




Identity Restoration Theory: Reclaiming Cultural Identity as a Pathway to Reintegration

Sigifredo Castell Britton, PhD

Walden University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5616-4958>

Contact: sigifredo.castellbritton@waldenu.edu

Abstract

This article introduces Identity Restoration Theory (IRT), a new theoretical framework that explains what formerly incarcerated individuals need to reconnect with disrupted cultural identities as a pathway to reintegration. Grounded in qualitative fieldwork with Raizal ex-offenders and community leaders on San Andrés Island, Colombia, IRT is designed to conceptualize reintegration, not as institutional resettlement, but as a culturally rooted process of re-embedding identity within community and place. The framework delineates five interdependent constructs—cultural memory, place reconnection, narrative repair, communal belonging, and agency activation—that emerged inductively from participant narratives. Anchored in the postcolonial context of an Afro-Caribbean island society, IRT provides a theoretical lens that can be applied to broader reintegration challenges among displaced, migrant, and formerly institutionalized populations. Developed through doctoral research, this study offers a theoretical contribution to criminology, cultural psychology, and reentry practice. In application, IRT positions cultural identity as a foundational condition for sustainable desistance, personal transformation, and relational belonging after incarceration.

Keywords: *identity restoration theory, cultural reintegration, post-incarceration, cultural disconnection, desistance, San Andrés Island*

Date Submitted: August 4, 2025 | **Date Published:** March 26, 2025

Recommended Citation

Castell Britton, S. (2026). Identity restoration theory: Reclaiming cultural identity as a pathway to reintegration. *Journal of Social, Behavioral, and Health Sciences*, 20, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.5590/JSBHS.2026.20.1774>

Introduction

Reintegration after incarceration continues to challenge criminal justice systems across diverse societies, where policy frameworks remain anchored in institutional performance indicators and risk management strategies. Contemporary correctional models prioritize measurable outcomes, such as employment, housing stability, supervision compliance, and participation in structured programming, as primary benchmarks of post-release success (Clear et al., 2017; Petersilia, 2003; Ramakers et al., 2025). Within this framework, prison-based educational and rehabilitative initiatives have received sustained attention, as empirical research associates participation in correctional education and structured rehabilitation with reductions in

recidivism and improved post-release adjustment (Esperian, 2021; Lebbie, 2021). These priorities have shaped reentry policy in North America, Europe, and Latin America, where reintegration frequently operates as an administrative process centered on control and compliance rather than on identity reconstruction.

Although culturally adapted interventions demonstrate stronger outcomes when they align with community values, relational norms, and lived cultural experience (Domenech Rodríguez et al., 2011), mainstream reintegration systems often rely on standardized models that overlook these contextual dimensions. Recent scholarship therefore argues that structural supports, while necessary for stability, do not sustain long-term desistance, because they fail to repair the cultural, relational, and narrative disruptions produced through incarceration (Elisha, 2025; Hwang, 2025; McCausland, 2025). This emerging evidence suggests that effective reintegration requires attention, not only to material stability, but also to the reconstruction of identity within culturally grounded relational contexts.

Emerging studies in criminology and psychology reveal that individuals achieve lasting reintegration not merely through compliance but through identity reconstruction. Desistance research increasingly shows that personal transformation depends on coherence between one's sense of self and one's social world (Byrne, 2020; Villman, 2024). When incarceration fractures cultural continuity, individuals lose access to ancestral knowledge, communal belonging, and moral grounding, elements essential to human dignity and social reintegration. This insight invites a broader understanding of reentry as a cultural and psychological process rather than a purely structural transition.

Education and community engagement represent crucial sites for this transformation. Prison education programs have long been associated with reduced recidivism, yet their effectiveness is strongest when they affirm cultural identity, language, and lived experience (Milner et al., 2024; Zeng et al., 2025). Studies show that culturally responsive education enhances self-efficacy and promotes agency among incarcerated populations (Bennett et al., 2025; Gay, 2018). Programs that sustain heritage and spiritual continuity foster resilience, dignity, and purpose, while those that disregard culture reinforce alienation and dependence (Stickle & Schuster, 2023). These findings position culture as a vital determinant of reintegration outcomes.

The context of San Andrés Island, Colombia, illustrates the consequences of neglecting culture in reentry policy. The Raizal people, an Afro-Caribbean community with deep maritime and linguistic traditions, face ongoing cultural erosion through overdevelopment, tourism, and displacement (Cupples et al., 2024; Márquez Pérez, 2024). Incarceration compounds this dislocation, isolating individuals from land, language, and ritual. Earlier fieldwork documented the disappearance of Raizal Creole and traditional practices from prison education, leaving many ex-offenders to return home uncertain of how to belong (Castell Britton, 2024). Their experiences highlight reintegration as not only a material return but also a quest for identity restoration.

To respond to this gap, this study introduces Identity Restoration Theory (IRT), a framework that redefines reintegration as a relational, cultural, and psychological process. Derived from qualitative fieldwork with Raizal ex-offenders and community leaders, IRT identifies five interdependent constructs: cultural memory, place reconnection, narrative repair, communal belonging, and agency activation. Together, these constructs illuminate how individuals reconstruct coherence between who they are, where they come from, and how they rejoin community life.

Recognizing the cultural and structural boundaries that limit existing reintegration frameworks, this literature review establishes the theoretical foundations that ground IRT. The review traces how contemporary scholarship in criminology, psychology, and education has addressed—and often overlooked—the cultural dimensions of reentry. It examines the evolution of reintegration research, the growing attention to identity and belonging, and the pedagogical approaches that restore cultural continuity. Through this synthesis, the review demonstrates the need for an integrated framework that unites cultural, psychological, and communal

dimensions as the foundation of post-incarceration recovery.

Literature Review

The literature review positions the development of IRT within five interconnected domains of scholarship that collectively support its conceptual foundation. These domains include conventional reintegration models; cultural identity and desistance; culturally responsive pedagogy in carceral education; trauma and self-efficacy in psychological reintegration; and cultural memory, place, and belonging. Together, these bodies of research show that reintegration extends far beyond institutional compliance or behavioral adjustment. Reintegration requires the restoration of cultural continuity, personal coherence, and relational belonging. This review therefore establishes the empirical and theoretical groundwork through which IRT reframes return from incarceration as a process of recovering meaning rather than merely achieving structural outcomes.

The purpose of this review is twofold. It evaluates how reintegration scholarship has historically emphasized structural indicators, such as employment, supervision, or recidivism, while overlooking cultural and relational dimensions that shape long-term desistance. It also identifies theoretical gaps that appear when belonging, cultural identity, and narrative reconstruction remain absent from reintegration discourse. Scholars note that these omissions arise not from limited evidence but from dominant paradigms that seldom recognize culture as a restorative and epistemic construct essential for transformation (Byrne, 2020; Leslie, 2019; Ramakers et al., 2025). Addressing this gap becomes critical, because reintegration approaches that disregard cultural identity tend to reinforce disconnection, deepen marginalization, and elevate the likelihood of recidivism (Kılıç & Tuysuz, 2024; Mourão et al., 2025).

Positioning this framing at the outset clarifies how the literature review supports the central aim of the article. Each subsection contributes to a cumulative understanding of how identity becomes disrupted, preserved, and restored throughout the experiences of incarceration and reintegration. The first subsection critiques conventional reintegration models and shows how prevailing frameworks rely on institutional metrics while overlooking community-based meaning. The second examines how incarceration fractures cultural heritage, particularly among Afro-descendant and Indigenous populations, whose identities remain deeply rooted in collective memory. The third analyzes how culturally responsive pedagogy within carceral settings rekindles agency, relevance, and belonging in ways that shape post-release trajectories. The fourth addresses trauma, self-efficacy, and psychological reintegration as internal processes that support identity reconstruction. The fifth integrates cultural memory, place, and belonging to illustrate how reintegration succeeds when individuals reconnect with the physical and symbolic landscapes that affirm identity. Together, these sections lead to the articulation of IRT, which explains how coherence, dignity, and purpose emerge as individuals reestablish cultural continuity during reintegration.

The Limits of Conventional Reintegration Models

Conventional models of reintegration have historically centered on structural and behavioral outcomes, framing reentry as a sequential process of compliance, supervision, and gradual resettlement. Programs such as pre-release planning, transitional housing, therapeutic intervention, and community supervision have become the standard mechanisms correctional systems use to facilitate post-incarceration adjustment (Byrne, 2020; Petersilia, 2003). These approaches emphasize coordination among parole officers, halfway houses, and community service agencies to maintain stability and monitor conduct. Although such systems reduce immediate barriers to reentry, they commonly measure success through institutional benchmarks, such as employment secured, housing obtained, or recidivism reduced, rather than through indicators of cultural reintegration or restored belonging (Mourão et al., 2025; Ramakers et al., 2025). This orientation exposes the

limits of prevailing reintegration logic because it prioritizes structure over identity and monitoring over meaning.

The purpose of this sub-section is to clarify how these conventional models, while indispensable for basic reintegration, fail to address the deeper processes of identity restoration. Empirical evaluations reveal that programs limited to structural supports frequently show diminished long-term outcomes once institutional supervision ends (McCausland, 2025). A narrow emphasis on compliance overlooks the relational and cultural dimensions of reintegration that individuals require to reconstruct meaning and sustain prosocial participation (Kılıç & Tuysuz, 2024). When reentry is treated as a transactional exchange, the individual becomes a subject of management rather than a participant in community renewal. These gaps create conceptual space for theoretical models that engage reintegration as a cultural and existential process.

Economic assessments have reinforced this structural orientation because they often evaluate reintegration in terms of cost savings and productivity. Program evaluations tend to emphasize financial efficiency and short-term employment gains while neglecting cultural or psychological repair (Stickle & Schuster, 2023). This focus, while administratively useful, disregards the ways incarceration destabilizes the social fabrics that foster responsibility, identity, and belonging. When reintegration is reduced to a bureaucratic checklist, it risks reproducing the same disconnection that incarceration created. The result is structure without identity and supervision without meaning.

This critique does not diminish the importance of conventional reentry models. Instead, it identifies their limitations within a broader understanding of recovery and identity reconstruction. Scholars increasingly argue for reintegration frameworks that incorporate cultural, relational, and psychological restoration alongside structural supports. IRT speaks to this need, because it situates reintegration within the processes of cultural continuity, narrative recovery, and communal belonging. The following section examines how identity reconstruction and renewed cultural continuity strengthen long-term reintegration and establish the conceptual foundation for IRT.

Cultural Identity and Desistance

Desistance research increasingly recognizes that personal transformation after incarceration depends on reconstructing identity within a social and cultural context. Individuals move away from offending not only through behavioral change but through a redefinition of self that affirms dignity, belonging, and purpose (Villman, 2024). Scholars have shown that desistance unfolds through narrative repair, a process in which individuals reinterpret past experiences in ways that restore coherence between personal history and collective heritage (Hwang, 2025; Maruna, 2001). This evidence clarifies that reintegration requires more than external supervision, because individuals need opportunities to rebuild identity through relationships, cultural grounding, and renewed meaning. The purpose of this subsection is to show how identity formation, rather than supervision alone, shapes the long-term success of reintegration and thereby advances the rationale for IRT.

Incarceration for Afro-descendant and Indigenous populations functions as a cultural rupture, because it severs access to language, ritual, and community memory. Individuals frequently lose the oral traditions, spatial practices, and cultural expressions that sustain collective identity. This loss occurs through suppression of native languages, restrictions on music and worship, and isolation from ancestral spaces, which interrupts the intergenerational transmission of values and belonging (Cupples et al., 2024; Faruqui et al., 2024). These disruptions weaken the symbolic frameworks individuals rely on to understand themselves and their place in the world. Reintegration for these populations therefore becomes a cultural and existential challenge, not simply a material adjustment, which reinforces the central argument of this literature review.

Recent studies demonstrate that when identity reconstruction incorporates cultural affirmation, the likelihood of sustained desistance increases. Reintegration programs that validate heritage and community memory foster self-efficacy and strengthen moral agency, while approaches that neglect culture tend to reproduce alienation and reduce long-term stability (Milner et al., 2024; Zeng et al., 2025). Research across Afro-Caribbean and Indigenous contexts further indicates that cultural belonging enhances personal resilience and strengthens community cohesion (Leslie, 2019; United Nations, 2023). These findings clarify why reintegration cannot rely solely on structural supports. Reintegration must also rebuild the symbolic, emotional, and cultural connections that incarceration disrupts, because these connections shape motivation, identity, and participation in communal life.

The evidence presented in this subsection advances the literature on models that recognize identity restoration as a central mechanism of reintegration. When cultural meaning is part of the reintegration process, desistance shifts from a legal status to a relational journey of returning to self, history, and community. This conceptual shift prepares the foundation for IRT, because it positions the recovery of cultural belonging as essential to sustainable change. By linking cultural identity to desistance, this subsection bridges the gap between conventional reintegration models and culturally anchored frameworks of transformation that guide the theoretical contributions of the present study.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Carceral Education

Education has long been recognized as one of the strongest predictors of successful reentry, yet many correctional education programs remain disconnected from the cultural realities of the individuals they serve. Empirical research across diverse contexts demonstrates that vocational and higher education initiatives within prison settings reduce recidivism and improve employment outcomes after release, even during periods of social disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic (López-Armijos et al., 2025; McNeeley, 2023). Incarcerated learners frequently encounter curricula that overlook their histories, languages, and community values, which produces a form of academic alienation that extends beyond the classroom and into the reintegration process (Berglund, 2025). This alienation does not arise from the absence of instruction, but from the absence of recognition. When prison education adopts assimilationist models that privilege external standards of knowledge, it erases the learner's lived context and transforms education into a disciplinary tool, rather than a space for personal reconstruction (Chlup, 2020; Murff, 2020). Such models may transmit information, but they do not repair identity, because they fail to connect learning to cultural meaning, belonging, or continuity, all of which are essential for sustainable reintegration.

Culturally responsive pedagogy offers an alternative approach that positions education as a site of identity work, rather than mere skills training. Studies demonstrate that when curricula validate culture, spirituality, heritage language, and community memory, incarcerated learners experience increased agency, motivation, and self-efficacy (Bennett et al., 2025; Milner et al., 2024; Ragoonaden & Müller, 2017). Within carceral environments, these pedagogical models help participants reinterpret incarceration as a period of reflection instead of erasure. Programs that embed cultural narratives within the educational process, such as storytelling rooted in community history, recovery of heritage languages, and art grounded in ancestral traditions, restore meaning to learning and counteract institutional alienation (Zeng et al., 2025). These practices matter for reintegration, because they rebuild the cultural frameworks through which individuals interpret change, reconnect with identity, and sustain desistance beyond release.

Prison education that integrates cultural identity into instruction does more than teach academic content; it rebuilds narrative coherence, restores belonging, and strengthens the psychological capacities that support long-term transformation. These outcomes align directly with desistance research, which identifies self-efficacy, meaning-making, and cultural grounding as essential to sustainable reintegration. Within the structure of this literature review, culturally responsive pedagogy serves as a conceptual bridge between the

cultural ruptures caused by incarceration and the identity repair required for reentry. It prepares the ground for IRT by demonstrating how education, when rooted in culture rather than assimilation, re-roots identity and empowers individuals to reenter their communities with dignity, purpose, and coherence.

Trauma, Self-Efficacy, and Psychological Reintegration

Reintegration after incarceration cannot be understood apart from the psychological consequences of confinement. Incarceration generates trauma through isolation, institutional control, and the loss of autonomy, experiences that often leave individuals with internalized shame, disconnection, and a fractured sense of self (Duwe & Clark, 2017). Understanding these disruptions requires attention to lived experience and meaning-making, as phenomenological approaches emphasize how individuals interpret and reconstruct their realities through reflection and narrative (Neubauer et al., 2019). These disruptions weaken self-efficacy, the belief in one's capacity to act and effect change (Bandura, 1997). When self-efficacy deteriorates, structural supports such as housing, employment, or supervision are rarely sufficient to sustain long-term behavioral transformation, particularly when autonomy and intrinsic motivation remain compromised (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Reintegration therefore requires psychological restoration just as urgently as it requires material stability.

The recovery of agency and self-belief emerges as a central component of psychological reintegration. Research demonstrates that programs fostering autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and reflective engagement produce stronger and more durable desistance outcomes than interventions centered on external compliance or control (McCausland, 2025; Rogers, 2021). Self-determination theory further confirms that empowerment, rather than surveillance, predicts sustained stability and personal growth (Magee, 2021). Trauma recovery thus becomes both a psychological and ethical process, because individuals must repair the internal harm produced through incarceration while envisioning themselves as capable of contributing meaningfully to community life. Educational and therapeutic environments that validate emotional experience and connect it to cultural meaning help individuals rebuild coherence and perceive themselves as active participants in their own transformation (Courtney, 2023; Milner et al., 2024).

Restorative approaches illustrate how psychological healing intersects with cultural affirmation. Trauma-informed educational models, community-based mentorship, and culturally grounded support networks encourage individuals to reinterpret their narratives, acknowledge suffering without absorbing stigma, and reestablish control through connection and belonging (Faruqui et al., 2024; Hwang, 2025). When reintegration is framed as an opportunity for healing rather than a condition of surveillance, individuals engage more deeply with their own growth and form stronger bonds with the communities that receive them.

Yet psychological reintegration cannot be separated from cultural identity restoration. Trauma recovery and the rebuilding of self-efficacy do not function as isolated clinical goals; they serve as necessary foundations for reconnecting with memory, meaning, and belonging. This examination of trauma and self-efficacy suggests why reintegration requires internal reconstruction as much as external support. These insights directly prepare the conceptual ground for IRT, which integrates psychological renewal with cultural, social, and relational dimensions to explain how sustainable reintegration takes form.

Cultural Memory, Place, and Belonging

Cultural memory serves as the collective archive through which communities carry identity, values, and continuity across generations. For individuals emerging from incarceration, reconnection with that memory becomes a vital act of restoration rather than a symbolic gesture. Displacement, whether physical, cultural, or spiritual, fractures the relationship between people and the places that give meaning to their lives. When imprisonment removes individuals from the landscapes, languages, and rituals that sustain belonging, the

rupture extends beyond social exclusion; it becomes a dislocation from the narratives that anchor existence itself (Cupples et al., 2024; Márquez Pérez, 2024). Reintegration, therefore, cannot be understood as complete until individuals recover the spatial and cultural coordinates through which identity is located and affirmed.

Research on Afro-Caribbean and Indigenous communities underscores that place carries more than geographic significance, because it embodies memory, ritual, lineage, and moral order. Ancestral lands, sacred practices, and communal histories are central to resilience and post-release identity reconstruction (Faruqui et al., 2024; Leslie, 2019). The Raizal people of San Andrés Island exemplify this relationship. Generations of maritime dispossession, ecological disruption, and cultural marginalization have reshaped livelihoods and weakened the transmission of stories, songs, and communal practices that sustain belonging (Castell Britton, 2024; Cupples et al., 2024). For Raizal ex-offenders, returning home involves more than physical relocation; it requires reclaiming cultural memory and reinhabiting the environments where identity is lived, remembered, and restored.

Programs that intentionally reestablish cultural connection, including ancestral storytelling, environmental stewardship, community worship, and ritual participation, help individuals situate recovery within shared identity rather than in isolation. These practices create bridges linking psychological healing, social participation, and spiritual grounding, thereby framing desistance as a culturally anchored process, rather than a bureaucratic achievement (Hwang, 2025; United Nations, 2023). When returning citizens engage with spaces that reflect their history and values, reintegration becomes an experience of renewal, coherence, and restoration, rather than a continuation of institutional control.

Cultural memory and belonging are not peripheral to reintegration; they define the context through which identity restoration becomes possible. Reconnecting with place reclaims the narratives that incarceration sought to silence, and this reconnection transforms reentry into an act of cultural healing. This final conceptual pillar of IRT links cultural memory and spatial belonging to the psychological, narrative, and relational dimensions discussed earlier, demonstrating how sustainable reintegration emerges when individuals return not only to society, but also to the cultural worlds that sustain meaning and purpose.

Toward Identity Restoration Theory

The literature demonstrates that reintegration requires more than the fulfillment of structural or supervisory conditions, because it depends on the restoration of identity, meaning, and cultural continuity. Across the domains reviewed, structural reintegration, cultural identity, pedagogy, psychological healing, and belonging, a consistent gap emerges. Existing frameworks rarely integrate these dimensions into a coherent explanation of how sustainable reintegration takes form. This conceptual gap grounds the development of IRT, which unites these perspectives into a single model that interprets post-incarceration recovery through cultural, psychological, and relational restoration.

IRT arises from the convergence of three disciplines. Criminal justice clarifies the processes of desistance and social reentry. Educational psychology illuminates self-efficacy, agency, and the transformative potential of culturally responsive education. Forensic psychology examines trauma, stigma, and the moral reconstruction of the self. Synthesizing these domains reveals how formerly incarcerated individuals rebuild coherent identities through the restoration of memory, place, and belonging. Reintegration therefore becomes not a matter of structural reinsertion, but a process of cultural re-rooting that reconnects the individual with collective life.

The evidence reviewed demonstrates that effective reintegration requires a multidimensional perspective integrating structural access, psychological healing, and cultural meaning. IRT responds to this need by positioning cultural identity as a mediating condition that links social reintegration with personal

transformation. This stance does not reject existing models; it complements them through an expanded understanding of what it means to return.

Applied to the Raizal community of San Andrés Island, the development of IRT carries both local and global significance. Locally, the theory situates reintegration within the historical and cultural narratives of an Afro-Caribbean society shaped through displacement and resilience. Globally, it offers a lens through which other postcolonial and marginalized communities can reframe reintegration as a process of identity renewal, rather than institutional resettlement.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to introduce and develop IRT, a framework that explains what formerly incarcerated individuals need to restore disrupted cultural identities as a pathway to reintegration. The study draws on qualitative fieldwork with Raizal ex-offenders and community leaders on San Andrés Island, Colombia, and examines how culture, place, and memory shape the process of post-incarceration recovery. The aim is to advance a theory that clarifies the relationship among identity, belonging, and desistance within contexts marked through historical marginalization and postcolonial displacement.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do Raizal ex-offenders and community leaders describe the relationship between cultural identity and reintegration after incarceration?
2. What processes of memory, place, and belonging emerge from participants' narratives as mechanisms of identity restoration?
3. How can these findings inform culturally grounded reintegration practices within the context of San Andrés Island?

Examining these questions allows the study to establish a foundation for IRT as a model that frames reintegration through cultural continuity, rather than institutional resettlement. The findings demonstrate that culture, belonging, and memory function as central mechanisms that sustain post-incarceration recovery and social participation. This orientation defines the study as an empirical investigation with theoretical significance and ensures coherence between the purpose and presentation of results.

Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a qualitative design grounded in phenomenological inquiry to explore how formerly incarcerated Raizal individuals understand reintegration as a process of cultural restoration. This design supported the purpose of examining how memory, place, and belonging interact in identity reconstruction after incarceration. Phenomenology offered a strong foundation, because it privileges lived meanings and illuminates the subjective dimensions of recovery, continuity, and agency, elements central to the development of IRT. This approach allowed the theory to emerge inductively from authentic narrative experiences, rather than from predetermined conceptual categories.

Participants emerged through community networks, rehabilitation initiatives, and cultural organizations on San Andrés Island. The sample included Raizal ex-offenders and community leaders who actively engaged in cultural preservation, social development, or reintegration efforts. Purposeful sampling ensured variation in age, gender, incarceration history, and forms of community involvement. This diversity produced a rich set of

perspectives that revealed both individual and collective dimensions of post-incarceration life. Table 1 presents an overview of participant characteristics and situates the study within the demographic and cultural context of the island.

Table 1. *Participant Characteristics and Contextual Overview*

Group	Age range	Education	Incarceration/role	Key contributions
Raizal ex-offenders (n=10)	20–49	Secondary school to university	2–8 years in mainland prisons	Described cultural erasure, prison education, reentry challenges, and the importance of locally grounded skill development
Community leaders (n=10)	37–76	Post-secondary to advanced degrees	Educators, pastors, elders, community organizers	Offered insights on cultural continuity, communal acceptance, and reintegration within the island’s colonial legacy

Note: Age ranges, education levels, and roles are presented to illustrate the diversity of participant perspectives. Raizal ex-offenders contributed lived accounts of incarceration and reentry, while community leaders offered broader reflections on cultural continuity, social belonging, and reintegration within the island’s colonial legacy.

Data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews and focus group conversations conducted in English and Creole. Each exchange emphasized storytelling, reflection, and cultural expression, and this emphasis allowed participants to describe experiences of rupture and restoration in their own terms. Interviews invited participants to speak about cultural memory, island identity, incarceration, and reintegration, while focus groups encouraged dialogue around shared histories and communal belonging. This process fostered the depth of insight required for theoretical development grounded in lived reality.

The study followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, and guided the progression from initial engagement with transcripts to the construction of conceptual categories. Manual coding supported intimate interaction with participant narratives and encouraged sensitivity to cultural nuance and emotional tone. Reflexive journaling allowed me to track interpretive decisions and monitor assumptions throughout the analytic process. Triangulation across interview and focus group data strengthened analytical coherence, and member checking ensured that emerging interpretations aligned with participants’ cultural understandings and personal intentions.

The study drew methodological inspiration from research in reintegration and education that demonstrates the value of narrative inquiry for understanding identity reconstruction among marginalized populations. These bodies of work illustrate how culturally responsive engagement fosters empowerment, self-efficacy, and a renewed sense of belonging within communities that experience historical displacement. The methodological commitments of this study therefore aligned with principles of cultural respect, contextual relevance, and relational understanding, which served as essential foundations for constructing IRT.

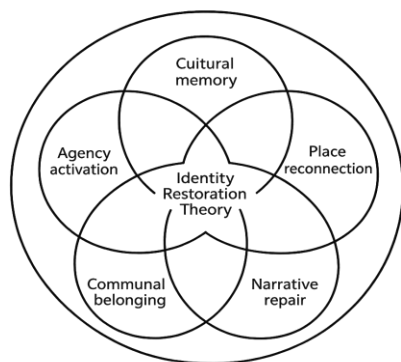
Ethical approval was granted through the Institutional Review Board of Walden University. The research protected participant identities through anonymization and secure data handling procedures. Relational ethics guided every stage of the process and emphasized cultural sensitivity, reciprocity, and respect for oral traditions within the Raizal community. These principles shaped decisions regarding recruitment,

interviewing, interpretation, and dissemination, ensuring that the research honored the cultural integrity of participants and supported community values.

Results

Five dominant themes emerged consistently across participant accounts, because the narratives revealed cultural memory, place reconnection, narrative repair, communal belonging, and agency activation as essential mechanisms of reintegration. These themes captured both the disruption of identity during incarceration and the processes of cultural restoration that participants considered necessary for their return to community life. Figure 1 illustrates the analytical framework that guided the interpretation of these themes and shows how inductive coding evolved into the five interdependent constructs that form the foundation of IRT.

The proportions represented in Figure 1 do not communicate statistical frequency. Instead, they reflect equal weight distribution within the thematic corpus and demonstrate that each construct contributed with comparable significance to the overall framework. Together, the constructs illuminate the cultural, relational, and psychological dimensions of reintegration that participants emphasized throughout their narratives.

Figure 1. *The Five Restorative Constructs of Identity Restoration Theory*

Note: The model is derived from qualitative thematic analysis and depicts the constructs as mutually reinforcing and structurally interdependent. The configuration does not imply sequence, hierarchy, frequency, or causal direction; rather, it illustrates how identity restoration emerges through their reciprocal convergence within culturally grounded reintegration processes.

Theme 1: Cultural Memory

Cultural memory emerged as a primary construct, because participants understood identity as something sustained through inherited practices, stories, and collective meaning. Ex-offenders described imprisonment as a period of cultural erasure in which institutional routines replaced the familiar rhythms of island life. Meals, music, language, and spiritual expression lost significance inside mainland prisons, and participants explained that this absence harmed them more deeply than confinement itself. They returned home disoriented and unsure of how to reconnect with their heritage, a condition that intensified the emotional distance created through years of separation from community and kin.

Community leaders situated these experiences within longstanding histories of colonial displacement and cultural loss. They emphasized that incarceration accelerated fractures in the transmission of Raizal traditions, particularly oral storytelling, ritual practice, and intergenerational teaching. Elders explained that songs, proverbs, and ancestral narratives often failed to reach younger members, because imprisonment and migration disrupted the flow of cultural knowledge. This interruption weakened communal identity and heightened the sense of isolation that many ex-offenders carried upon release.

Participants described reengagement with ritual, oral history, and spiritual practice as a pathway toward both psychological recovery and renewed belonging. They spoke about the healing impact of joining church choirs, sharing stories with elders, attending cultural ceremonies, and participating in traditional gatherings. These acts of remembrance restored coherence between self and community and transformed cultural memory into an active force of reintegration. Research on culturally responsive education and heritage-based learning reinforces this insight and confirms that cultural affirmation strengthens motivation, resilience, and identity reconstruction during reentry (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Milner et al., 2024; Zeng et al., 2025).

In summary, the importance of cultural memory revealed that reintegration involves far more than logistical adjustment. Participants portrayed the return home as a cultural reconstruction of self, in which ancestral language, traditions, and community history restored dignity and direction. Within IRT, cultural memory functions as both the starting point and the sustaining force of transformation, because it reconnects individuals to the heritage that anchors identity, belonging, and purpose.

Theme 2: Place Reconnection

Place reconnection emerged as a second major construct, because participants described identity as something anchored in the physical and spiritual landscapes of San Andrés. Ex-offenders explained that the island's environment carried meanings shaped through generations, and return to these spaces awakened memories silenced during imprisonment. They spoke about the sea, the coastline, and family compounds as living elements that restored recognition after years of dislocation. The scent of salt air, the movement of waves, and the touch of sand under their feet revived sensory memories that reminded them of who they were before confinement disrupted their lives.

Participants insisted that these encounters with place did more than evoke nostalgia. They reactivated social roles that held moral significance within community life, such as caregiving, mentoring, and participating in collective labor. The island's landscape encouraged responsibility and belonging, because it carried stories, obligations, and shared history. Community leaders reinforced these accounts and described land and sea as moral spaces that preserved collective memory, grounded social order, and offered continuity in the face of colonial disruption (Cruz & Torrejano, 2020; Hooker, 2005; Márquez Pérez, 2024). Their reflections demonstrated that geography shaped culture, identity, and relational expectations.

This theme aligned with emerging research that highlights the restorative and identity-affirming role of land-based practices in postcolonial and Indigenous contexts. Studies confirm that reconnection with ancestral environments strengthens self-efficacy, nurtures cooperation, and supports desistance, particularly when individuals rebuild purpose through culturally meaningful work (da Silva et al., 2022; Hwang, 2025; Tobón, 2020). Participants affirmed this relationship through accounts that linked fishing, small-scale agriculture, and community maintenance to renewed discipline, emotional grounding, and cultural pride. Their narratives revealed that place reconnection restored not only memories, but also responsibility to community and land.

Within IRT, place reconnection explains how individuals reground themselves through embodied ties to ancestral environments that affirm identity and belonging. Reintegration unfolded not within institutional procedures but within the lived spaces where memory, cultural meaning, and agency converged. Participants portrayed return as a process of reinhabiting the world that shaped them, and, through this renewed presence, they reconstructed coherence between self and community. Place reconnection therefore functions as a stabilizing force that strengthens cultural continuity and supports the broader transformation that IRT describes.

Theme 3: Narrative Repair

Narrative repair emerged as a third essential construct, because participants described identity reconstruction as a process that required reclaiming voice, meaning, and coherence after incarceration. Ex-offenders explained that institutional labeling and social stigma fragmented their sense of self. Many remembered how the category of "criminal" overshadowed every other dimension of their identity and created silence, shame, and emotional withdrawal. They carried this rupture into reentry, often struggling to articulate who they were beyond the mark that confinement imposed on their lives. The interviews created a space where participants reinterpreted these experiences and restored continuity between past, present, and future (Duwe & Clark, 2017; Maxwell, 2013).

Storytelling served as both a coping strategy and a cultural form of healing. Participants who expressed their narratives through conversation, prayer, or traditional songs described significant emotional relief and renewed purpose. They explained that giving voice to their experiences transformed pain into insight and strengthened their connection to community values. When they shared these stories with elders or peers, they felt recognized and supported, which reduced isolation and reaffirmed dignity. One participant expressed this

clearly when he said, “Telling my story made me feel like I came back to life.” This insight resonates with research demonstrating that reflection and culturally responsive education strengthen agency, resilience, and reintegration (Gay, 2018; Milner et al., 2024; Rogers, 2021).

Community leaders extended this understanding and framed storytelling as an act that preserved historical continuity. They viewed personal narratives as cultural testimonies that connected individual recovery with collective endurance. Participants often linked their own struggles to longer histories of resistance, displacement, and faith within the Raizal community. Through this connection, they no longer interpreted incarceration as a personal failure but as an experience that required collective interpretation and communal healing. Their stories assumed new meaning as part of a shared narrative of survival and transformation (Bennett et al., 2025; Zeng et al., 2025).

Within IRT, narrative repair captures the process through which individuals reclaim authorship over their lives and restore coherence after stigma and disruption. Participants reconstructed identity through deliberate reflection, cultural expression, and social recognition. As they restored continuity through narrative, they reentered community life with renewed dignity and a clearer sense of purpose. Narrative repair therefore functions as a mechanism that links psychological healing to cultural memory and communal belonging, strengthening each of the other constructs within the theory. It demonstrates that reintegration becomes sustainable when individuals rebuild meaning through stories that affirm both personal worth and collective heritage.

Theme 4: Communal Belonging

Communal belonging arose as a fourth essential construct, because participants consistently described reintegration as a relational process that required renewed trust, recognition, and shared responsibility. Returning home did not grant immediate acceptance. Participants explained that they confronted social hesitation, stigma, and emotional distance from family and neighbors. They viewed belonging as something that unfolded gradually, through actions that demonstrated integrity and reaffirmed their place within the community’s moral framework. This relational dimension revealed that reintegration demanded more than individual determination; it required a collective willingness to reweave the social bonds that incarceration had strained or severed (Petersilia, 2003).

Community leaders emphasized that reintegration succeeded when families, faith communities, and neighborhood networks acted as partners in restoration. They described cultural gatherings, ritual practices, and communal meals as settings where returning individuals recovered identity through participation and service. These interactions anchored participants within shared rhythms of life and allowed them to demonstrate responsibility in ways that renewed trust. Leaders viewed these practices as essential because they transformed reintegration from an isolated struggle into a collaborative social project rooted in solidarity and reciprocity. Research confirms programs that foster relational support and mentorship reduce recidivism and strengthen emotional stability when they cultivate trust, accountability, and communal care (Cruz & Torrejano, 2020; Green, 2024; Hwang, 2025).

Participants also described how cultural celebrations, language, music, and storytelling facilitated their return. Symbolic gestures, such as invitations to sing hymns, prepare traditional foods, or contribute to community events, carried profound emotional weight. These moments restored dignity and signaled renewed recognition within the moral community. One participant noted that singing again in church “felt like being seen,” capturing the transformative power of simple acts of inclusion. Studies confirm that communities that frame reintegration as cultural recovery, rather than supervision, create environments where resilience and sustained desistance flourish (Faruqui et al., 2024; Murff, 2020).

Within IRT, communal belonging functions as the social mechanism that restores relational identity and integrates individuals into collective life. This construct demonstrates that reintegration gains strength when communities embrace returning individuals as cultural actors rather than seeing them as stigmatized subjects. Through this reciprocal process, individuals and communities heal together. Participants rebuild identity through meaningful participation, and communities reclaim cultural continuity through the reintegration of their members. Communal belonging therefore serves as the relational bridge that links cultural memory, narrative repair, and agency activation, ensuring that reintegration takes root in shared meaning and collective purpose.

Theme 5: Agency Activation

Agency activation emerged as the fifth construct, capturing the moment when participants reclaimed direction, autonomy, and purpose after incarceration. They described agency as a capacity that imprisonment had weakened through routine control, loss of choice, and the constant experience of surveillance. Participants explained that this erosion of self-efficacy left them uncertain of their ability to rebuild life upon release. Reconnection with culture, memory, and community reawakened a sense of internal strength, allowing them to perceive themselves not as passive recipients of reintegration services, but as active contributors capable of shaping their futures (Bandura, 1997; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Mourão et al., 2025).

Participants described agency as something rediscovered rather than granted. They associated this renewal with meaningful roles within their families, churches, and neighborhoods. Acts such as caring for children, mentoring younger relatives, or participating in cultural events revived a sense of usefulness and dignity. These experiences strengthened motivation and encouraged participants to see reintegration as an opportunity to contribute rather than atone. Community leaders reinforced this view, observing that individuals who embraced responsibility and engaged in cultural or educational activities demonstrated stronger resilience and more sustained desistance. They referred to this phenomenon as “remembered power,” a phrase that conveyed the rediscovery of capability through cultural and relational engagement (Chlup, 2020; Milner et al., 2024).

Education, mentorship, and vocational training rooted in local culture played a vital role in this transformation. Participants valued learning environments that affirmed identity and honored traditional skills such as fishing, agriculture, and craftwork. These opportunities restored confidence, because they allowed individuals to excel in domains connected to family heritage and island life. Participants explained that such culturally grounded learning shifted reintegration from dependency toward contribution, strengthening self-efficacy in ways that generic programs seldom achieved. Recent studies confirm that agency increases when instruction validates cultural identity, emphasizes participation, and fosters contextually meaningful self-determination (Bennett et al., 2025; Rogers, 2021; Zeng et al., 2025).

Within IRT, agency activation represents the culmination of reintegration as a process of reclamation. Individuals reconstruct self-efficacy through cultural engagement, affirm identity through purposeful action, and transform reintegration into a pathway of continuity rather than correction. Agency bridges personal renewal with communal responsibility, allowing returning individuals to act as culture bearers who strengthen the collective life of their communities. Through this construct, IRT illustrates how psychological, cultural, and relational restoration converge to restore autonomy, dignity, and meaningful participation in the social world.

Integration of Constructs

The five constructs—cultural memory, place reconnection, narrative repair, communal belonging, and agency activation—formed an interdependent system that revealed how reintegration unfolded as a culturally

grounded process of restoring coherence between self, community, and environment. Each construct carried distinct meaning, yet their full significance emerged through their interaction. Participants consistently described recovery as a movement that flowed across these domains rather than a sequence of discrete stages. Cultural memory revived belonging, belonging strengthened agency, and agency reinforced both personal and collective transformation.

Participants' narratives demonstrated that successful reintegration required the simultaneous restoration of identity, dignity, and cultural continuity. Individuals who reengaged with ancestral practices, community networks, and land-based activities reported strengthened confidence, emotional stability, and motivation to contribute to collective well-being. Their accounts portrayed reintegration not as a task imposed through external structures, but as an inner and relational process rooted in cultural recognition. In contrast, participants who remained socially isolated or disconnected from cultural identity continued to experience disorientation, marginalization, and diminished self-efficacy. These patterns affirmed that housing, employment, or supervision alone could not produce lasting reintegration, absent the cultural and psychological coherence that IRT defines as essential (Hwang, 2025; Petersilia, 2003).

IRT integrates insights from criminology, cultural psychology, and educational theory to reframe reintegration as both a social and existential journey. The constructs illuminate reintegration as a living process shaped through memory, land, narrative, and relational life. They reveal that individuals return not only to communities but to cultural worlds that sustain purpose, belonging, and moral orientation. Reintegration succeeds when cultural identity operates as a restorative force, guiding individuals toward self-determination, responsible participation, and renewed dignity.

Viewed together, these constructs represent more than thematic findings; they embody the interwoven dimensions of what it means to return to oneself and to the cultural world that confers meaning. IRT emerges from this as a framework that explains reintegration through cultural continuity, psychological renewal, and collective affirmation. Through this lens, the act of returning transforms from a logistical transition into a profound reconstruction of identity grounded in history, belonging, and shared humanity.

Discussion

The findings reinforce the central proposition that reintegration extends beyond structural resettlement and requires the restoration of fractured cultural identity. Participants described incarceration as a cultural and existential rupture that disrupted language, ritual, memory, and belonging. IRT responds to this disruption through a framework that interprets reintegration as a process of re-rooting in cultural continuity, communal recognition, and agency activation. When this restoration fails to occur, the reintegration process becomes challenged.

Reintegration Beyond Structure: Reclaiming the Cultural Core

The first research question examined how Raizal individuals describe reintegration as cultural reconnection and identity repair. Participants' narratives revealed that returning home produced a profound sense of dissonance, because many felt physically present yet emotionally disconnected, a condition they described as being "home but not belonging." This insight reinforces Petersilia's (2003) argument that reintegration falters when models emphasize compliance or employment while ignoring the deeper processes that restore meaning and identity.

IRT expands this critique through the finding that cultural continuity, rather than access to material resources alone, sustains long-term reintegration. Participants referenced language, ritual, memory, and collective

identity as the elements that allowed them to feel whole again after incarceration. The restoration of these cultural anchors created the emotional and psychological conditions that made social reintegration possible. Through this understanding, reintegration emerges not as a technical transition, but as a cultural return in which individuals recover the foundations of dignity, belonging, and purpose.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy as Identity Work

The second research question explored how land, language, memory, and tradition shape transformation after incarceration. Participants described education as a pivotal space where cultural identity could either be diminished or restored. They explained that prison curricula often felt disconnected from island realities and erased the values, stories, and languages that grounded their identity. This experience aligns with research showing that correctional education reduces recidivism, although many programs overlook the cultural dimensions that shape learning outcomes and personal transformation (Cabrera et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2013).

Scholars in culturally responsive pedagogy demonstrate that learning grounded in heritage strengthens engagement, self-efficacy, and emotional resilience (Chang & Viesca, 2022; Chen et al., 2021; Gay, 2018; Magee, 2021). Participants' accounts confirmed this relationship, because they envisioned educational spaces rooted in Raizal Creole, music, agriculture, and community memory as environments that restored dignity and motivated change. Research on educator preparation also highlights that culturally responsive practices enhance relational competence and deepen identity affirmation among learners (Caingcoy et al., 2022; Courtney, 2023). These insights reveal that education functions as identity work when it affirms cultural meaning and positions individuals as creators of knowledge, rather than subjects of institutional control.

Within IRT, culturally grounded education repairs fractured narratives and reestablishes belonging through memory, language, and shared heritage. Participants experienced this shift as a restoration of voice and purpose, because culturally responsive instruction validated their histories and reconnected them with community life. Through this process, education supports reintegration, not through technical training alone, but through the renewal of cultural identity that sustains long-term transformation and desistance.

Land, Place, and Ecological Belonging

The second research question examined how land, memory, language, and tradition influence transformation after incarceration. Participants described their return to ancestral spaces as a profound experience that restored presence, clarity, and emotional grounding. Simple acts such as walking barefoot on ancestral soil, smelling the sea, or singing in Creole helped them recover a sense of identity they felt had been suppressed during imprisonment. These experiences support arguments from Cruz and Torrejano (2020) and from Márquez Pérez (2024), who emphasize that land functions as a constitutive force in cultural identity and social cohesion.

The findings further resonate with ecological and environmental justice perspectives that explain how structural inequality affects cultural belonging. Bullard (2018) argues that environmental degradation and social exclusion often operate together as interconnected forms of injustice. Participants' descriptions reflected this relationship, because they interpreted the transformation of their island, including ecological disruption and demographic pressures, as a continuation of historical marginalization. In this context, reconnecting with land supported their emotional healing and reestablished continuity with their ancestral world.

IRT integrates this ecological belonging into reintegration discourse through the insight that place cannot be separated from identity. Scholars in culturally rooted and postcolonial contexts consistently demonstrate that

land-based experiences strengthen resilience, cooperation, and self-efficacy (Cruz and Torrejano, 2020; Márquez Pérez, 2024). Participants' narratives affirmed this position, because embodied engagement with place allowed them to reclaim roles within family, community, and spiritual life. Through this understanding, reintegration acquires ecological significance, because ancestral land becomes the ground upon which coherence, belonging, and purpose reemerge after confinement.

Agency, Self-Efficacy, and Narrative Reclamation

The third research question explored the constructs that shape IRT and their contribution to culturally rooted reintegration. Participants described agency as something they recovered through meaningful action, mentorship, entrepreneurship, and storytelling. Their experiences revealed that agency emerged when they engaged with practices grounded in culture, heritage, and community life. These accounts illustrate that self-efficacy is not a universal abstraction, but a culturally situated capacity shaped through memory, identity, and social recognition. This perspective corresponds with Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy and with the motivational principles outlined in Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory.

Narrative reclamation played a central role in this transformation. Participants explained that storytelling, ritual, and Creole language allowed them to reinterpret their histories and reject stigmatizing labels imposed during and after incarceration. Through narrative repair, they reconstructed identity with dignity and moral purpose. This process aligns with research that identifies culturally responsive education and reflective practice as catalysts for identity reconstruction and resilience (Milner et al., 2024; Rogers, 2021). Participants' stories revealed that narrative repair functioned as both emotional healing and cultural affirmation, allowing them to step into community life with renewed legitimacy.

IRT interprets agency activation as a reawakening of cultural power. Participants described agency not as a skill they learned in isolation, but as a force rooted in heritage, memory, and communal obligation. Mentoring youth, creating livelihood through traditional trades, and speaking Creole in public spaces represented acts that restored both self-worth and social participation. These experiences confirm that agency becomes sustainable when it draws strength from cultural identity, rather than from external forms of supervision or control. Through this understanding, agency activation emerges as a central mechanism through which reintegration becomes a moral and cultural renewal.

Global Relevance and Decolonial Application

Although rooted in the Raizal experience of San Andrés, the principles of IRT resonate across contexts where incarceration intersects with colonial histories, displacement, and cultural marginalization. Scholars such as Gwyneth Czerniawski (2020) critique Eurocentric reintegration and prison education frameworks that universalize Western assumptions and overlook culturally grounded knowledge systems. Research on employment and reintegration further demonstrates that structural supports alone cannot guarantee desistance when broader social and cultural conditions remain unaddressed (Ramakers et al., 2017). These insights align with the perspectives of study participants, who explained that reintegration cannot succeed when models ignore cultural history and communal identity. Through this convergence of scholarship and lived experience, IRT offers a decolonial perspective that interprets reintegration as cultural renewal rather than reinsertion into punitive structures.

The findings indicate that cultural memory and ecological belonging provide the moral and psychological infrastructure required for sustainable transformation. Participants' experiences reflected broader global patterns, in which formerly incarcerated individuals confront legacies of racialized control, cultural erasure, and structural exclusion. They described recovery as a return to ancestral identity, rather than a reinsertion into systems that contributed to their marginalization. This understanding reinforces the argument that

reintegration must honor cultural foundations and community knowledge to achieve emotional stability and social participation.

IRT expands reintegration discourse, through a framework that values memory, belonging, and agency as core conditions of recovery. In postcolonial contexts, such constructs offer communities a path toward justice that strengthens identity and restores dignity. Through this lens, reintegration becomes a collective commitment to cultural continuity and mutual care. The framework therefore holds relevance for global settings where structural inequality and historical trauma shape the experiences of incarcerated populations.

Reintegration as a Collective and Cultural Practice

The findings revealed that reintegration required collective participation rather than individual effort alone. Participants emphasized that they regained a sense of belonging through relationships that affirmed their identity and restored trust. They described mentoring youth, engaging in cultural rituals, and participating in communal events as moments that reconnected them with the moral and social life of the island. These experiences illustrate that reintegration succeeds when communities recognize returning individuals as contributors rather than as stigmatized subjects.

Community leaders reinforced this perspective through assertions that reintegration operates through shared responsibility. They explained that families, faith communities, and neighborhood networks provided the emotional and cultural support that allowed individuals to feel grounded after incarceration. This perspective aligns with research on collective efficacy, which identifies social cohesion and shared norms as essential conditions for community stability and reduced violence (Sampson et al., 1997). Through this lens, reintegration becomes a relational process that strengthens both the individual and the collective.

IRT interprets communal belonging as a central mechanism of transformation, because it creates the social and moral space where healing can occur. Participants described belonging not as passive acceptance, but as a dynamic process of participating in community life and contributing to its continuity. Their accounts revealed that communal recognition restored their dignity and allowed them to reclaim roles linked to care, responsibility, and cultural identity. These insights confirm that reintegration flourishes when communities function as partners in restoration and when cultural practices support relational trust and collective renewal.

Synthesis and Theoretical Significance

The synthesis of these findings confirms that reintegration must be understood as a process of identity restoration rather than a narrow reentry task. Participants described transformation through cultural memory, ecological belonging, narrative coherence, communal participation, and agency activation. These elements functioned as interdependent forces that rebuilt dignity and coherence after incarceration. Their narratives revealed that structural supports alone could not sustain reintegration when cultural identity remained fractured or unacknowledged.

IRT advances this understanding through a unified framework that integrates cultural psychology, criminology theory, and educational practice. The constructs demonstrate that individuals reconstruct meaning when they reconnect with memory, land, and communal life, and when they reclaim authorship over their stories. Reintegration therefore emerges as a relational and existential journey grounded in cultural continuity. Through this perspective, recovery becomes a moral and psychological transformation rooted in heritage and communal recognition, rather than compliance with external conditions.

The theory holds significance beyond the context of San Andrés. It offers culturally grounded insight for communities shaped through colonial histories, displacement, and structural inequality. These contexts often require reintegration models that honor local epistemologies and support identity restoration. IRT provides

this conceptual foundation and invites practitioners and policymakers to view reintegration as a collective and culturally situated process. Through this lens, individuals return not only to society but to the cultural world that sustains identity, purpose, and hope.

Conclusion

This study presented IRT as a framework for understanding reintegration as a process of cultural re-rooting, rather than mere structural resettlement. Grounded in the lived experiences of Raizal ex-offenders and community leaders on San Andrés Island, the findings revealed that incarceration fractures cultural memory, disrupts belonging, and erodes narrative coherence. Therefore, reintegration requires intentional restoration of identity through the interdependent processes of cultural memory, place reconnection, narrative repair, communal belonging, and agency activation.

The participants' voices affirmed that education, land, ritual, and community are not peripheral elements but essential pillars of reintegration. Their reflections showed that when reintegration strategies disregard cultural continuity, they reinforce alienation and marginalization. Conversely, when systems affirm heritage, language, and collective identity, they generate conditions for dignity, resilience, and sustained transformation. Reintegration flourishes when it honors both personal renewal and cultural coherence.

IRT contributes to the fields of criminal justice, educational psychology, and reintegration studies by addressing a critical theoretical gap. It proposes the interpretation of reintegration equally through cultural and existential dimensions, as well as material supports. This culturally grounded approach extends beyond the Caribbean context, offering insight for Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and marginalized populations worldwide who navigate the dual legacies of colonial disruption and systemic exclusion.

For policymakers, educators, and practitioners, the implication is clear: reintegration must move from surveillance to solidarity and from control to cultural restoration. Embedding memory, place, and community within post-incarceration frameworks transforms reintegration from a bureaucratic exercise into a moral and cultural act. Sustainable reintegration occurs when individuals are not simply returned to society but are restored to themselves and to the cultural worlds that give their lives continuity and meaning.

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