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Social Identity Theory and Deradicalization: A Critical Evaluation of the Role Identities Play in the Reintegration of Ex-combatants in Nigeria's OPSC

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Abstract: This paper employs Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a critical lens to evaluate the deradicalization and reintegration processes within Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC). It argues that while the initial disengagement of ex-Boko Haram combatants may occur within the program's camps, sustainable reintegration is fundamentally a social process of identity transformation, contingent on complex negotiations among the individual, the state, and the receiving community. Through qualitative analysis of interviews and focus group discussions with ex-combatants, security personnel, government officials, and community members, the study identifies a critical disconnect between OPSC's design and the realities of identity reconstruction. Key findings reveal that the program's operational failures, specifically, post-camp economic abandonment, a lack of transparency, and the absence of formal reconciliation mechanisms actively sabotage reintegration. These failures foster a toxic environment of stigma and mistrust, reinforce perceptions of impunity, and exacerbate community grievances. The study concludes that by neglecting the social and psychological dimensions of identity, OPSC not only undermines its own objectives but also risks perpetuating the very cycles of insecurity it aims to resolve. The paper advocates a fundamental reorientation of

deradicalization policy toward a holistic, identity-sensitive framework that prioritizes long-term, community-based reintegration over short-term disengagement.

Keywords: Deradicalization, Ex-combatants, OPSC, Re-integration, Social identity.

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Introduction

In societies recovering from violent extremism, the question of who *belongs* becomes as critical as the question of who fights. Nowhere is this more evident than in Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC), a government-led deradicalization and reintegration initiative for former Boko Haram combatants. While the program seeks to transform ex-fighters into law-abiding citizens, its success depends not only on vocational training or psychological rehabilitation but, more profoundly, on identity reconstruction. The shift from a violent extremist identity to a peaceful civilian one is neither automatic nor guaranteed; it is a profoundly social process shaped by belonging, stigma, and acceptance. Here, Social Identity Theory (SIT), introduced by Tajfel and Turner (1979), offers a vital framework for examining how individuals define themselves within groups, perceive others, and how those perceptions influence reintegration outcomes.

This paper critically examines the role of social identity in the deradicalization and reintegration of ex-combatants within Nigeria's OPSC framework. It pursues two key objectives: (1) to evaluate how identity transformation occurs among former Boko Haram members during and after the deradicalization process, and (2) to assess how community perceptions and group dynamics affect the reintegration and long-term acceptance of these individuals. In doing so, the paper argues that deradicalization is not merely a behavioral or ideological shift but an identity negotiation between the individual, the state, and society. The analysis demonstrates that unless reintegration efforts engage directly with the social and psychological dimensions of identity, addressing both the ex-combatant's need for belonging and the community's readiness to *forgive, they will not be successful.*

The Social Identity Theory

The social identity theory was developed by social psychologists Henri Tajfel and John Turner during the 1970s, and it explores circumstances in which individuals prioritize their social identity over their individual identity (Scheepers, 2019). The framework encompasses three key components: social

identification, social categorization, and social comparison, and these explain how social identity may influence intergroup behaviour. The primary premise of this theory posits that individuals would exert effort to acquire and preserve a favourable sense of self-distinctiveness. Individuals with varying interpersonal behaviours develop distinct social identities. Consequently, members of a collective will endeavour to uphold their mutual social identity (Spears, 2011; Crocetti et al., 2018)

Within the context of radicalization, the social identity theory is instrumental in illuminating the initial stages of recruitment and indoctrination within extremist groups (Hogg, 2021). Ike (2021) argues that Boko Haram members, like members of other extremist organizations, are drawn to these groups because they offer a sense of belonging, purpose, and identity, particularly to those who feel marginalized or disaffected by mainstream society. Hogg (2021) notes that, in addition to the socio-political, religious, and economic factors that contribute to individuals joining these groups, it is important to acknowledge the role identity plays. Consequently, individuals may be susceptible to radicalization, as their affiliation with extremist groups aligns with their search for a sense of self and significance. Moreover, Jensen et al. (2020) highlight that group members are inclined to conform to the norms and values of their respective groups, even when these norms involve engaging in acts of violence and terrorism. By delving into the social identity dynamics within Boko Haram, the study gains a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying its members' actions, shedding light on why individuals may commit acts of terrorism within the framework of group identity.

The social identity theory offers a critical perspective that points to a pivotal strategy for countering extremist narratives. As Doosje et al. (2016) state, effective de-radicalization programs should thus encompass more than dismantling extremist ideologies; they should also aim to facilitate a profound shift in individuals' social identities. By actively assisting former Boko Haram members in developing a new, non-extremist social identity that is grounded in prosocial values and community integration, these programs have the potential to be significantly more efficacious (Hogg, 2021). The process of identity transformation involves helping individuals redefine their sense of self so that it no longer aligns with the extremist group's ethos and objectives (Webber & Kruglanski, 2016). This shift may entail transitioning from a sense of identity rooted in violence and radicalism to one that emphasizes cooperation, empathy, and engagement with mainstream society (Webber et al., 2019)

Moreover, examining the role of social identity transformation within successful de-radicalization initiatives provides a valuable lens through which the study can assess the

long-term outcomes of these programs. Research by Al Raffie (2013) suggests that when individuals experience a shift in their social identity, they are more inclined to disengage from extremist groups and are less likely to revert to terrorist activities upon their release. Therefore, by focusing on social identity transformation, de-radicalization programs can potentially contribute to a reduced risk of re-engagement in terrorism. Doosje et al. (2016) state that individuals who have undergone de-radicalization must not only change their individual identities but also become integrated into non-extremist social groups within their communities.

Lastly, the social identity theory provides a valuable lens through which to analyse the intricate gender dynamics that prevail within extremist groups, such as Boko Haram (Lyon, 2023). Pearson (2016) avers that group identities are often deeply entwined with gender roles and dynamics, influencing both the radicalization and de-radicalization experiences of individuals. Gender plays a significant role in shaping the social identities of group members, impacting their behaviours, motivations, and roles within the extremist organization (Pearson, 2016). Thus, this perspective informs the study's examination of gender-specific challenges and opportunities within the context of de-radicalization programs targeting former Boko Haram members. By considering the intersection of gender-specific identities with broader group identities, a nuanced understanding emerges of how gender shapes the multifaceted nature of the de-radicalization process (van de Wetering et al., 2018). For instance, research indicates that women in extremist groups may have distinct experiences of radicalization and may hold different motivations for joining and leaving such organizations compared to their male counterparts (Morgades-Bamba et al., 2020; Pearson, 2016; Nuraniyah, 2018). Consequently, de-radicalization programs must consider the unique challenges and opportunities presented by gender dynamics.

However, one of the main critiques of Social Identity Theory (SIT) is its heavy focus on group identity while downplaying the complexity of individual identity. Critics argue that not all behaviours can be explained through group affiliation and that individual psychological processes are often more nuanced than the theory suggests. This limitation may hinder the ability to address the diversity of personal motivations and actions that lead individuals toward radicalization or extremist behavior. Furthermore, SIT tends to emphasize intra-group dynamics and identity without sufficiently accounting for external social, economic, and political factors that influence behavior. In the context of radicalization, external factors such as socio-political grievances, poverty, and historical conflicts may play a more substantial role in shaping extremist actions than group identity

alone (Harwood, 2020; Brown, 2020). In the context of this study, applying SIT to deradicalization efforts may be limited, as it primarily deals with group dynamics rather than personal transformation. While understanding social identity is crucial for analyzing how individuals are drawn into groups like Boko Haram, SIT offers limited insight into individualized interventions that help people break away from such groups. This gap may reduce the theory's usefulness for designing personalized deradicalization programs.

Community Perspectives in Deradicalization

Deradicalization initiatives are, by nature, complex processes that involve the intricate interplay between individuals, communities, and authorities. Community perspectives play a crucial role in shaping the success or failure of these programs. Ayandele (2021) argues that community perspectives are instrumental in deradicalization efforts, providing essential insights into the local dynamics, cultural nuances, and social structures that shape individuals' experiences. Community involvement is often deemed critical for several reasons. Firstly, communities act as the primary social environment for individuals, influencing their beliefs, behaviors, and sense of belonging (Silke, 2018). Secondly, community support is pivotal to the successful reintegration of individuals undergoing deradicalization, fostering a sense of acceptance and normalcy.

While community perspectives are valuable, engaging communities in deradicalization initiatives poses significant challenges. One significant hurdle lies in overcoming distrust between communities and authorities. Historical grievances, perceived injustices, and a lack of confidence in state institutions can hinder effective collaboration (Ibrahim, 2019). The challenge is not only to gain community support but to do so in a way that fosters genuine partnership and addresses underlying tensions. Furthermore, the heterogeneity within communities poses difficulties. Diverse opinions, conflicting interests, and varying levels of awareness of radicalization make it challenging to achieve consensus and unified support for deradicalization efforts (Neumann, 2013). The lack of a cohesive community stance can undermine the impact of interventions, as individuals undergoing deradicalization may face varying degrees of acceptance or rejection.

While community engagement is essential, there are potential pitfalls that need careful consideration. One risk is the potential for stigmatization and ostracization of individuals who have undergone deradicalization. Despite the intent to reintegrate them into society, community perspectives may perpetuate stereotypes, leading to the isolation of individuals who have disengaged from extremist ideologies (Adekunle, 2020). This can compromise the personal security and psychological well-being of those undergoing rehabilitation. Additionally, the pressure from within

communities to adopt punitive measures against individuals associated with radicalization can create a hostile environment. Calls for harsher penalties or exclusionary practices can undermine the rehabilitative goals of deradicalization initiatives, underscoring the delicate balance required to navigate community perspectives (Horgan, 2017). Striking the right chord between accountability and rehabilitation is crucial for fostering a community environment conducive to deradicalization.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between communities and government initiatives. Their involvement can help build trust, offer alternative narratives, and foster community resilience (Neumann, 2013). However, the effectiveness of CSOs depends on their independence, credibility, and the extent to which they are perceived as genuine actors working for the community's welfare. Despite their potential contributions, CSOs also face challenges, including limited resources, potential co-optation by authorities, and varying levels of community engagement (Ibrahim, 2019). A critical evaluation must consider the effectiveness and autonomy of CSOs, ensuring they can act as genuine intermediaries rather than extensions of government agendas.

Deradicalization efforts often involve a delicate balance between local and national interests. The perspectives of communities may be deeply rooted in local concerns, while national authorities prioritize broader security considerations. Striking a balance between these divergent perspectives is essential for developing policies and interventions that address both local dynamics and overarching security imperatives (Olonisakin et al., 2019). However, achieving this balance is challenging. Local interests may clash with national security priorities, leading to tensions between communities and authorities. A critical evaluation should scrutinize the extent to which deradicalization initiatives successfully navigate these tensions and ensure that broader security concerns do not overshadow community perspectives.

Deradicalization initiatives often grapple with whether to adopt community-led or community-informed approaches. A community-led approach involves community members actively participating in and making decisions about the design and implementation of interventions. In contrast, a community-informed approach seeks community input but retains a more centralized decision-making structure (Ibrahim, 2019). Each approach has its merits and challenges. A community-led approach may enhance local ownership and cultural relevance, but could be constrained by limited resources and expertise. On the other hand, a community-informed approach may benefit from external expertise but risks being perceived as top-down and insufficiently attuned to local realities (Kayode, 2023).

Radicalization and Deradicalization: The Social Identity Question

The processes of radicalization and deradicalization are deeply intertwined with questions of identity, belonging, and group affiliation. At their core, these phenomena are not merely ideological shifts but social transformations, which are changes in how individuals perceive themselves in relation to others and the groups to which they aspire to belong. Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides a critical lens for understanding this dynamic, suggesting that individuals derive a sense of meaning and self-worth from their group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the context of violent extremism, radicalization often emerges when marginalized individuals find empowerment, purpose, and community within extremist groups that offer strong in-group cohesion and clear out-group opposition. Conversely, deradicalization requires dismantling and reconstructing these identities, challenging individuals to redefine their sense of self outside the violent collective.

Radicalization has emerged as a complex and significant phenomenon in contemporary discussions, attracting attention from scholars, policymakers, and practitioners across a range of disciplines. The definition of radicalization remains elusive due to its subjective and context-dependent nature. Scholars often conceptualize radicalization as a process in which individuals or groups adopt extreme ideologies and engage in actions that challenge established norms or systems. Daniya (2021) succinctly defines radicalization as the "shift from nonviolence to violence" (p. 14). This definition highlights the transformative nature of radicalization, emphasizing the departure from conventional beliefs towards more extreme positions. The nuances in defining radicalization underscore the need for a comprehensive, context-specific understanding to address its diverse manifestations.

Different studies have adopted different approaches to radicalization, all indicating that it is a dynamic, nonlinear process that unfolds over time and encompasses various phases. Jibrin (2020) identifies four key stages: pre-radicalization, identification, indoctrination, and action. The pre-radicalization phase involves exploring alternative ideologies, followed by identification with a radical group. Indoctrination entails the internalization of extremist beliefs, ultimately culminating in the adoption of violent actions. Recognizing these phases provides valuable insights into the progression of radicalization and informs targeted interventions at different stages.

During the pre-radicalization phase, individuals may experience a sense of disaffection or disenchantment with mainstream ideologies, leading them to explore alternative belief systems. This exploration often involves

exposure to radical ideas through social networks, online platforms, or charismatic leaders who propagate extremist ideologies. Understanding this initial phase is crucial for developing preventive measures that address the root causes of radicalization and mitigate the risk of individuals embracing extremist ideologies. The identification phase marks a critical juncture at which individuals align with a radical group or ideology. The social identity theory provides a lens for understanding this phase, highlighting the human tendency to derive a sense of belonging and self-worth from group affiliations. Individuals may be drawn to extremist ideologies that offer a strong sense of identity and purpose, creating a sense of belonging that may have been lacking in their lives (Ngwa, 2020).

Indoctrination is the phase where individuals internalize extremist beliefs, adopting a radical worldview that justifies the use of violence to achieve their goals. This process often involves exposure to propaganda, charismatic leaders, or ideological mentors who reinforce and amplify extremist narratives (Adeleke et al., 2023). The psychological mechanisms underlying indoctrination are complex, intertwining with cognitive processes, group dynamics, and emotional factors (Jibrin, 2020). The final phase, action, represents the manifestation of radicalization in tangible behaviours, often involving violence or acts of terrorism. At this stage, individuals are not merely radicalized in thought; they actively participate in activities that pose a threat to society. Understanding the factors that drive individuals from radical thoughts to violent actions is crucial for developing effective counter-radicalization strategies (Jibrin, 2020).

Umar et al. (2019) have noted that the drivers of radicalization are multifaceted and context-specific, spanning social, economic, political, and psychological dimensions. Yakubu (2021) provides insights into how individuals derive a sense of identity and belonging from group affiliations. Extremist groups often exploit this human tendency, offering a compelling alternative identity that resonates with individuals who feel marginalized, disenchanted, or alienated from mainstream society (Umar et al, 2019; Abdullahi, 2021). Beyond social factors, grievances stemming from political oppression, economic inequality, or perceived social injustice play a significant role in fueling radicalization. Studies suggest that individuals are more susceptible to radicalization when they perceive a misalignment between their ideals and the socio-political realities of their environment (Daniya, 2021). Addressing these structural issues is essential for developing comprehensive strategies that tackle the root causes of radicalization.

In the contemporary digital age, online platforms have become integral to the process of radicalization. The internet provides a

virtual space for the rapid dissemination of extremist ideologies, recruitment efforts, and the establishment of virtual communities (Adam, 2020). Grip (2019) highlights the role of the internet as a facilitator of radicalization, describing it as a medium that enables the global spread of extremist narratives and ideologies. Online platforms offer a unique environment where individuals can explore and reinforce their radical beliefs, connect with like-minded individuals, and access propaganda that amplifies extremist narratives. The anonymity of the online realm further facilitates recruitment, enabling extremist groups to operate beyond geographical boundaries. Understanding the online dimension of radicalization is crucial for developing effective counter-radicalization strategies in the contemporary landscape (Grip, 2019; Aleyomi, 2023; Attoh, 2018).

Efforts to counter radicalization encompass a spectrum of approaches, ranging from preventive measures to intervention programs and rehabilitation initiatives. The complexity of radicalization necessitates a multifaceted, collaborative approach involving government agencies, community organizations, educational institutions, and online platforms. Preventive measures aim to address the root causes of radicalization and mitigate the risk factors associated with the initial phases. These may include educational programs that promote critical thinking, community engagement initiatives, and efforts to address socio-economic disparities. Early intervention strategies focus on identifying individuals at risk of radicalization during the pre-radicalization and identification phases, offering targeted support and counseling to divert them from the path of extremism.

Aleyomi (2019) argues that rehabilitation initiatives are crucial for individuals who have already become radicalized. These programs aim to de-radicalize individuals, providing them with the necessary psychological and social support to disengage from extremist ideologies and reintegrate into society. Rehabilitation efforts may involve counseling, vocational training, and community-based programs that foster a sense of belonging and inclusion. Stakeholder collaboration is essential to the success of counter-radicalization strategies. Government agencies play a pivotal role in developing and implementing policies that address the structural factors contributing to radicalization. Community organizations and educational institutions are crucial partners in preventive and intervention efforts, leveraging their proximity to individuals at risk of radicalization. Online platforms also have a responsibility to counter the spread of extremist content actively. Collaborative efforts between tech companies, governments, and civil society organizations can help develop strategies to identify and remove extremist content, disrupt online recruitment channels, and promote counter-narratives that

challenge extremist ideologies.

On the other end of the spectrum is deradicalization, which, on the surface, as Lyon (2023) has noted, should involve a reversal of the steps in radicalization. However, it is much more complicated than it appears on the surface. The concept of deradicalization has gained prominence as a key component of counter-terrorism strategies globally. Deradicalization programs aim to disengage individuals from extremist ideologies, preventing the perpetration of violence and fostering their rehabilitation into mainstream society. This critical evaluation examines the theoretical underpinnings, challenges, and ethical considerations associated with deradicalization, shedding light on its complexities and effectiveness. Abdullahi (2023) notes that deradicalization is rooted in the assumption that individuals drawn to extremist ideologies can be rehabilitated through targeted interventions. The underlying theories often draw from psychological, sociological, and criminological perspectives. Social learning theory posits that radicalization is a learned behavior, suggesting that exposure to extremist ideas can be countered through exposure to alternative narratives (Bjørgo & Horgan, 20019). Cognitive behavioral approaches focus on challenging and changing the cognitive distortions that underpin extremist beliefs, aiming to reshape individuals' thought patterns (Horgan, 2018).

Despite the noble intentions behind deradicalization programs, they face formidable challenges that necessitate a nuanced evaluation. One of the primary challenges lies in accurately identifying individuals suitable for deradicalization. The heterogeneity of radicalized individuals, each with unique motivations and levels of commitment, complicates the task of developing one-size-fits-all interventions (Borum, 2021). Moreover, the covert nature of radicalization often makes it challenging to identify individuals until they engage in criminal activities. The efficacy of deradicalization programs is also under scrutiny. Evaluating the success of these initiatives is inherently complex, as measuring changes in individuals' beliefs and attitudes is subjective and challenging to quantify (Horgan, 2018). Recidivism remains a concern, with some arguing that individuals may feign deradicalization to gain early release or reduced sentences, raising doubts about the authenticity of behavioral changes (Bjørgo, 2019).

The evolving nature of extremist ideologies further complicates deradicalization efforts. Adaptable and resilient, extremist beliefs may mutate or re-emerge in different forms, making it difficult to predict and prevent recidivism (Borum, 2021). Additionally, the influence of online radicalization poses a significant challenge, as individuals may continue to engage with extremist content even after undergoing deradicalization

programs. Deradicalization initiatives present a delicate balance between national security imperatives and respecting individuals' rights. Coercive or draconian measures, such as detention without trial or excessive surveillance, can undermine the ethical foundation of deradicalization programs. There is a risk that overly punitive measures may exacerbate grievances and reinforce a sense of injustice, potentially hindering the desired outcomes of rehabilitation (Bjørgo, 2022).

Furthermore, questions arise regarding the voluntariness of participation in deradicalization programs. In some cases, individuals may be compelled to undergo such initiatives under the threat of legal consequences, raising concerns about the effectiveness and ethical implications of interventions that lack genuine engagement (Sageman, 2022). Respecting individuals' autonomy and ensuring that deradicalization efforts are consensual are essential ethical considerations. Another ethical dilemma concerns the potential stigmatization of particular communities. If deradicalization initiatives disproportionately target specific ethnic or religious groups, it can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and exacerbate social divisions (Horgan, 2022). The ethical imperative lies in developing programs that are inclusive, culturally sensitive, and avoid reinforcing discriminatory narratives.

Effective deradicalization cannot occur in isolation from the broader community.

Community engagement is pivotal, as local communities often possess nuanced insights into the dynamics of radicalization and can play a crucial role in rehabilitation efforts (Vidino & Hughes, 2015). However, involving communities requires a delicate approach to avoid alienation or stigmatization. Builder (2021) also notes that civil society organizations, including religious leaders, educators, and social workers, can contribute significantly to deradicalization initiatives. They often serve as trusted intermediaries and can play a crucial role in challenging extremist narratives, providing alternative perspectives, and fostering community resilience (Neumann, 2023). Empowering civil society to participate in deradicalization efforts actively enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of interventions. Given the global nature of terrorism and radicalization, international cooperation is indispensable for addressing the challenges associated with deradicalization. Sharing best practices, exchanging information, and coordinating efforts can enhance the collective understanding of radicalization dynamics and inform the development of more effective deradicalization strategies (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2020). Collaborative initiatives also contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced approach that considers diverse cultural, social, and political contexts.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to enable an in-depth, contextual exploration of the complex social and identity-based processes inherent in deradicalization and reintegration. The research philosophy was interpretivist, proceeding from the assumption that reality is socially constructed and that understanding the subjective meanings, experiences, and perceptions of different stakeholders is paramount. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with key stakeholder groups in Northeast Nigeria, the epicenter of the Boko Haram insurgency and the primary implementation zone for Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC). A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit participants with direct experience of or affected by the deradicalization process.

The final sample for this study consisted of four personnel from the Nigerian Armed Forces involved in Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) operations, five ex-Boko Haram combatants who had completed the OPSC program (with data collected through two individual interviews and one focus group discussion involving three participants), and two government officials engaged in policy formulation or implementation related to deradicalization. Additionally, two focus group discussions were conducted with community members from areas affected by the reintegration of ex-combatants.

All interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using a rigorous thematic analysis approach based on the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with familiarization, involving repeated reading of transcripts and note-taking, followed by the generation of initial codes through systematic, line-by-line analysis. Next, the researcher searched for themes, collating related codes into potential overarching categories, and reviewed themes to ensure coherence and consistency with the dataset. The subsequent phase involved defining and naming themes, where the essence of each theme was refined and clearly articulated. Finally, in the reporting phase, the themes were woven into a coherent narrative supported by direct participant quotations. This systematic process ensured that the analysis remained deeply rooted in empirical evidence, capturing the nuanced and often contradictory perspectives on identity, stigma, and reintegration within Nigeria's OPSC framework.

To maintain participants' anonymity, their responses have been coded as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1*Transcript Organisation for Thematic Analysis*

Stakeholder Group	Participant Code
Ex-Combatants	EC1, EC2, EC3, EC4

Government Officials	GOF1, GOF2
Armed Forces / Security Personnel	AF1, AF2, AF3
Community Members	CM1, CM2, CM3, CM4

Source: Author's Compilation

The Nigerian Question: Evaluating OPSC

Launched in 2016, Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC) represents the Nigerian state's flagship institutional response to the complex challenge of reintegrating former Boko Haram combatants. Conceived as a Disarmament, Deradicalization, and Reintegration (DDR) program, its official narrative is one of strategic compassion, aiming to peel away low-risk fighters from the insurgency through a structured process of psychological intervention, vocational training, and eventual return to their communities. However, a critical evaluation of OPSC, informed by the lived experiences of its participants, implementers, and the receiving communities, reveals a program mired in profound contradictions. It operates within a chasm between its stated humanitarian and security objectives and an opaque, under-resourced, and often counterproductive reality. This section dissects this chasm, arguing that OPSC's operational failures, particularly concerning economic reintegration, transparency, and community engagement, actively sabotage the delicate process of social identity transformation it purports to facilitate.

From the perspective of state actors, OPSC is framed as a necessary and pragmatic tool for counterinsurgency. A government official (GOF1) articulated this strategic vision, describing it as "*a success and it is enshrined in the Borno model*", highlighting the high number of surrenders as a key metric of achievement: "*Over 100,000 individuals followed. Another strategy is town hall meetings. Moreover, lastly, community representatives also participate fully in screening*." This official narrative presents a picture of a well-orchestrated, community-driven process. Similarly, a security personnel involved in the program's logistics (AF1) outlined a multi-agency approach: *"experts from the Nigerian Correctional Service mainly carry out the deradicalization process… psychologists and sociologists,"* and noted efforts at aftercare, stating, *"we also carry out aftercare operations… a kind of follow-up on them to their own choice locations of reintegration."*

However, this top-down narrative of coordination and success is starkly challenged by the ground-level experiences of ex-combatants, for whom the program's promise often evaporates upon release. The most glaring failure lies in economic reintegration, a cornerstone of building a new, sustainable civilian identity. The testimonies of ex-combatants are saturated with accounts of economic abandonment,

which directly fuels existential anxiety and threatens a return to violence. One ex-combatant (EC2) was unequivocal: *"I must confess the people [community] have been supportive… One big challenge is that since I left the camp, there is no support from the government, nothing at all"*. This sentiment of being cast adrift was echoed forcefully by another (EC1), who pinpointed the lack of capital as a critical failure: *"The support we get is not consistent. Sometimes we get advice, but nothing more… What worries us the most is that we are not given capital, or proper training"*.

The psychological impact of this economic precarity is profound. Without the means to perform the roles of provider and productive community member, core components of a positive civilian identity, ex-combatants find themselves in a state of limbo. Their new, pro-social identity is rendered precarious and unsustainable. EC2 directly linked this economic hardship to the risk of recidivism, a view that underscores the fragility of the identity transformation achieved in the camp: *"70% of us who are back to the community are suffering; we do not have livelihood, which is dangerous, one may think of going back to the bush because of the hardship"*. This statement is not merely a complaint; it is a stark warning that deradicalization is reversible when the material foundations for a new life are absent. EC1 corroborated this, stating, "Our lives need to be looked after properly, because if not, we could go back." The phrase *"go back"* signifies more than a return to a location; it implies a regression to a former identity, a self that the program claimed to have eradicated. The program, therefore, by neglecting post-camp economic support, inadvertently creates the conditions for the very threat it seeks to neutralize.

This failure is compounded by a pervasive lack of transparency and accountability in the program's implementation, which erodes public trust and fuels the stigmatizing narratives that hinder social reintegration. From within the security apparatus itself, a critical voice (AF1) highlighted this fundamental flaw, arguing that the program's opaque nature undermines its own legitimacy: *"Coupled with the opaque nature of the program… There is no budget line… So the thing is just covert, kind of. And so it brings a lot of doubts"*. This internal critique is devastating, as it suggests that the state's own agents are aware that the program operates in a shadowy space beyond public scrutiny. This opacity breeds suspicion among the wider society, where communities already grappling with trauma are quick to interpret secrecy as evidence of nefarious dealings.

Community members (CM1) explicitly linked this opacity to corruption, asserting that *"resources channeled to the reintegration are not accountable, are not transparent"*. This perception creates a toxic environment for reintegration. When

communities believe that ex-combatants are receiving lavish, secret state support while they, the victims, receive nothing, it frames the returnees not as penitent citizens but as state-sponsored interlopers. This perception, whether accurate or not, becomes a social fact that powerfully shapes community attitudes. CM2 voiced this widespread sense of injustice with palpable anger: *"Individuals come out to complain every day that this people have cheated us, they killed our people and now the government has forgiven them, giving them money, capital and arms, while those that they killed their relatives the government did not do anything for them."* The belief that ex-combatants are given *"arms"* is almost certainly a misperception, but it is a powerful one that reveals a deep chasm of mistrust between the state and its citizens. It casts OPSC not as a peacebuilding endeavor but as a betrayal, further alienating communities and hardening the *"us versus them"* dynamic that Social Identity Theory identifies as a barrier to accepting former out-group members.

The community reception of ex-combatants is thus deeply fractured, existing on a spectrum from cautious support to outright hostility, directly impacting the returnees' sense of safety and belonging. Some ex-combatants reported instances of moving acceptance. EC2, for example, noted, *"when I came, I did not even have a house, but my community members gave me a house to stay," and acknowledged that "sincerely many have shown me love."* Similarly, EC3 expressed profound gratitude for the chance of family reunification: *"For 15 years I was in the bush, I did not see my family until now, so I thank the community for accepting us and allowing me to meet with my parents again."* These accounts demonstrate that social identity change is possible when met with community reciprocity.

However, these positive experiences are tempered by pervasive fear and stigmatization. EC1 revealed the precariousness of his safety, stating, *"Our lives are in danger. Because some of us tried to kill them."* This is not merely a fear of abstract violence but a concrete threat that reinforces an identity of "otherness" and perpetual victimhood. Another ex-combatant (EC4) acknowledged this conditional acceptance, noting, *"The community accepted us, though some people are still scared of us, but I know gradually they will get used to us."* The community's fear is a powerful social barrier. As CM1 analytically framed it, *"There are serious issues of trust between community members and repentants."* This trust deficit is the central challenge that OPSC has failed to address adequately. A government official (GOF1) conceded this point, admitting, "the greatest challenge is trust. From some communities and trust from the fighters who are yet to surrender," and revealingly noted that *"some people in the community reject the idea that Boko Haram fighters are capable of repentance and believe the de-radicalization program is a bleeding ground for spies."*

This perception of ex-combatants as unreformed and dangerous is exacerbated by ongoing security incidents, which communities often link directly to the reintegration program. A community member from a high-impact area (CM4) provided a chilling firsthand account: "Since the reintegration, it seems like [local security] were demoralized… You will not see any local security." He directly connected the program to a rise in local violence, stating, *"Just of recent, almost two people were kidnapped and this kidnapping did not happen just outside the town but within the community… people are saying it seems like there are people that are living within the community that are suspects."* For this community, the theoretical risk of recidivism has become a lived reality, validating their worst fears and solidifying the stigmatized identity of the "repentant" as a wolf in sheep's clothing. CM4 concluded starkly, *"It is not safe… they will feel at home, and they will feel like they are part of the community. Moreover, if anybody rejects that or feels like they can be violent, it is not safe to go."* This narrative directly fuels the recidivism vortex; community suspicion leads to rejection and violence, which in turn pushes ex-combatants towards isolation and potentially back into the arms of extremist groups for protection or sustenance.

Furthermore, the program ignites a toxic dynamic of comparative victimhood that pits ex-combatants against the very communities they are meant to rejoin. CM3 articulated this with devastating clarity, explaining that local youth "feel discriminated… they do not have jobs, they are idle, they are not empowered, and they saw the ex-combatant coming with full force, well organized, well rehabilitated, well trained." This perception, however inaccurate from the ex-combatant's perspective, is politically explosive. It frames deradicalization as a policy that rewards violence and punishes loyalty, creating a new layer of grievance. CM3 warned of the consequences for social cohesion: "There will be a serious issue of cohesion… It is the youth that will determine their stay in society." In the competition for scarce resources and state attention, the "repentant" identity becomes a marker of privilege in the eyes of marginalized community youth, making genuine integration nearly impossible.

The foundational crisis of OPSC, however, lies in the unresolved tension between amnesty and accountability. The program is caught between a restorative justice model, which prioritizes reconciliation and reintegration for the sake of peace, and a retributive justice model, which demands legal accountability for atrocities committed. This schism is evident in the starkly different perspectives of stakeholders. The government's position, as voiced by GOF1, leans towards restorative measures, with the official even suggesting that "reconciliation should be included in the process… that will bring in the community to listen to the

repentance and agree to forgive before reintegration"—an admission that such a formal process is currently lacking.

In direct opposition to this is the perspective of security personnel who have fought a kinetic war. AF2 expressed a visceral rejection of the program's core premise, rooted in a deep sense of personal and collective loss: "We have sadly lost our own loved ones, our colleagues, and the others, and then you… end up pampering them… That is kind of rubbish for me." For this individual and many in the communities, OPSC represents a profound injustice. AF2 advocated for a purely retributive approach: "OPSC has not really been very, very, very effective because there is… no framework… to try [them]… I prefer you try them, jail them, which is… the sentence that they are… entitled to." This view was echoed in the community, with CM2 asserting that ex-combatants "feel like they are above the law." The absence of a visible, transparent mechanism for truth-telling or accountability means that the program is perceived not as an act of mercy but as one of impunity. This erodes the state's moral legitimacy in the eyes of the victims and makes community-level forgiveness, a prerequisite for successful identity transformation, a near-impossible demand.

Conclusion

The study set out to critically evaluate the role of social identity in the reintegration of ex-combatants through Nigeria's Operation Safe Corridor (OPSC), applying the theoretical lens of Social Identity Theory (SIT). The analysis reveals a fundamental and problematic disconnect: while the processes of radicalization and deradicalization are profoundly rooted in identity transformation, OPSC operates on a model that is critically inattentive to these social and psychological realities. The program's focus on short-term, camp-based deradicalization and its neglect of the long-term, community-based process of identity reconstruction ultimately undermine its own objectives.

The evidence demonstrates that the initial identity shift within the camp's controlled environment is fragile and often superficial. As articulated by ex-combatants, the promise of a new life quickly disintegrates upon release into a reality defined by economic abandonment, as EC2 starkly noted, "since I left the camp, there is no support from the government, nothing at all." This economic precarity directly threatens the sustainability of a new civilian identity, creating a powerful incentive for recidivism. The warning from EC1 that "we could go back" is not an idle threat but a rational response to a system that fails to provide the material foundation for a new social self.

Furthermore, the program's implementation failures actively poison the social environment necessary for successful reintegration. The pervasive lack of transparency, described by AF1 as an "opaque nature" that "brings a lot of doubts," fuels community mistrust and

reinforces stigmatizing narratives. This fosters a toxic dynamic where ex-combatants are perceived not as penitent citizens but as state-sponsored interlopers, a perception powerfully captured by CM2's grievance that the government is "giving them money, capital and arms, while those who killed their relatives, the government did not do anything for them." This perception, whether factually accurate or not, solidifies the "us versus them" boundary that SIT identifies as a barrier to accepting former out-group members.

Consequently, the community, which should be the primary site for identity validation and belonging, often becomes a space of fear, rejection, and ongoing threat. The testimonies of ex-combatants fearing for their lives and community members linking reintegration to a rise in local insecurity, as CM4 did with reports of kidnapping, reveal that OPSC, in its current form, can exacerbate the very insecurities it aims to resolve. The program ignites a vicious cycle: its operational failures foster community stigma and economic hardship, which in turn increase the risk of recidivism, thereby validating community fears and further entrenching the stigmatized identity of the "repentant" terrorist.

Thus, the analysis uncovers the foundational dilemma that OPSC cannot resolve: the unresolved tension between amnesty and accountability. The program exists in a liminal space between restorative and retributive justice, satisfying neither. For security personnel like AF2, who view the program as "pampering" the enemy, and for victimized communities, it represents a state-sanctioned impunity that erodes the rule of law. Without a formal, transparent mechanism for truth-telling and reconciliation, as GOF1 suggests, the program lacks the moral legitimacy required for communities to forgive and accept returnees genuinely.

By implication, viewing Nigeria's deradicalization efforts through the lens of Social Identity Theory exposes a critical flaw. OPSC treats deradicalization as a finite, individual process of ideological correction, largely complete upon camp graduation. However, this paper has argued that sustainable deradicalization is an ongoing social process of identity negotiation. It requires the ex-combatant to internalize a new, pro-social identity and, just as crucially, requires the community to validate that new identity through acceptance. By failing to address the economic, transparent, and reconciliatory pillars that support this dual-sided process, OPSC risks not only the failure of individual reintegration but also the perpetuation of the cycles of grievance and violence that fuel extremism. A successful deradicalization policy must therefore be a holistic identity-reintegration policy, one that is as invested in healing and empowering communities as in rehabilitating former combatants.

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