, the released individual may find themselves in a state of tension, denial, or defensiveness, perhaps even forced acceptance of that image. Here, identity becomes a daily battleground, where the individual struggles to assert their true self against societal perceptions that reject recognition or change.

Contemporary sociological literature shows that this division between the subjective and the social produces a kind of "imposed identity," which forces the individual to conform to prevailing expectations imposed upon them against their will. In this context, the virtual self is not merely a symbolic construct, but rather a material structure embodied in institutional practices such as job denial, difficulty in obtaining housing, or exclusion from social circles—manifestations that systematically reproduce exclusion (Tyler, 2020).

Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of this interaction is that those released may gradually begin to adopt that stereotype, especially if positive social recognition is absent. As some studies indicate, they become prisoners of what is known as "internalized stigma," meaning that when an individual sees themselves through the eyes of others, they internalize their negative perception and make it part of their self-awareness, which weakens their self-confidence and reinforces their social withdrawal (Corrigan & Watson, 2002).

Goffman points out that this gap between the two selves is not bridged simply by the end of the punishment or the change in behavior, because society often reactivates that negative identity in every interaction, reinforcing the feeling of isolation and pushing the individual to withdraw rather than engage. Here, the real self becomes invisible, while the virtual self is imposed as a permanent mask that is difficult to remove.

Understanding this conflict between the actual and the perceived self is essential for analyzing the invisible obstacles faced by those released from prison and for identifying the structural reasons that keep them stigmatized. Identities are not formed solely from within; they are reproduced through recognition or denial, interaction or marginalization, making the struggle for reintegration a matter of identity as much as it is a matter of law or economic opportunity.

From this perspective, no strategy for reintegrating released prisoners can succeed unless the social perceptions that produce the "virtual self"—a preconceived notion that overshadows actual reality—are redefined. The process of rehabilitation is not complete with the individual alone; it must also encompass society, by dismantling stereotypes and redefining marginalized groups through the genuine recognition of their new identities. The tension between an individual's true image and the one imposed by society is a fundamental obstacle to reintegration, necessitating the dismantling of stigma as a first step toward building a more equitable relationship between the individual and their environment.

2.1.3. Stigma as a product of social interaction

Understanding stigma as a social phenomenon is incomplete without analyzing the everyday contexts in which it is produced. Stigma is not merely imposed from above through institutions, but is shaped and reformulated within a network of symbolic interactions that occur in daily life, where meanings are constructed through communication, and social judgments are reinforced through their repetition within ordinary situations. According to the symbolic interaction perspective, identity is not fixed or essential, but rather the product of an ongoing relationship between the "self" and the "other," shaped by others' interpretations of the individual's behavior and by the individual's response to these interpretations (Blumer, 1969).

In this context, Goffman (1963) demonstrates how fleeting social situations—such as a conversation at work, a glance in the street, or silence in a job interview—produce profound effects on the identity of the stigmatized individual, reactivating the stigma as a present and dominant characteristic. Everyday interaction not only generates meaning but also social categorization itself, where discriminatory markers are repeated and "difference" is reframed as "deficiency" or "deviance" warranting caution or exclusion.

Recent literature suggests that this interaction is not neutral, but rather governed by unequal power relations, where certain groups—such as those released from prison—are more likely to be viewed through a lens of suspicion and distrust, regardless of their current actions. In this context, Tyler (2020) asserts that stigma is not merely a social "misunderstanding," but a political practice that is produced and reproduced within everyday spaces through language, gesture, and behavior, making it part of the "machine of inequality" that perpetuates exclusion in the details of daily life.

From this perspective, stigma becomes a social experience that extends beyond overt stances or major moments, reaching into minute details that accumulate a sense of exclusion. Even simple initiatives—such as seeking employment, participating in discussions, or being present in public spaces—become fraught with negative interpretations, subjecting those released from prison to a constant scrutiny that measures their past rather than their present. This recurring experience reshapes their sense of self, leading some to believe that attempts at change may not be rewarded, resulting in a symbolic withdrawal from the social sphere or the reproduction of defensive behaviors that deepen their isolation.

Therefore, those released from prison face not only explicit judgments but also the implicit messages conveyed through the looks, indifference, and lack of trust of others. This reinforces a distorted self-image, leaving them feeling constantly watched and categorized, even in the simplest moments of life. This recurring interaction creates a persistent psychological burden, transforming reintegration into a struggle not only with institutions but also with the very fabric of daily life. Thus, understanding stigma as a product of symbolic interaction is crucial for grasping the roots of isolation and moving beyond the reductionist view that sees stigma as an inherent "characteristic," rather than as a consequence of complex and recurring social interactions.

2.1.4. Distorted identity and impression management

Impression formation is the process by which others develop a preliminary perception of an individual based on their observed behavior, appearance, or speech. The danger of this process lies in its potential reliance on preconceived notions that do not reflect reality, leading to a reduction of an individual's identity to a single, distorted image that impacts their social standing and limits their opportunities to interact with others.

In this context, Goffman (1963) offers a nuanced understanding of distorted identity, based on his conception that identity is not produced in isolation but is socially constructed through daily interactions that define the rules and standards by which an individual's value is measured. When someone fails to conform to these standards, they are subjected to what is known as "stigma," a label that diminishes their symbolic status and distorts their image in the eyes of others. In the case of individuals released from prison, stigma becomes dominant in their identity, reducing their entire personalities to a single label: "former prisoner." This label then becomes the lens through which institutions and society view and treat the individual, regardless of any changes that may occur in their behavior or personality.

This distortion is not limited to external perception; it permeates the self, where the individual reproduces this categorization within their own self-perceptions. This is where what is known as "distorted identity" arises, which is not merely a result of societal judgment, but rather an expression of an internal process of acceptance or conflict with that judgment. Recent research has shown that individuals who experience stigma often develop a persistent sense of shame and inferiority, hindering their ability to interact naturally in social contexts (Pachankis et al., 2008).

In an attempt to cope with this symbolic burden, stigmatized individuals resort to "impression management," a process Goffman described as part of "social functioning," whereby the individual seeks to influence how they are perceived. According to this view, those released employ defensive strategies to conceal their past or to construct new narratives that reframe the prison experience as a moral transformation or a moment of maturation and learning (Goffman, 1959; Maruna & Ramsden, 2004). However, these strategies may be undermined by surrounding contexts, as societal and institutional biases often resist accepting any positive redefinition of the identity of those previously labeled as deviants.

The literature shows that this conflict between self-presentation and the acceptance of social judgments creates what is called "suspended identity," a situation in which the individual lives outside of full symbolic recognition, unable to return to their pre-stigmatization state, nor fully accepted in their new identity (LeBel, 2008). Some research suggests that this situation may lead to what is known as "existential isolation," where the sense of social belonging diminishes, and confidence in the possibility of real change erodes (Winnick & Bodkin, 2008).

From this perspective, understanding and managing distorted identity is inseparable from analyzing the power relations that produce and reproduce stigma, whether through institutional discourses or societal behaviors. The stigmatized individual not only faces the gaze of others but also grapples with a whole structure of norms that determines who is worthy of recognition and who remains trapped on the symbolic margins. In this context, the struggle for recognition is not merely self-defense; it is also a form of resistance against social symbols that force the individual to bear an identity they did not choose.

In summary, Goffman's analysis of distorted identity and impression management reveals the nature of the conflict experienced by stigmatized individuals between their self-image and societal image. Individuals lack the freedom to define themselves and are instead forced to interact with pre-established representations imposed by social contexts. This complexity demonstrates that identity is not a fixed given, but rather an ongoing process of negotiation subject to power relations and recognition. Therefore, understanding the behavior of those released from prison cannot be separated from the social structure that reproduces their stigma, making impression management a social act of resistance as much as it is adaptive.

2.2. Complementary theories

Despite the valuable analytical tools Erving Goffman's stigma theory offers for understanding how social interactions produce a stigma that distorts an individual's image and restricts their identity, relying solely on this framework is insufficient to explain all dimensions of the social experience of those released from prison. The paths of identity reconstruction after exposure to stigma are inseparable from broader symbolic structures, group classifications, and representations of self and other. Therefore, there is a need to broaden the theoretical horizon by incorporating complementary theories that illuminate other aspects of identity formation, belonging, and social interaction.

The experience of those released from prison is not merely about the individual stigma attached to the person, but also involves collective and symbolic dimensions that redefine the self in light of new affiliations and social positions. The individual does not face stigma as an isolated being, but as a former member of a group, striving to reproduce their position within a complex social context that includes prejudices and rigid categorization criteria. This underscores the importance of viewing identity as a product of multi-layered interactions, in which group symbols, discourses of belonging, and standards of acceptance and rejection all play a role.

In this context, the following complementary theories will be presented:

2.2.1. Symbolic Interaction Theory (Mead and Blumer)

Symbolic interactionism is one of the most prominent classical contributions to sociology for understanding identity formation through social interaction. Mead (1934) established this theoretical framework by viewing the self as a social construct, not a self-contained, internal entity. Identity does not form in a vacuum, but rather arises through

the individual's interaction with others, especially when they learn to see themselves as society expects them to be. Mead expressed this concept through the "public other," that is, the image of society that the individual carries within them and that governs their behavior, even in the absence of direct supervision.

This perspective highlights the extent to which self-perception is influenced by social expectations, a fact clearly demonstrated in the experiences of stigmatized individuals, such as those released from prison. The image of the "public other" that the individual holds of society becomes an internal censor, reactivating the stigma of imprisonment even in the absence of any direct external intervention, and affecting their social positioning and the process of rebuilding their identity after their sentence ends.

Blumer (1969) later developed these ideas when he presented a more systematic formulation of symbolic interactionism, emphasizing three main assumptions: first, that individuals behave toward things according to the meanings that those things give them; second, that these meanings arise through social interaction with others; and third, that these meanings are modifiable and changeable through continuous interpretive processes that individuals undertake in their everyday life situations.

Blumer emphasized that social interaction is not merely a means of conveying meaning, but a formative process that produces the symbolic reality in which individuals live. Meaning is not bestowed from the outside, but is shaped through reciprocal action. Thus, self-identity becomes a fluid project, constantly being redefined according to the contexts of interaction and response. For those released from prison, every social situation is an arena for reinterpreting the self or for reinforcing the stereotypes associated with their past. If interactions are dominated by symbols of stigma or pre-existing negative expectations, this restricts their opportunities to negotiate a new meaning for their identity and weakens their chances of genuine integration into society.

Brekhus (2015) offers a contemporary treatment of symbolic interactionism, emphasizing that social categories and their associated meanings are not produced solely at the level of discourse or legal texts, but are fundamentally embodied in the details of everyday life. Social classifications and symbolic boundaries are not always overtly imposed, but are constantly reproduced through ordinary patterns of communication, from silent gestures and reservations to body language.

This perspective helps in understanding how the identity of the "former prisoner" is practiced in everyday life, not as an individual case, but as a social category that is reshaped and symbolically reinforced. Those released face stigma not only in public discourse, but also in the subtle details that govern their interactions with others. Consequently, their attempts to transcend their former identity become linked to their ability to navigate these nuanced interactions within social contexts that do not always allow for a fair negotiation of self-image.

In summary, symbolic interaction theory offers a precise analytical framework for understanding how identity is constructed and reshaped within everyday situations, not as a fixed given, but as an interactive outcome subject to the interpretations and responses of others. From this perspective, the mechanisms by which the stigma of imprisonment persists and its impact on the reproduction of the stigmatized self can be explored, particularly in environments dominated by social expectations and preconceived notions. This paves the way for a shift to theories that focus on the collective structures of identity, most notably social identity theory, which will be discussed later.

2.2.2. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner)

Social identity theory, as developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), is a major contribution to social psychology, providing a profound understanding of the link between group affiliation and self-formation. Originating in a critique of classical psychological individualism, the theory asserts that an individual's identity is not solely derived from their personal characteristics but is largely shaped by their membership in social groups. It is based on three interconnected cognitive and social processes: classification, in which individuals are categorized into social groups (e.g., prisoner/free, deviant/normal); self-identification, where individuals redefine themselves through the category

to which they are assigned; and finally, social comparison, in which the group's standing is measured in relation to other groups, directly impacting an individual's self-esteem.

The theory suggests that individuals are inherently driven to achieve "positive differentiation" for their group, favoring it over others to bolster their sense of self-worth. However, this differentiation is not always readily available, particularly for individuals belonging to low-status or socially stigmatized groups. In his later work, Tajfel (1981) expanded upon these hypotheses, indicating that social categories not only define the individual externally but are also embedded in their self-perception, reshaping their understanding of the world and their place within it. Every social classification transcends mere description; it functions as a construct that produces collective perceptions and long-lasting affective responses. This addition is crucial for understanding how categories are constructed and reproduced, not only through social stereotyping but also through the integration of classification into the structure of consciousness.

The experience of individuals released from prison is one of the most prominent examples that can be understood through the lens of social identity. They are subjected to a rigorous and continuous process of social categorization, placing them in the category of "ex-offenders," a category that carries negative symbolic connotations in the collective imagination. This categorization does not stop at external stigma; it reshapes the individual's self-perception. Once a person belongs to this group—even after their release from prison—they become trapped in an unrecognized symbolic position and find themselves surrounded by a series of societal expectations that reproduce the stigma of the group as a whole.

In this context, the individual is denied the opportunity for positive differentiation and instead experiences a continuous decline in the status of their group, resulting in a sense of internalized shame and a threat to their self-identity. Modern literature demonstrates that these processes not only create a state of exclusion but also lead to what is known as "internalized stigma," where the individual begins to view themselves through the lens of the external group, becoming aware of their inferior position and reproducing their sense of inferiority within themselves. Consequently, identity becomes a psychological and social burden, and self-reconstruction becomes contingent upon a social reclassification that is not easily achieved (LeBel, 2012).

Analyzing the situation of released prisoners through the lens of social identity theory reveals the complexity of the relationship between symbolic belonging, social recognition, and self-construction. Identity is not a fixed entity; rather, it is constructed and reformulated within a social structure that determines who is legitimate and who is excluded. In cases of collective stigma, such as those experienced by released prisoners, the issue is no longer simply discrimination, but rather the reproduction of a stigmatized social category prevented from positive differentiation. In this sense, the distortion of self-experienced by these individuals is not merely a consequence of imprisonment, but a result of being denied membership in a new, recognized group that would provide them with symbolic value and support for their identity. Here, the theory proves its importance not only as a framework for understanding intergroup relations but also as an explanatory tool for the distortion of individual identity under structural social exclusion.

3. Previous Studies

Given the complex nature of this research, which stems from a sociological analysis of the experience of stigma and distorted self among those released from prison, relevant previous studies fall into three main categories. The first category comprises studies that address the social stigma that pursues individuals after release, focusing on forms of discrimination and social rejection and their repercussions on the potential for reintegration and return to public life. The second category focuses on the impact of the prison experience on identity, and the psychological and social effects it leaves behind, weakening an individual's self-perception and reshaping it according to negative societal classifications. The third category, which is most closely linked to the theoretical framework of this research, consists of studies that draw on Erving Goffman's theory of stigma and shame, and its associated strategies of "impression management" and "identity concealment"—concepts that are central to analyzing the process of self-reconstruction for individuals who have experienced imprisonment and social exclusion.

Based on this classification, previous studies will be presented according to the following three axes:

3.1. Studies that addressed the social stigma of those released

The literature has shown increasing interest in analyzing the impact of stigma on individuals released from prison, as a social phenomenon that reproduces exclusion after the official sentence has ended. In this context, Pager (2003)

presented a pioneering empirical study that used a comparative field study approach to compare employment opportunities between individuals with and without a criminal record. The study revealed that simply having a criminal background significantly reduces the likelihood of employment, even with equal qualifications.

Winnick & Bodkin (2008) also presented a quantitative study focusing on internal stigma among released individuals. They indicated that some adopt a negative societal view of themselves, leading to a deterioration in their social relationships and reinforcing the formation of a stable, distorted identity. The study concluded that stigma is not limited to the external dimension but permeates self-awareness, producing an identity based on shame and alienation.

In the same vein, LeBel (2012) presented a qualitative study based on interviews with a number of released individuals in the United States. The study concluded that participants expressed a persistent feeling of carrying an "invisible mark" that haunted them in the details of their daily lives. The study focused on the individual's perception of stigma as a factor affecting self-esteem and reducing their chances of social reintegration.

In a subsequent study, Moore et al. (2013) analyzed the relationship between an individual's awareness of their stigma and their social behavior after release from prison. Using longitudinal data, the study demonstrated that higher awareness of stigma is negatively associated with proactive change or job seeking, and also affects levels of depression and motivation. The findings confirmed that stigma is not merely an external social judgment, but rather leaves a long-lasting psychological and behavioral impact that limits the potential for effective reintegration into society.

Western et al. (2015) conducted a longitudinal study exploring the impact of prison stigma on various aspects of life after release, such as access to healthcare, housing, and employment. The results showed that released individuals suffer from the accumulation of social burdens resulting from stigma, which cumulatively affects all aspects of their lives, ultimately producing a lasting feeling of symbolic and actual exclusion from society.

Taken together, these studies reveal that stigma is not merely externally imposed, but rather reshapes an individual's self-perception, often producing a distorted self-burdened by shame, fear, and helplessness. Furthermore, the effects of stigma extend far beyond outward discrimination, impacting daily interactions, psychological structures, and opportunities for reintegration after imprisonment. This makes it a pivotal element in understanding the experience of released prisoners from a comprehensive sociological perspective.

3.2. Studies that addressed the impact of imprisonment on identity

Prison is an experience that profoundly reshapes an individual's self-perception and identity. It creates an institutional environment characterized by isolation and surveillance, reinforcing negative social labels. In this context, Haney (2001) presented a foundational study analyzing the long-term psychological effects of the prison experience. He demonstrated that the punitive environment gradually erodes feelings of autonomy and dignity, leading to what he termed a "negative adaptive identity"—an identity based on withdrawal and detachment from the outside world. He concluded that prison weakens individuals' ability to rebuild their identities after release, keeping them trapped in negative social categories.

Irwin (2005), on the other hand, focused on what he called "the continuity of imprisonment after release," where the individual carries with him into civilian life language and behaviors acquired in the penal environment. He saw these patterns as forming part of a prison identity that fixes the individual in a marginal social position, preventing him from becoming an independent social actor, thus producing a pattern of reproducing social marginalization in the post-prison phase.

In an in-depth interactive study, Crewe (2009) demonstrated that a prisoner's identity is not solely produced by formal punishments, but is also shaped by the subtle power dynamics and daily hierarchies among prisoners and by institutional surveillance. She showed that imprisonment redefines the individual in terms of their position within the system—whether obedient or rebellious, powerful or submissive—categories that subsequently influence self-perception and the individual's place in society after release.

In a related context, Liebling & Maruna (2013) explained that penal institutions produce what can be described as a "fixed stigmatized identity," which is difficult to break without effective social interventions. The study indicated that the failure to provide alternative narratives of self within the penal institution contributes to the entrenchment of a negative identity, meaning that release from prison does not equate to release from the logic of categorization and the associated psychological isolation.

Walker et al. (2015) highlighted the pivotal role of social support during and after imprisonment in identity reconstruction. It showed that the absence of support networks reinforces the entrenchment of a marginal identity, while positive relationships and reintegration opportunities can restore an individual's ability to define themselves outside of punitive categories, helping them resist the complete internalization of social stigma.

These studies reveal that the prison experience is not merely a spatial and temporal confinement, but a pivotal social event that reshapes an individual's self-perception and brands them with an identity that conforms to negative societal classifications. This makes the question of identity after release a crucial area for understanding the difficulty of reintegration and the extent of the long-term psychological and social impact of the prison experience.

3.3. Sociological studies have used Goffman's theory to understand shame and stigma

Goffman (1963) provided a highly influential theoretical framework for analyzing the mechanisms of social stigma, highlighting how society categorizes individuals based on traits deemed unacceptable and reproduces shame in their identities through everyday interactions. He distinguished between multiple types of stigma, explaining that individuals seek to protect their identity through impression management strategies and attempts to control how others perceive them. This work has become a central reference in analyzing the effects of social categorization and exclusion.

In a subsequent study, Harding (2003) used Goffman's concept of "dominant trait," suggesting that the stigma of imprisonment becomes the dominant characteristic that defines an individual to others. He showed that some released prisoners use personal narratives that reframe their experience as one of transformation, not shame, in order to reduce the impact of the stigma during their job search. The study demonstrates how constructing a new identity requires retelling the self in a socially acceptable light.

In this context, Harding et al. (2017) developed an analytical framework to distinguish between fixed narratives that perpetuate distorted identity and fluid narratives that contribute to the symbolic reconstruction of the self. Based on Goffman's theory, the study showed that support from non-judgmental individuals can be a source of strength for the individual in the face of stigma, thus enhancing opportunities for readjustment and reintegration.

For their part, Keene et al. (2018) focused on the obstacles faced by released prisoners in obtaining housing, drawing on Goffman's theory to analyze the impact of stigma on formal relationships. The study showed that concealing one's prison history is often a necessary tactic to avoid rejection, and that housing represents not merely shelter but a space for rebuilding social identity beyond previous classifications.

Overton et al. (2024) explored the role of personal narrative in mitigating stigma, suggesting that presenting oneself through stories highlighting suffering and efforts toward change contributes to renegotiating an individual's position within society. Their study revealed that these narratives not only lessen negative perceptions but also enable individuals to construct a new, more acceptable identity. The analysis drew upon Goffman's concepts of symbolic interaction to understand how these narratives are constructed and their impact on shaping the audience's initial impressions.

Together, these studies demonstrate that Goffman's theory remains a powerful tool for understanding shame and stigma, not merely as social judgments, but as interactive processes that reshape the self and hinder reintegration. They also underscore that narrative, impression, and everyday relationships are central to resisting stigmatizing stereotypes and actively renegotiating identity after imprisonment.

The preceding overview demonstrates that studies have addressed stigma and the prison experience from multiple perspectives, both in terms of the impact of external stigma on reintegration opportunities and through an analysis of the transformations that occur in an individual's identity within the penal environment. The application of Goffman's theory has also contributed to clarifying how stigmatized identities are formed through social interaction and societal

representations. However, most of these studies have focused on the structural or behavioral aspects of the post-prison experience, without sufficiently delving into understanding the subjective ways in which the released individual experiences feelings of internal shame or their identity conflict between a stigmatized past and a present in which they seek to rebuild themselves. Furthermore, this literature has not given sufficient weight to analyzing the complex relationship between internalized stigma and impression management strategies from a narrative perspective. Herein lies the research gap that this study seeks to fill, through a sociological approach that focuses on the experience of the stigmatized self, and attempts to answer questions related to how internal shame is formed, the mechanisms of identity reconstruction, and the limits of the role that social structures play in facilitating or hindering this transformation.

Focusing on the subjective dimension of the stigma experience, and on how individuals express their internal conflicts, is a rare approach in the literature, despite its potential for a deeper understanding of the post-prison experience. By examining the narratives of released prisoners and analyzing their strategies for dealing with societal perceptions, this study offers a qualitative perspective on how the self is reshaped in the face of persistent negative social labels. Thus, the study does not merely trace the effects of stigma, but rather approaches it as a dynamic social process reflected in discourses, behaviors, and attempts to regain recognition and dignity.

4. Methodology

Given the complex and sensitive nature of the subject of the study, which deals with the negative social representations associated with those released from prisons, and the reflection of these representations on identity construction in light of Irving Goffman's theory, we decided to adopt a qualitative methodology that is appropriate to the main objective of the research, which is to understand the subjective experiences and social meanings through which individuals rebuild their identity after release, in light of the marginalization and social rejection they are exposed to.

The qualitative approach is the most appropriate way to deconstruct these invisible dynamics, laden with symbols and meanings, as it allows us to get closer to the reality of individuals and study their perceptions and attitudes in a more in-depth way, without reducing their experience to abstract quantitative numbers or indicators.

In this context, the case study was chosen as a general methodological framework for the study, because it provides the possibility of delving into a specific social situation and analyzing it within its realistic and lived context, which contributes to producing rich knowledge about how self-identity is affected by internal stigma, and the mechanisms of resistance or adaptation that released individuals may adopt.

Based on the above, it can be said that adopting this methodological approach provides flexible analytical tools for understanding the complexities of the daily life experience of those released, and enhances the possibility of revealing the meanings and connotations that they ascribe to themselves and to their relationships within the surrounding society, in light of the ongoing stigma, discrimination, and social marginalization they face.

This section reviews the elements of the methodology used in the study in a manner that is appropriate to the research objectives and questions, as follows:

4.1. Type of study

This study is a single-case study, a fundamental methodology in qualitative sociological research, used when the aim is to delve into a unique or complex social or human experience. This study focuses on the case of a released prisoner, whose experience is rich and expressive of intertwined social and psychological phenomena, such as internalized shame, social stigma, distorted self-image, and identity reconstruction within the context of societal perceptions.

This type of study allows the researcher to delve into the intricate details of an individual's experience, moving beyond superficial or general descriptions, by tracing their biography, behaviors, daily interactions, and thought patterns. Instead of searching for general laws, the case study focuses on a deep understanding of how theoretical concepts—

such as "stigma," "identity," and "impression management"—are embodied in the individual's reality, and how they are reshaped by their actions, attitudes, and resistance to the negative stereotypes imposed upon them by society.

Through this approach, the study contributes to enriching the sociological understanding of stigma, not only as a social classification, but as a complex daily lived experience that directly affects self-perception, reshapes social relationships, and often restricts the potential for actual reintegration into the social fabric.

4.2. The methodology used

This study adopts a qualitative approach as the most suitable methodological framework for understanding complex social phenomena related to human experience and the meanings individuals ascribe to their reality. This approach focuses on exploring depth rather than breadth, and on understanding rather than statistical interpretation, making it an effective tool for analyzing sensitive topics such as the experience of internal stigma and distorted self-image among those released from prison.

The qualitative approach enables the researcher to build an interactive relationship with the case under study, based on listening, reflection, and observation, thus allowing for the uncovering of the psychological, social, and contextual dimensions that constitute the experience. It also allows for the analysis of the symbols and meanings that the individual uses to express themselves and to interpret their relationship with society, in light of their feelings of shame or rejection, or their attempts to adapt and rebuild.

This approach supports the interpretive orientation of the study, which prioritizes understanding how individuals perceive themselves and reproduce their identities within relationships of power, discrimination, and stigma, in line with the theoretical framework based on Irving Goffman's theses on impression management and distorted identity.

4.3. Study tool

In keeping with the qualitative nature of the adopted methodology, the in-depth interview was chosen as the primary data collection tool, given its ability to provide access to the internal structures of an individual's experience and to understand the subjective and social meanings they express in their own language. The in-depth interview is considered an effective means of exploring an individual's self-perceptions, their feelings related to stigma, and their strategies for coping, resisting, or reconstructing their identity after release from prison.

This tool is distinguished by its flexibility, allowing the researcher to expand on the topics that appear most relevant during the interview and return to sensitive or important points without being bound by a closed format or pre-defined questions. It also fosters a trusting and humane relationship, encouraging the interviewee to disclose their personal experiences and deep interactions with society.

The data gathered from the interview will be reinforced through non-participant observation, a technique with broad potential for understanding social behaviors and interactions as they actually occur in everyday life, not just as they are verbally expressed in conversations or interviews. This field observation can take place in the locations where the subject is present, whether within their family environment, their community, or even in social support spaces and rehabilitation programs they participate in. This significantly contributes to identifying subtle daily dynamics that may not be readily apparent in spoken or described discourse.

Combining these two tools enriches the analysis and gives the researcher a deeper understanding of the tensions that an individual experiences between their self-image as they see it and their image as seen by others.

4.4. Fields of study

The spatial scope of the study is the Prisoners' Welfare Association in Tanta, located at 43 Al-Sagha Street, Tanta, Gharbia Governorate, Arab Republic of Egypt. It is an institution concerned with providing psychological and social support to those released from prisons, making it a suitable environment for monitoring the interactions and extended effects of social stigma in a practical and realistic context.

As for the time frame, it was set from June 4 to June 19, 2025, which is the period during which the in-depth interviews and field follow-up of the case under study were conducted.

The humanities field employs a single-case study approach, selecting an individual released prisoner whose case qualitatively reflects the psychological and social conflicts stemming from internal stigma, and the challenges associated with attempting to rebuild personal and social identity after release. The selection of this case was carefully considered to ensure it was representative of the study's theme in terms of the nature of the crime, the length of the prison sentence, and the time elapsed since release, thus providing a sufficient temporal and psychological context for the emergence of the effects and consequences of stigma.

4.5. Sample selection criteria

A set of methodological criteria was established for selecting the case study, ensuring its consistency with the nature of the research topic. These criteria included the following:

- a- Prison period: The person being investigated must have spent a sufficient period of imprisonment to allow for the formation of deep psychological and social effects, and this has been determined to be no less than three years.
- b- Type of crime: The crime must be of a type that is associated with a high degree of social stigma, such as theft or moral crimes.
- c- Time since release: A moderate period of time (from six months to two years) must have passed since the release, allowing for attempts at reintegration to emerge, without the effects of imprisonment having faded away.

Based on these criteria, the case of a released prisoner who had served five years for robbery was selected. He had been released approximately a year prior. This case clearly illustrates the psychological and social struggles associated with rebuilding one's identity, particularly given the lingering effects of the internal and social stigma that continues to haunt him after his release.

This case study offers a unique analytical opportunity to understand how the concepts of "distorted self" and "stigma," as discussed by Erving Goffman in his theory, are embodied. The subject demonstrates a clear awareness of the alteration in his self-image in the eyes of others and expresses internal conflicts related to his attempt to regain his dignity and social identity. Furthermore, his social and living conditions after release allow for the observation of strategies of adaptation, withdrawal, or renegotiation of his social status. This makes the case a mirror reflecting manifestations of inner shame and the struggle to reconstruct the self within the context of an existing social stigma.

4.6. Data analysis method

The qualitative nature of the data collected through in-depth interviews with the case study necessitates a meticulous and detailed analysis to explore the released individual's personal experience in confronting social stigma and inner shame. Therefore, the analysis will focus on deconstructing and interpreting the texts through systematic stages that seek to uncover the deeper meanings and patterns expressing the psychological and social conflicts associated with stigma and identity reconstruction. The analysis comprises two main phases:

- a- Interview Content Analysis: The analysis process begins with a careful and repeated reading of the interview transcripts, breaking them down into smaller units of meaning categorized according to themes that express feelings and life experiences related to inner shame and psychological and social tension. The analysis focuses on identifying situations and events that influence the released individual's psychological and social state, documenting real-life examples that reflect the tensions and contradictions between the true self and the distorted identity. This stage allows for a precise understanding of the individual's internal conflicts and how the stigma affects their social relationships.
- b- Extracting Behavioral and Symbolic Patterns: After classifying the content, behavioral and symbolic patterns that express strategies for coping with stigma and shame are extracted. The use of symbols such as the "mask," representing an attempt to conceal a distorted identity to maintain a socially acceptable image, and the "wall," symbolizing the psychological and social barriers that an individual builds to protect themselves from rejection or discrimination, are prominent. Other patterns also appear, such as social withdrawal, reflecting an attempt to escape pressures, or confrontation, reflecting resistance to or negotiation with social reality.

This analysis reveals the relationship between internal shame and identity reconstruction, showing how social stigma imposes social roles that require the individual to adopt "masks" and psychological barriers, according to Irving Goffman's theory, which explains that individuals constantly seek to manage their image in front of society and renegotiate their identity to achieve psychological and social balance.

5. Results

Based on the research objectives and questions that this study sought to answer, this section presents the findings obtained through field interviews and data analysis within the framework of the adopted theory. Several recurring patterns were revealed, reflecting the experiences of released prisoners in confronting social stigma and their ongoing attempts to rebuild their identities amidst stressful social conditions. To ensure greater coherence between the theoretical framework and the field findings, the analysis will be presented according to the following themes:

5.1. Manifestations of internal shame among those released

The interviewee confirmed that he suffers from a deep sense of shame and self-isolation, stemming from his awareness of society's perception of him as a "former criminal." He explained that people constantly judge him based on his past in prison, to the point that even when talking to himself, he feels impure and unlike others.

This feeling can be explained in light of the concept of "self-stigma," where the individual adopts the negative perceptions that society holds about him, and reproduces them internally, leading to a continuous psychological disturbance as a result of the conflict between his real identity and the social identity expected of him.

The interviewee reported that he tended to avoid interacting with others in social gatherings, tended to withdraw to a corner, avoiding talking to others, and often looked at the ground when strangers were present or when talking about his past.

He stated that these situations make him feel like he doesn't exist or is unwanted, and that others see him only on the basis of his past, and not as a normal human being living his life.

He reported that this feeling of internal shame causes a decrease in his self-esteem and an increase in feelings of anxiety and tension, making the reintegration process extremely difficult.

The interviewee added that he cannot face his image in the mirror without recalling memories of his past, and that he feels psychologically broken despite the passage of time, and even if people forget him, he cannot forget himself.

He also confirmed that he feels a burden on his family, despite the absence of any explicit rejection from them, and that he feels like a burden on them and not in his natural place among them.

The interviewee expressed a feeling of hopelessness about the future, noting that he works and learns, but does not believe it is possible for him to return to a normal life, as the inner voice keeps telling him that his past sins distinguish him and he cannot be like others.

In this context, he expressed his feeling that his continuous attempts to prove himself and improve his reality are met with a constant inner sense of futility, as if his efforts are predetermined to be unappreciated or unsuccessful, which deepens his sense of helplessness and disappointment.

However, the interviewee indicated that he often blames himself for his current situation, even when he tries to justify his past with poverty or social pressures, as guilt remains present and undermines his ability to build a positive self-image.

The interviewee sometimes expressed a feeling of inner turmoil, finding himself torn between his desire to move beyond the past and start a new life, and a constant feeling that this past was still present in his own eyes and in the eyes of others.

The case of the individual reveals how internalized shame transforms into an ongoing psychological experience, intertwined with feelings of embarrassment and isolation, reflecting a disruption in the harmony between the self and the surrounding social reality. Goffman explains that this tension arises from the discrepancy between the individual's

self-image and the image society imposes upon them, leading to a fragmentation of identity and a collapse in self-confidence. In the individual's case, this fragmentation manifests as an inability to confront either the self or society, translating into withdrawal and isolation behaviors that hinder their social and psychological rehabilitation. Goffman emphasizes that internalized shame is not merely a fleeting feeling but a persistent condition stemming from a profound internal conflict.

From the perspective of sociopsychological theories, the subject's experience can be understood within the framework of social stigma theory, which suggests that individuals perceived as social outcasts suffer from self-recrimination and low self-esteem as a result of internalized stigma. According to Link et al. (1989), a distorted identity results from this dissonance between their true identity and the identity imposed by society, creating a profound internal conflict that leads to psychological and social instability. Symbolic interaction theory further clarifies that individuals do not form their identity in isolation from their social interactions; their self-perception is shaped by what they observe in the expressions and reactions of others, making self-stigma inevitable if discriminatory social behavior persists. This analysis underscores the importance of social reintegration interventions that extend beyond the individual to include modifying societal attitudes to reduce stigma and enhance opportunities for support and acceptance.

5.2. Strategies to reduce stigma (denial, avoidance, justification...)

The interviewee reported that he employs various methods in his daily life to cope with the social stigma associated with his past. He indicated that he often "acts as if nothing happened," attempting to deny his previous involvement with prison. He even stated that he presents himself to others solely based on his current roles, without mentioning his past. He mentioned avoiding places where he might encounter people who know his history and taking care to steer clear of discussions that could bring back memories of that period.

It was clear from his manner of speaking and tone that he was striving to construct a new image of himself, one cleansed and free from the past. He indicated that he sometimes justifies what happened as a "mistake of a lifetime" or "a phase that has ended," believing that everyone is prone to error, but that no one deserves to be judged for it for the rest of their life. It was also observed that he exaggerates his current seriousness and commitment, as if he wants to emphasize his complete transformation, attempting to overcome the stereotypes he believes others hold about him.

He also explained that he is careful in choosing the people he interacts with and avoids relationships that might dredge up the past, noting that "less is more," and that silence in some situations protects him from exposure or embarrassment. This tendency toward avoidance and denial, he said, is "more comfortable than confrontation," even if it comes at the expense of his peace of mind.

In this context, certain symbolic meanings can be discerned in the interviewee's discourse. He seems to be presenting a selective version of himself, revealing aspects that conform to social expectations while concealing others, in an attempt to reshape his image and distance himself from the shadows of the past. His speech also suggests a psychological distance separating him from his surroundings, as if invisible boundaries define his relationships with others, contributing to a state of caution and withdrawal that protects him from potential scrutiny or prejudice.

The case study reveals that strategies for mitigating stigma are inseparable from an ongoing internal conflict between the desire for inclusion and the fear of rejection. The adoption of mechanisms such as denial, avoidance, and rationalization reflects an attempt to regain control over one's identity, but simultaneously expresses its fragility. Corrigan (2005) explains that individuals with an internalized stigma seek to protect themselves from social exposure by developing defense mechanisms that alleviate psychological pain, but which, in the long run, may lead to self-isolation and limit their potential for reintegration. This behavior can be explained by the concept of the "reflected self" within symbolic interactionism theory, where the individual reconstructs their self-image based on what they perceive others to be thinking of them.

The concept of the "reflected self" is central to symbolic interactionism theory, developed by Charles Horton Cooley to explain how an individual's self-identity is shaped by their perception of how others perceive them. According to

this concept, the individual does not see themselves directly, but rather through a "social mirror" of their daily interactions. They imagine how they appear to others, infer their evaluations, and then respond emotionally to these reflections with feelings of pride, shame, or self-rejection (Andersen & Taylor, 2025). This concept suggests that identity is not a fixed essence, but rather an interactive outcome influenced by the social environment and the mental images exchanged between the individual and society.

In the case of the individual being interviewed, his attempts to deny his past and avoid discussing it are a direct reflection of this self-perception. He understands that society may hold a negative view of him due to his past record, which compels him to reshape his identity in a way that provides him with a form of psychological and social protection. He seeks integration by presenting a new self-image, derived from what he hopes others will perceive him to be, within a framework of acceptance and transcendence of the stigma.

From a social theory perspective, these strategies can be understood in light of impression management theory, as presented by Goffman (1963), which posits that individuals constantly strive to present themselves to others in a way that avoids rejection or stigmatization. In the case of the subject, avoiding or justifying the past represents a continuous attempt to control the perceived image of them. Furthermore, symbolic interaction theory explains that actions such as denial or justification are practiced within a social context, where identity is formed through interaction with societal expectations. The persistence of discriminatory attitudes reinforces individuals' adoption of these strategies, highlighting the need for a holistic approach that addresses both self-identity and societal attitudes simultaneously.

5.3. The identity conflict between a criminal past and a reformist present

The interviewee revealed that his current identity is fraught with complex internal tensions stemming from the interplay between his criminal past and his persistent attempts to present himself as a reformed individual. He lives in a state of division between "who he was" and "who he aspires to become," with the past still casting a heavy shadow on the present, even as he tries to transcend it behaviorally and socially.

The subject's case reveals an internal conflict between his criminal past and his present, in which he strives to build a new self-based on discipline and reform. Despite his efforts to demonstrate change, this conflict continues to manifest in his daily behavior, through his constant attempts to avoid anything that might reconnect him to or remind him of his past, while simultaneously striving to project a current, upright image.

The interviewee expressed feeling that society doesn't allow him to completely break free from his past, but rather constantly reminds him of it in various situations, whether through the looks of others, indirect comments, or even by restricting the opportunities available to him. He indicated that he feels as if he is "carrying an open file that can never be closed," and that any attempt he makes to demonstrate change is often met with disbelief or skepticism, leading him to wonder at certain moments: "Am I being punished twice?"—once with imprisonment, and again with societal rejection.

This identity conflict leads to a state of constant tension, as the subject tries to reconcile two selves:

- a- An old self associated with stigma and deviance, which he cannot forget because of the social impact it leaves.
- b- A new, reformist self, which he seeks to establish through positive behavior and engagement in valued community roles.

This conflict between the two identities clearly transcends the psychological dimension, reaching the social level, where society's perception of him restricts him and reinforces stereotypes, thus weakening his ability to establish a new, acceptable identity. The individual still feels haunted by his old image and that society does not acknowledge his reform efforts, deepening his sense of a divided and incomplete identity.

This state of division reflects a tension between the "imposed identity" imposed upon him by others, based on his past, and the "desired identity" he seeks to establish in the present. This tension is a form of "anxious identity," where the individual is unable to transcend his past image or replace it with a new one due to persistent social pressures such as stigma and discrimination.

From the perspective of Goffman's (1963) theory, this conflict embodies the state of "tainted identity," where the individual struggles to regain a socially acceptable image despite their past. This tension can also be understood through the concept of "identity management" within everyday interactive contexts, where the individual is forced to modify their behavior or conceal parts of their history to maintain a fragile psychological and social equilibrium. This intersects with the concept of "impression management," where the individual seeks to control how they are perceived by presenting themselves in a carefully crafted manner, yet this remains vulnerable to collapse under the constant social reminders of their past.

Symbolic interactionism, as developed within the framework of Burke & Stets' (2009) "identity theory," clarifies that identity is not understood as a fixed essence, but rather is constructed through ongoing interactions with others, taking shape in light of social roles and their associated expectations. In this context, a criminal past becomes an indelible part of the formed self-image, as noted in the previous conclusion regarding the concept of the "reflected self," thus reinforcing the internal division between what is and what ought to be.

Furthermore, one can draw upon sociological literature on "social identity" to understand this fragmentation. This literature, particularly the work of Tajfel and Turner (1979), indicates that identity is influenced by social relationships and is reshaped based on group affiliations and past experiences. In the absence of societal recognition of change, the researcher's reformist identity remains fragile and vulnerable to threats from prevailing negative perceptions.

The identity conflict between past and present not only reflects individual suffering but also represents a societal failure to support reintegration processes. The lack of recognition of change and the persistence of a punitive outlook lead to self-doubt, which may cause the individual to abandon their reform efforts or, in some cases, to re-engage in criminal behavior as a desperate reaction to continued social rejection.

5.4. The impact of societal views on their reintegration or exclusion

The interviewee's statements revealed that societal perception plays a crucial role in the reintegration process or in perpetuating social exclusion after release from prison. He clearly indicated that the social image by which he is viewed directly impacts his ability to reintegrate, not only through overt statements or attitudes, but also through a complex network of implicit messages that reinforce rejection, such as suspicion, indifference, and unspoken discrimination.

The interviewee believes that society does not treat those released from prison as people who have turned the page on their past, but rather as individuals under "symbolic surveillance," where their daily behavior is reinterpreted through the lens of their past, placing them in a constant cycle of evaluation and caution. He expressed feeling that people's gazes "scrutinize him more than they see him," and that he struggles to build new relationships due to the prejudices that shape others' perceptions of him. He notes that this restricts him not only in personal relationships but also extends to job opportunities, community participation, and even public spaces, where he sometimes feels "unwelcome".

The case of the interviewee indicates that the stigma of imprisonment is not limited to the sentence itself, but extends beyond it, being reproduced socially in various ways that transform the past into a daily burden, weighing down the present and hindering the future. This has led him to feel that "society is unforgiving," and that his past has become a "markcard" preceding him everywhere. He describes himself as living in a state of "constant anticipation of the unspoken accusation," which is reflected in his feelings of insecurity and distrust of his surroundings.

From the perspective of "social stigma" theory, as presented by Goffman (1963), this case exemplifies the "stigmatized individual," who is treated based on a generalized negative attribute that excludes them from normal social roles. The individual is not seen as someone seeking change, but rather as a "former criminal," a label through which they are reinterpreted. This leads to what is known as "distorted identity discrimination," where the stigma is constantly reproduced, hindering reintegration and weakening the individual's capacity for normal social interaction.

This finding aligns with the theory of "social identity" and contemporary social psychology literature, which indicates that belonging to a stigmatized group—such as those released from prison—leads to decreased self-esteem and feelings of exclusion and isolation. This stems from the individual's perception of societal rejection and lack of recognition as a fully capable member. This situation can contribute to what is known as "negative identification," where the individual adopts the negative image imposed upon them by society. Recent studies (such as Haslam et al., 2020) suggest that these negative psychological effects are exacerbated when society is unwilling to accept change or acknowledge rehabilitation efforts, thus increasing the tendency toward social withdrawal and diminishing opportunities for reintegration.

The interviewee indicated that he feels every opportunity he aspires to – whether in work or social integration – is met with a silent wall of rejection, sometimes leading him to question the value of change and to consider withdrawing from public life and choosing a secluded existence. This reflects the profound impact that societal perceptions have, not only on an individual's behavior but also on their self-awareness and their belief in the possibility of overcoming the past.

Following the daily life of the subject within his family and community context revealed multiple facets of the interactions he experiences, both at home and in his immediate surroundings. By tracking his behavior in social situations and the way others receive him, clear signs of caution, detachment, and sometimes veiled indifference emerged. These everyday details lent a realistic tone to the presented data, clearly reflecting the tension he experiences between his desire for integration and a social reality that doesn't offer an open welcome, but rather subtly reproduces distance and suspicion.

For example, the interviewee was observed avoiding large family gatherings, despite being invited, because he felt that the looks of some relatives carried a degree of suspicion or implicit condemnation. He also mentioned a specific experience when he applied for a job at a shop and was rejected after being asked to provide his criminal record, which created a feeling that his past would continue to haunt him despite his earnest attempts to integrate. In another instance, the interviewee mentioned that one of his neighbors avoided shaking his hand at a religious event, merely greeting him from a distance, which he interpreted as a sign of the continued stigma within his social circle. These examples, among others, highlight how stigma manifests itself in the details of daily life, not as direct acts of hostility, but as small, repeated actions that accumulate a feeling of exclusion and symbolic rejection.

The impact of societal attitudes extends beyond mere discrimination; they are employed as a mechanism for perpetuating failure and exclusion. When an individual encounters rejection or suspicion at every attempt at integration, they are forced to reconsider their path to reform, either by continuing to resist the stigma despite the high psychological costs, or by surrendering to it as a new, imposed identity, which poses a real threat to the stability of the reintegration process.

Overall, the results show that societal perception is a crucial determinant in the matter of reintegration. It either provides a supportive environment that fosters a sense of belonging and respect, or it reproduces exclusion through invisible social mechanisms, trapping the individual in a vicious cycle of shame and rejection, and threatening the very foundation of the reform project.

In light of the analysis of the field data obtained from the case of the released person, the most prominent results reached by the study can be summarized as follows:

- a- The feeling of inner shame dominated the experience of the released person after his release, as it appeared through his withdrawal into himself, his avoidance of social interaction, and his constant feeling of guilt and shame about his criminal past, which reflects his deep concern about the way others see him.
- b- Adopting defensive strategies to alleviate the stigma of social disfigurement, which included denial, avoidance, and justification, as the released person sought to alleviate the pressure of the stigma and tried to present himself in a different light from the "former criminal," but these strategies remained of limited effect in light of the surrounding social reality.
- c- The emergence of a clear identity conflict between the past and the present, as the released person suffered from an internal rupture between his desire to start a new life and his separation from his old image, and society's continued definition of him based on his past, which made him live in a state of self-instability.

d- The community's perception greatly affected his chances of reintegration, as he faced real difficulties in obtaining work or community support, and felt rejected by the wider social environment, except for some limited support from his family, which reinforces the hypothesis that social stigma is one of the most prominent obstacles to the actual integration of those released.

These findings reveal that the post-prison experience does not end with release, but rather reproduces new forms of social and psychological suffering. Released prisoners face a struggle with themselves on one hand, and with society on the other. In this context, Erving Goffman's "stigma" theory contributes to a deeper understanding of this experience. Goffman argues that stigma produces a "distorted identity" that accompanies the individual and affects their self-perception and their interactions with others. The released prisoner in this study serves as an example of a socially stigmatized individual who strives to negotiate with their old image and construct a new self. However, societal rejection and the individual's own internal rejection, influenced by that stigma, hinder this process.

Thus, the accumulated internal shame within the individual resulting from the harsh prison experience, along with the accompanying feelings of guilt, brokenness, and stigma, as well as the repercussions of societal rejection, produce a complex identity crisis that is one of the most prominent manifestations of long-term social exclusion. This makes the process of identity reconstruction for released individuals an arduous and complex task, requiring sustained psychological effort, unwavering willpower, and a profound shift in societal attitudes towards them. This shift must be based on recognizing their humanity and capacity for change, and granting them a fair opportunity for a new life unconstrained by stigma and undistorted by classifications and prejudices.

In light of this, the released individual's attempts in this study can be understood within what Goffman calls "strategic impression management," where the individual seeks to present their new self to others in a way that mitigates the stigma. Through their daily behavior and explanations of their past actions, the released individual tried to present themselves as someone who had changed and moved beyond their past, which is part of the process of reintroducing themselves "to the social public" in an acceptable manner. However, the effectiveness of this management remains limited as long as societal prejudices persist, keeping identity in a state of negotiation and suspension, and deepening the crisis of the distorted self that Goffman described.

In this context, Goffman (1963, p. 3) says: "When an individual is stigmatized, his social identity becomes defined in a way that contradicts normal expectations, and others begin to see him only through this deficiency, not through his other qualities." Here, the effect of stigma is manifested in reducing the person to his past, and fixing his previous image as the essence of his being, which represents the main obstacle to reintegration and self-redefinition.

Although this study was based on the individual case of a single released prisoner, the data and analyses drawn largely reflect recurring patterns in the experiences of many released prisoners who face similar challenges in interacting with themselves and their social environment. The psychological and social dimensions revealed by this experience are significant indicators that identity crises, the burden of stigma, and difficulties in reintegration are not isolated individual traits, but rather broader social phenomena that require further study and intervention from both societal and institutional bodies.

6. Recommendations

The findings of this study demonstrate that the experience of those released from prison extends beyond legal or procedural aspects, touching upon the very core of individual identity and social integration. Stigma and social exclusion pose significant obstacles to rebuilding self-awareness. Therefore, this issue requires multi-layered responses, encompassing public policies, psychological support, cultural discourse, and institutional interventions. In light of this, the following recommendations can be made:

6.1. Policies for social reintegration

a- Enacting legislation that protects released prisoners from discrimination in the labor market, and encourages employers to hire them through tax incentives or financial support.

b- Establishing specialized government units to monitor the reintegration of released prisoners, linking the relevant authorities (prisons, Ministry of Social Affairs, labor market).

c- Developing genuine vocational rehabilitation programs within prisons that continue after release, to ensure continuity and non-interruption.

6.2. Psychological and social support programs for those released

a- Providing individual and group psychological support sessions for those released, taking into account the effects of internal shame and identity conflicts.

b- Establishing community centers that provide accompanying services (follow-up, consultation, referral) for the post-release period.

c- Training social and psychological specialists on the specificities of dealing with released prisoners from a non-stigmatizing perspective.

6.3. Community awareness campaigns to reduce stigma

a- Launching national campaigns aimed at changing stereotypes about former prisoners, focusing on success stories and the ability to change.

b- Engaging public and influential figures with societal acceptance in conveying messages supporting the right of those released to a second chance.

c- Organizing community events (seminars, exhibitions, art performances) that contribute to creating spaces for direct human interaction between the community and those released.

6.4. Developing non-stigmatizing media discourse

a- Reconsidering the prevailing media discourse on crime and punishment, and ceasing to portray released prisoners as a "permanent danger".

b- Developing codes of conduct for journalists, obliging them to use terms that respect human dignity and do not reproduce the stigma.

c- Supporting the production of media content (films, programs, articles) that demonstrates the positive transformation of those released and enhances their chances of social acceptance

6.5. Spiritual and moral support for those released

a- Involving religious institutions in spreading a discourse that encourages repentance and acceptance of repentant individuals, and opposes rejection and stigmatization.

b- Integrating religious mentors into spiritual support programs within prisons and after release, to promote psychological stability and positive identity.

c- Employing religious platforms to spread the values of modesty and mercy, and to enshrine the principle that every individual has a right to a new beginning.

The recommendations presented stem not only from a social reality in need of reform, but also from a deeper sociological understanding of what the experience of stigma and distorted identity means in the lives of released prisoners, as Erving Goffman explained. According to Goffman, society produces a distorted identity for the "stigmatized" individual, forcing them into a constant struggle to manage their image in the eyes of others, in what is known as "strategic impression management".

Goffman (1963, p. 121) explains this by saying: "The labeled individual is required to behave in such a way as not to suggest that the burden of his labeling is heavy, nor that bearing this burden has made him different from others; he is required, practically speaking, to adapt well to his situation".

Therefore, reintegration cannot be reduced to mere functional or legal integration; rather, it must be understood as a transformative act that resists identity distortion and restores the individual's ability to identify with themselves. The recommendations put forward in this context become attempts to dismantle the logic of stigma and create a more

supportive environment that allows for identity reconstruction free from prejudice, enabling those released to identify with their reformed selves, not with their former image in the eyes of others.

In short, dismantling stigma is not an intellectual luxury, but a social and moral imperative aimed at repairing the relationship between the individual and society. A society that does not forgive is a society that reproduces fear, while societies capable of inclusion are those that believe that reform is not only possible, but a human duty without which justice cannot be achieved.

7. Conclusion

This study highlights the growing importance of understanding internal shame as a pivotal factor in the reintegration process of those released from prisons. Our awareness of the depth of this shame and the internal rupture and identity disturbance it causes is a fundamental step towards building genuine rehabilitation programs that take into account the psychological and social aspects of individuals, and are not limited to legal or procedural aspects only.

The research results revealed that the feeling of inner shame is not just a passing state, but a deeply rooted feeling that controls the released prisoner after his release from prison, and is manifested in his introversion, social isolation, and constant shame about his past, which indicates the extent to which the view of others affects the formation of his subjective experience.

The study also showed that those released resort to defensive strategies, such as denial, avoidance, and rationalization, in order to cope with social stigma. However, these strategies are often of limited effect in a social reality that continues to define them through their past, which weakens their ability to build a new self-image.

It also became clear that identity conflict is one of the most prominent challenges facing those released, as they experience an internal turmoil between their desire to start a new life and society's continued imposition of the image of the "former criminal" on them, leading to a state of self-instability that may be prolonged and hinder attempts at change.

On the other hand, the results confirm that those released face tangible difficulties in social reintegration, most notably the lack of job opportunities and their feeling of rejection from the wider environment, which reinforces the impact of stigma as a major obstacle to the integration process, despite some limited forms of support from the family.

In light of this, it can be said that the answer to the research questions has clearly shown that internal shame is not just a psychological result, but a social structure that feeds on stigma and reproduces exclusion, and that attempts to rebuild identity remain hostage to society's attitudes and mechanisms of acceptance or rejection.

Irving Goffman's theory is an effective analytical tool for understanding these complex dynamics. It has enabled the deconstruction of the relationship between stigma, identity, and self-representations, and has contributed to providing an accurate reading of the practices that individuals adopt in dealing with social exclusion.

The study's findings indicate that stigma produces a distorted self-image, causing the individual to feel a profound disconnect from their former self, resulting in an internal rupture that is difficult to overcome. The individual's desire for change clashes with the remnants of the past, for which society constantly holds them responsible, leaving them in a state of tension between who they were and who they aspire to be.

At the same time, the released individual is unable to forge a new identity due to the societal rejection that binds him. The effects of the stigma are not limited to reputation and social behavior, but extend to distorting one's sense of self, making the individual a prisoner of others' perceptions, unable to redefine himself outside the framework of his criminal past.

In conclusion, this study confirms that the reintegration of released prisoners cannot be achieved without a deep understanding of the structures of shame and stigma, and a re-examination of the social discourses that reproduce marginalization, which requires a comprehensive approach that takes into account the symbolic and identity dimensions in addition to the institutional dimension.

This approach requires working simultaneously at the individual, community, and institutional levels, through psychological and identity support programs for released prisoners, and community awareness campaigns that help dismantle stereotypes. It also includes reforming public policies to be more inclusive and equitable in dealing with this marginalized group.

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