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Family Visitation as a Therapeutic Space: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of Inmate Counseling

Ach. Firman Ilahi¹, Samsul Arifin², Abdul Gopar³, Dimas Anggara Putra⁴, Ahmad Mirza⁵, Choirul Atiq⁶

^{1,2,3,4,5,6}Universitas Ibrahimi, Situbondo, Indonesia

¹firmanilahi@ibrahimi.ac.id, ²syamsulahasan@ibrahimi.ac.id

Abstract

Family visitation in correctional institutions has consistently been associated with improved psychological adjustment among incarcerated individuals. However, existing research has largely focused on measurable outcomes while providing limited insight into the relational mechanisms through which these benefits emerge. This study explores how family visitation functions as a counseling-relevant process by employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of semi-structured interviews conducted with nine male inmates, five family members, and one correctional officer at a correctional facility in Situbondo, East Java, Indonesia. The findings reveal that family visitation serves two interconnected functions. First, it provides existential validation by reaffirming inmates' social identities beyond the "offender" label. Second, it evokes emotional ambivalence, as feelings of comfort and hope coexist with guilt regarding the emotional and financial burdens experienced by family members. At the relational level, family visits function as condensed systemic interactions in which family members mutually regulate emotional distress, renegotiate family roles, and collaboratively reconstruct the inmate's identity. These interactions are frequently characterized by protective hesitation, a communication pattern in which sensitive topics are intentionally avoided to preserve relational harmony within the limited visitation period. These findings support a reconceptualization of family visitation as a Naturally Occurring Systemic Therapeutic Intervention (NOSTI) rather than merely an administrative procedure. The study highlights the potential of integrating structured pre-visit preparation and post-visit debriefing into correctional counseling services to transform routine family visitation into a purposeful rehabilitative resource.

Keywords: family visitation; correctional counseling; emotional ambivalence; systemic intervention; interpretative phenomenological analysis

Introduction

Social interaction during incarceration has consistently been recognized as a critical determinant of psychological well-being, institutional adjustment, and successful post-release reintegration among incarcerated individuals (Arifin, 2025; Durosini, Triberti, & Pravettoni, 2021; Moore, Stuewig, & Tangney, 2016). Within the socially restricted and emotionally deprived environment of correctional institutions, sustained contact with the outside world extends beyond a peripheral social activity. Rather, it functions as a vital psychological anchor that promotes identity continuity, emotional regulation, and resilience under prolonged conditions of confinement. Among the various forms of external contact, family visitation represents the most significant and multifaceted interpersonal interaction because it reconnects incarcerated individuals with their primary social networks while simultaneously exposing relational vulnerabilities shaped by separation, stigma, and institutional constraints (Tewksbury & DeMichele, 2018).

Over the past decade, criminal justice systems worldwide have gradually shifted from predominantly punitive approaches toward models emphasizing rehabilitation, reintegration, and restorative justice (Arifin, 2021; Barreto & Matthews, 2022; Mears & Cochran, 2021). Within this evolving paradigm, maintaining positive family relationships is increasingly recognized not merely as a humanitarian or legal concern but also as an essential component of successful rehabilitation. A growing body of international research demonstrates that regular family visitation is associated with reduced institutional misconduct, lower recidivism rates, and improved mental health outcomes among incarcerated populations (Tasca, Turanovic, Rodriguez, & Spohn, 2019; Turanovic & Tasca, 2019). Consequently, visitation spaces are increasingly being reconceptualized as potential settings for psychosocial intervention rather than simply administrative venues for family contact.

Despite this growing recognition, empirical research on family visitation remains largely dominated by quantitative, outcome-oriented studies. Although such research has established robust associations between visitation frequency and various behavioral and psychological outcomes, it provides only limited insight into the relational mechanisms through which visitation exerts its influence (Durosini, Triberti, & Pravettoni, 2021). From the perspective of counseling psychology, this limitation is particularly significant because psychological change is shaped not merely by social contact itself but by the subjective processes of meaning-making, emotional exchange, and relational negotiation that occur during interpersonal interactions.

Recent studies suggest that family visitation provides emotional reassurance, reinforces personal identity, and buffers the psychological stress associated with incarceration (Bevan, 2017). At the same time, visitation may evoke intense emotional responses related to separation, personal responsibility, and unresolved family conflict, producing experiences that are simultaneously comforting and distressing (Arditti, 2016). Furthermore, research on families affected by incarceration indicates that visits often become moments of heightened relational intensity during which family roles, expectations, and communication patterns are renegotiated within strict temporal and institutional constraints (Strong & Busch, 2019). Nevertheless, these processes have rarely been examined through an explicitly counseling-oriented perspective.

A critical review of the literature published during the past five to seven years reveals three important research gaps. First, there remains a scarcity of qualitative, experience-centered studies that capture the lived psychological experiences of incarcerated individuals and their family members during visitation. Consequently, the subjective processes through which individuals interpret emotional support, manage emotional ambivalence, and negotiate relational meaning remain insufficiently understood. Second, a substantial disconnect persists between empirical findings on the benefits of visitation and the theoretical and practical frameworks of counseling psychology. Although visitation is frequently described as having therapeutic potential (Arifin, 2020; Barreto & Matthews, 2022), few studies have systematically examined how counseling-related processes—including emotional co-regulation, narrative reconstruction, and relational coping—emerge naturally during family visits. Third, existing research frequently conceptualizes visitation as either beneficial or detrimental, thereby overlooking its inherently ambivalent nature. Previous evidence indicates that visitation commonly evokes simultaneous feelings of hope and guilt, reassurance and vulnerability, as well as intimacy and conflict (Arditti & Few, 2006). However, this emotional ambivalence remains inadequately theorized and insufficiently explored through qualitative inquiry.

These gaps are particularly evident in non-Western contexts, where cultural values, family structures, and correctional environments differ substantially from those in which most visitation studies have been conducted. In Indonesia, correctional institutions operate within a collectivist sociocultural context in which family relationships play a central role in identity formation, moral responsibility, and emotional support. Despite this cultural significance, empirical research examining family visitation from a counseling psychology perspective within

Indonesian correctional settings remains limited. This gap is especially apparent in regional settings such as Situbondo, East Java, where strong kinship networks, religious values, and close community relationships shape family life, while correctional institutions continue to face challenges associated with limited resources, overcrowding, and standardized visitation procedures.

Situbondo offers a particularly relevant context for investigating family visitation as a psychological and relational phenomenon. As a region characterized by strong family cohesion and deeply embedded expectations of familial responsibility, incarceration disrupts not only the lives of incarcerated individuals but also the functioning of the broader family system. Within this context, visitation encounters are likely to carry considerable emotional significance, serving as spaces where shame, hope, obligation, and resilience converge. Exploring how incarcerated individuals in Situbondo experience and interpret family visitation therefore provides culturally grounded insights that extend beyond the local setting and contribute to the broader international literature on counseling, incarceration, and family relationships.

In response to these research gaps, the present study adopts an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to examine family visitation as a psychologically meaningful and relationally complex process within an Indonesian correctional facility in Situbondo. Specifically, the study pursues two interrelated objectives. First, it seeks to explore how incarcerated individuals experience and interpret family visitation, with particular emphasis on emotional support, emotion regulation, and coping processes activated during and following visits. Second, it aims to analyze the communication patterns and relational dynamics that emerge during visitation, focusing on how family members collectively regulate emotional distress, renegotiate family roles, and manage relational ambivalence within the constraints of the correctional environment.

This study contributes to counseling psychology in several important ways. Theoretically, it advances understanding of how therapeutic processes may emerge outside formal counseling settings by conceptualizing family visitation as a Naturally Occurring Systemic Therapeutic Intervention (NOSTI). Within this framework, counseling-related processes—including emotional co-regulation, narrative reconstruction, and relational repair—are understood to emerge organically through family interaction rather than through formal therapeutic intervention. By grounding this conceptualization within a non-Western context, the study broadens the cultural relevance of counseling theory concerning incarceration and family systems. Practically, the findings provide evidence-based

guidance for integrating family visitation into correctional counseling practice through structured pre-visit preparation, post-visit debriefing, staff training, and institutional policies designed to enhance the psychological quality of family interactions. In doing so, the study contributes to the development of more holistic, culturally responsive, and psychologically informed approaches to rehabilitation and community reintegration within contemporary correctional systems.

Method

This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how incarcerated individuals and their family members interpreted the meaning of family visitation. IPA was selected because the focus of this study was not visitation as an isolated event but rather the subjective meanings participants attributed to their visitation experiences. As an idiographic approach, IPA emphasizes how individuals make sense of significant life experiences within their unique personal and relational contexts (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). Unlike descriptive phenomenological approaches that seek to bracket the researcher's interpretation, IPA explicitly acknowledges the interpretative role of the researcher through a process of double hermeneutics, making it particularly well suited to examining emotionally complex and relationally negotiated phenomena such as family visitation.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure that all informants possessed substantial experience relevant to the research objectives (Palinkas et al., 2015). The study involved nine male incarcerated individuals aged between 24 and 53 years. All participants had served a minimum of six months of their sentence and had received at least three family visits during their incarceration. Their offenses represented a range of criminal cases, including family-related, property, and economic offenses, with varying sentence lengths. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of Incarcerated Participants

Informant	Age	Address	Status	Visit Frequency
Napi 1 (HD)	53	K	Married	routinely
Napi 2 (MK)	53	P	Married	routinely
Napi 3 (AD)	35	P	Married	routinely
Napi 4 (ZK)	31	K	Married	not routine
Napi 5 (JI)	35	J	Married	routinely
Napi 6 (DK)	38	J	Married	routinely
Napi 7 (IB)	27	P	Not married yet	routinely
Napi 8 (SB)	24	J	Not married yet	routinely
Napi 9 (AS)	33	J	Married	routinely

To obtain a broader relational perspective, five family members who regularly visited the incarcerated participants—including spouses, parents, and adult children—were also interviewed. In addition, one correctional officer responsible for coordinating visitation procedures participated as a contextual informant rather than as a primary participant.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in private rooms within the correctional facility. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' informed consent before being transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Throughout this study, terminology associated with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis—including IPA, semi-structured interviews, purposive sampling, thematic saturation, member checking, audit trail, and reflexive journaling—is used consistently according to its established methodological meaning.

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved. Saturation was determined using three complementary indicators. First, major themes recurred consistently across independent interviews, including patience and religious devotion as dominant forms of family support, longing and emotional relief as central emotional experiences, economic concern as the primary source of guilt, and self-improvement as the prevailing future-oriented motivation. Second, later interviews generated progressively fewer novel insights compared with earlier interviews. Third, substantial convergence was observed between the accounts of incarcerated participants, family members, and the correctional officer regarding the same visitation experiences. By the ninth inmate interview, no additional superordinate themes had emerged, indicating that sufficient interpretative depth had been achieved and data collection was therefore concluded.

The interview data were analyzed following the established procedures of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). The analytical process involved repeated reading of each transcript, detailed initial noting, identification of emergent themes within individual cases, and cross-case analysis to develop shared superordinate themes. Analysis was conducted iteratively, emphasizing interpretative depth and contextual understanding rather than the frequency of theme occurrence.

Credibility was enhanced through member checking with three key participants, who confirmed that the identified themes accurately reflected their lived experiences. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail documenting each stage of the analytical process and the decisions underlying theme development. Confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling, which enabled the research team to critically examine and document their assumptions throughout the interpretative process. Transferability was addressed by providing a rich description of the sociocultural and institutional context of Situbondo, allowing readers to evaluate the applicability of the findings to similar correctional settings.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the appropriate institutional ethics committee. Participant confidentiality was ensured through anonymization of all identifying information, secure storage of research data, and participants' right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty or adverse consequences.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding family visitation in correctional settings as a psychologically meaningful process requires an integrative theoretical perspective that encompasses individual, relational, and systemic dimensions of human experience. Previous research on incarceration and family contact has primarily drawn upon three complementary theoretical traditions: Social Support Theory, Attachment Theory, and Family Systems Theory. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive conceptual foundation for examining how family visitation functions not merely as a social interaction but as a relational context in which significant psychological processes emerge under institutional constraints.

Social Support Theory

From the perspective of Social Support Theory, family visitation represents a critical source of emotional, instrumental, and informational support for

incarcerated individuals. The theory proposes that supportive interpersonal relationships buffer the adverse psychological effects of stress by strengthening coping resources and reinforcing feelings of belonging, competence, and personal control (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Katz et al., 2018). Within correctional environments, where autonomy is restricted and social networks are substantially disrupted, family visitation constitutes one of the few opportunities through which meaningful supportive interactions can occur.

Empirical evidence indicates that perceived emotional support from family members during incarceration is associated with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and institutional misconduct (Bevan, 2017; Durosini, Triberti, & Pravettoni, 2021). More importantly, recent scholarship suggests that psychological outcomes depend less on the frequency of visitation than on how incarcerated individuals interpret and internalize these supportive interactions. This perspective highlights the importance of examining family visitation as a process of subjective meaning-making rather than merely a behavioral indicator.

Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory provides a complementary framework for understanding the emotional processes activated during family visitation. According to Bowlby (1988), attachment relationships shape emotional regulation, interpersonal expectations, and individuals' responses to separation and reunion throughout the lifespan. Because incarceration imposes prolonged and involuntary separation from significant attachment figures, family visitation becomes an emotionally salient event with the potential to restore—or, in some circumstances, destabilize—psychological security.

Previous studies have shown that family visits may temporarily re-establish a sense of emotional safety while subsequent separation can reactivate attachment-related distress, particularly among individuals with insecure attachment orientations (Arditti, 2016). Likewise, Turanovic and Tasca (2019) reported that visitation simultaneously reinforces relational bonds and evokes feelings of guilt, anxiety, and fear of future separation. From a counseling psychology perspective, these findings suggest that family visitation should not be understood as inherently therapeutic or detrimental. Rather, its psychological significance depends on how attachment needs, emotional expectations, and interpersonal experiences are negotiated within the constrained environment of correctional institutions.

Family Systems Theory

While Social Support Theory and Attachment Theory primarily emphasize individual psychological processes, Family Systems Theory focuses on the relational and systemic nature of family functioning. From this perspective, incarceration represents a critical life event that disrupts family roles, boundaries, communication patterns, and relational equilibrium (Strong & Busch, 2019). Consequently, family visitation can be understood as a temporary reconstruction of the family system within an institutional environment characterized by surveillance, restricted time, and limited privacy.

Previous research demonstrates that visitation provides opportunities for families to renegotiate parental responsibilities, reaffirm marital relationships, and address unresolved relational tensions despite substantial institutional constraints (Arditti, 2016; Strong & Busch, 2019). These interactions may strengthen family resilience by fostering adaptive role adjustment; however, they may also intensify existing relational conflicts when family members struggle to reconcile incarceration with pre-existing family identities and expectations.

Counseling Psychology Perspective

Recent counseling-oriented literature increasingly recognizes that family visitation may function as a relational microcosm in which therapeutic processes naturally emerge. Processes commonly facilitated during formal counseling—including emotional co-regulation, narrative reconstruction, relational repair, and collaborative meaning-making—may also develop spontaneously through family interaction during visitation (Barreto & Matthews, 2022; Bevan, 2017). Nevertheless, these processes remain insufficiently theorized and have rarely been explored through qualitative analyses of lived experience. Most previous studies continue to regard such processes as secondary outcomes rather than as central mechanisms underlying the psychological effects of family visitation.

Moreover, theoretical applications within the existing literature frequently portray family visitation as either protective or disruptive. Contemporary qualitative evidence challenges this binary perspective by demonstrating that visitation is inherently characterized by emotional ambivalence, simultaneously generating reassurance and vulnerability, hope and guilt, intimacy and uncertainty (Arditti, 2016; Turanovic & Tasca, 2019). This emotional complexity is particularly pronounced in collectivist cultural contexts, where family obligation, moral

responsibility, and emotional interdependence strongly influence interpersonal relationships. Within such contexts, family visitation may intensify psychological tensions as incarcerated individuals strive to maintain meaningful connections while simultaneously attempting to protect their families from additional emotional or economic burdens.

Conceptual Synthesis

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that family visitation constitutes a complex psychological and relational phenomenon that cannot be adequately explained through any single theoretical framework. Instead, family visitation should be understood as a dynamic relational process in which supportive exchanges, attachment-related emotions, and systemic family negotiations converge within the institutional context of incarceration.

This integrative perspective provides the conceptual foundation for reframing family visitation as a Naturally Occurring Systemic Therapeutic Intervention (NOSTI). Rather than viewing visitation solely as an administrative practice or a source of social support, the NOSTI framework conceptualizes family visitation as a naturally occurring therapeutic context in which psychologically meaningful processes—including emotional co-regulation, identity reconstruction, relational repair, and collaborative meaning-making—emerge through ordinary family interactions. This theoretical position guides the present study in examining how these naturally occurring therapeutic processes contribute to psychological resilience, relational adjustment, and meaning-making among incarcerated individuals and their families within an underrepresented Indonesian correctional context.

Result

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of interviews with nine incarcerated individuals, five family members, and one correctional officer revealed that family visitation is a psychologically complex and relationally dynamic experience within the correctional setting. Rather than representing a single, uniform phenomenon, family visitation emerged as a multidimensional process through which emotional, interpersonal, and identity-related meanings were continuously negotiated. Two superordinate themes were identified. The first captures incarcerated individuals' subjective experiences of family visitation, while

the second explores the communication patterns and relational dynamics that developed during visitation encounters.

Existential Validation and Ambivalent Emotional Regulation

Family visitation primarily functioned as a form of existential validation, enabling incarcerated individuals to maintain identities beyond the institutional label of offender. Participants consistently described visits as moments that reaffirmed their value within the family and reminded them that meaningful social relationships continued to exist despite incarceration.

Participant 1 described family visitation as "sangat berarti dan berharga" ("extremely meaningful and valuable"), emphasizing that each visit strengthened his determination to endure imprisonment. Similarly, Participant 3 explained that meeting his family restored his identity as a husband and father, allowing him to feel respected and needed despite being physically separated from his household responsibilities. These accounts indicate that family visitation reinforced identity continuity by reconnecting participants with significant social roles that had been disrupted by incarceration.

Beyond identity affirmation, visitation also served as a mechanism of emotional regulation. Participants consistently reported feelings of relief, happiness, and psychological comfort upon seeing their family members in person. Participant 3, for example, distinguished face-to-face visits from telephone communication, explaining that physically seeing his family provided reassurance that could not be achieved through verbal communication alone. Participants 6 and 8 likewise described family visits as moments of emotional calm that temporarily alleviated the psychological burden of incarceration.

However, these positive emotions were consistently accompanied by feelings of guilt and concern regarding the sacrifices made by family members. Participant 2 expressed persistent anxiety about the financial costs associated with travel to the correctional facility, while Participant 5 reported feeling uncomfortable knowing that his family might experience economic hardship simply to visit him. Importantly, participants did not describe comfort and guilt as separate emotional responses occurring on different occasions. Instead, both emotions emerged simultaneously during the same visitation experience, suggesting that emotional ambivalence constitutes an inherent characteristic of family visitation rather than an exceptional circumstance.

Family visitation also contributed to participants' coping strategies and future-oriented thinking. Conversations with family members frequently

emphasized patience, religious commitment, and personal self-improvement. Participant 3 recalled being encouraged to strengthen his religious practices and maintain hope throughout his incarceration, while Participant 7 described becoming more receptive to his mother's advice than he had been before imprisonment. He perceived this change as a direct consequence of the emotional significance attached to family visitation rather than to incarceration itself. In addition, many participants reported discussing concrete future plans, including employment opportunities, parenting responsibilities, and financial stability after release, demonstrating that visitation fostered psychological preparation for community reintegration.

The findings also revealed the vulnerability associated with dependence on family visitation as a primary coping resource. Participant 4 described considerable psychological distress after family visits ceased because of conflict with his wife's relatives. Rather than experiencing temporary disappointment, he portrayed the loss of family contact as emotionally devastating, illustrating how the interruption of visitation may significantly undermine psychological resilience when family relationships constitute an individual's principal source of emotional support.

Family Communication and Systemic Reconfiguration

The analysis further demonstrated that family visitation functioned as a relational space in which family interactions were actively reorganized under institutional constraints. Visitation was not merely an opportunity for interpersonal contact but also a setting in which family members negotiated emotions, reconstructed identities, and redefined family roles.

Communication during visitation frequently facilitated mutual emotional regulation. Participants described openly sharing their emotional struggles while simultaneously attempting to protect their family members from additional distress by carefully managing their own emotional expressions. Participant 2 illustrated this reciprocal process by explaining that conversations involved both emotional disclosure and supportive responses from family members, indicating that emotional regulation operated bidirectionally rather than being provided exclusively by one party.

Family visitation also functioned as a context for identity reconstruction. Through discussions concerning moral responsibility, family obligations, and future aspirations, participants actively challenged the socially imposed identity of offender and reconstructed alternative narratives centered on responsible parenthood, marital commitment, and personal reform. Family members played an

essential role in this process by affirming these emerging identities through their continued presence, encouragement, and acceptance. One family participant, for example, described visiting the incarcerated family member as an ongoing expression of parental responsibility rather than merely an act of obligation, thereby reinforcing the participant's sense of belonging within the family system.

The findings additionally revealed substantial changes in family roles and relational hierarchies. In Participant 4's case, prolonged separation combined with strained relationships with extended family members weakened the marital subsystem and increased emotional distance between spouses. In contrast, Participant 7 reported becoming increasingly respectful of his mother's authority following repeated visitation experiences, suggesting that incarceration may strengthen intergenerational relationships in certain family contexts rather than simply disrupting them.

Institutional characteristics of the visitation environment—including limited visitation time, continuous supervision, and restricted privacy—also significantly influenced communication patterns. Participants consistently reported focusing conversations on emotionally safe topics, such as health, religious practices, and family well-being, while intentionally avoiding potentially conflictual or emotionally overwhelming issues. The correctional officer similarly observed that interactions generally ranged from open and supportive to cautious and restrained. According to the officer, when conflict occurred, it was typically associated with jealousy, prolonged separation, or emotional insecurity rather than institutional procedures themselves.

This communication pattern is conceptualized in the present study as protective hesitation, referring to the deliberate avoidance of emotionally sensitive topics to preserve family harmony during limited visitation opportunities. Although this strategy contributed to maintaining relational stability, it simultaneously constrained opportunities for addressing deeper interpersonal concerns that remained unresolved.

Discussion

The findings of this study support and extend the three theoretical perspectives underpinning the present research—Social Support Theory, Attachment Theory, and Family Systems Theory—while simultaneously suggesting that no single perspective sufficiently explains the complexity of family visitation within correctional settings. Instead, the findings indicate that family visitation represents a multidimensional relational process in which emotional support,

attachment dynamics, and systemic family interactions converge to shape incarcerated individuals' psychological experiences.

Family Visitation as Existential Validation and Emotional Support

The first major finding demonstrates that family visitation functions as a form of existential validation that enables incarcerated individuals to preserve valued social identities despite institutional stigma. This finding is consistent with Social Support Theory, which proposes that supportive interpersonal relationships buffer psychological distress by fostering emotional security, belongingness, and resilience (Cohen & Wills, 1985). However, the present study extends this perspective by illustrating that emotional support is not passively received but actively co-constructed through interpersonal dialogue during family visits.

Participants described family interactions as opportunities to reaffirm identities that had been disrupted by incarceration, including their roles as parents, spouses, and responsible family members. These findings suggest that the psychological benefits of visitation derive not only from maintaining social contact but also from reconstructing meaningful personal narratives through ongoing relational interaction. In this respect, family visitation functions as a process of identity affirmation rather than merely an occasion for emotional reassurance.

A second important finding concerns the inherently ambivalent nature of emotional support during visitation. Although participants consistently described family visits as sources of comfort, hope, and emotional relief, these positive experiences were accompanied by equally strong feelings of guilt and anxiety regarding the emotional and financial burdens imposed on family members. Rather than representing contradictory emotional responses, comfort and guilt emerged simultaneously as interconnected dimensions of a single relational experience.

This finding challenges the predominantly linear assumptions of Social Support Theory, which generally conceptualizes support as uniformly beneficial. Instead, the results suggest that supportive relationships may also generate psychological distress when individuals perceive themselves as creating hardship for those providing support. Consequently, emotional support within correctional settings should be understood as inherently paradoxical, reflecting the coexistence of psychological protection and emotional burden within the same interpersonal interaction.

Attachment Processes Under Conditions of Forced Separation

The findings also extend the application of Attachment Theory to correctional settings. Attachment Theory conceptualizes close family relationships as sources of emotional security that function both as a safe haven during periods of distress and as a secure base from which individuals develop confidence and future-oriented motivation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Participants' narratives strongly reflected both attachment functions. Family visitation provided immediate emotional reassurance by temporarily reducing feelings of loneliness, uncertainty, and isolation. Equally important, interactions with family members encouraged participants to envision life beyond incarceration through discussions of employment, parenting responsibilities, religious commitment, and personal change. These conversations promoted optimism and strengthened participants' motivation to prepare for successful reintegration into society.

However, the findings also reveal the fragile nature of attachment under conditions of prolonged institutional separation. The experiences reported by Participant 4 demonstrate that the discontinuation of family visitation may substantially undermine psychological well-being, particularly when family relationships constitute the individual's primary source of emotional support. Rather than simply disappointing participants, disrupted visitation generated profound emotional distress, reinforcing previous observations that incarceration may threaten attachment security not only for incarcerated individuals but also for their families (Arditti, 2016).

These findings therefore suggest that family visitation should not be conceptualized solely as an emotionally supportive event. Instead, it represents an attachment process characterized by continuous negotiation between connection and separation. Emotional comfort and attachment-related vulnerability coexist throughout the visitation experience, making ambivalence a defining feature rather than an exceptional outcome.

Family Visitation as a Systemic Family Process

The present findings provide particularly strong support for Family Systems Theory, which conceptualizes families as interconnected emotional systems in which changes experienced by one member inevitably influence the functioning of the entire family (Bowen, 1978; Gilbert, 2006; Minuchin, 1974).

The analysis demonstrated that visitation served as a temporary reconstruction of the family system within the institutional environment. During

visits, family members collectively regulated emotional distress, renegotiated interpersonal roles, and reaffirmed family identities despite the structural constraints imposed by incarceration. Emotional regulation was found to be reciprocal rather than unidirectional. Family members not only provided reassurance to incarcerated individuals but were themselves emotionally supported through the inmates' efforts to appear optimistic and emotionally stable. These reciprocal interactions illustrate the systemic nature of emotional regulation predicted by Family Systems Theory.

Another notable finding concerns the process of identity reconstruction. Participants actively challenged the institutional identity of offender by constructing alternative narratives centered on responsible parenthood, moral accountability, and future family commitment. Importantly, these alternative identities were not developed individually but were collaboratively reinforced through family interaction. Family members acted as validating witnesses who confirmed participants' preferred identities, thereby facilitating narrative reconstruction through ongoing relational dialogue.

The findings further indicate that incarceration does not uniformly weaken family relationships. Instead, family roles and hierarchies were renegotiated in multiple ways depending on each family's relational context. While some participants experienced deteriorating marital relationships, others reported stronger emotional bonds with parents or increased respect for parental authority. These contrasting patterns demonstrate that family systems respond to incarceration through dynamic adaptation rather than predictable deterioration.

Finally, the institutional context itself significantly shaped family communication. Participants consistently described avoiding emotionally sensitive topics in order to preserve harmony during limited visitation opportunities. This communication strategy, conceptualized in the present study as protective hesitation, reflects an adaptive effort to maintain relational stability within highly constrained interactional settings. Although protective hesitation successfully minimized interpersonal conflict during visitation, it also limited opportunities for addressing unresolved relational difficulties that may require more sustained therapeutic intervention.

Original Contribution: Family Visitation as a Naturally Occurring Systemic Therapeutic Intervention (NOSTI)

The principal theoretical contribution of this study lies in reconceptualizing family visitation as a Naturally Occurring Systemic Therapeutic Intervention

(NOSTI). Rather than viewing visitation solely as an administrative procedure or a mechanism for maintaining family contact, the findings suggest that it constitutes a naturally occurring therapeutic context in which multiple counseling-related processes emerge through ordinary family interaction.

This conceptualization extends existing theoretical perspectives in three important respects.

First, the findings refine Social Support Theory by demonstrating that emotional support within correctional settings is inherently paradoxical. Family visitation simultaneously generates psychological reassurance and emotional burden, as participants experienced comfort alongside guilt concerning the sacrifices made by their families. These findings indicate that supportive interactions should not be understood exclusively as protective but rather as emotionally complex experiences in which psychological benefits and emotional costs coexist.

Second, the study contributes to Attachment Theory by illustrating that family visitation simultaneously functions as both a safe haven and a source of emotional vulnerability. Visits temporarily restore emotional security and reinforce attachment bonds; however, they also intensify awareness of separation, uncertainty, and dependence. Consequently, attachment experiences during incarceration are characterized not by emotional stability alone but by continuous negotiation between connection and loss.

Third, the findings extend Family Systems Theory through the identification of protective hesitation as a distinctive family communication strategy. Rather than confronting emotionally sensitive issues directly, family members intentionally restrict conversations to emotionally safe topics in order to preserve harmony during limited visitation periods. Although this strategy promotes short-term relational stability, it may also postpone the resolution of deeper interpersonal concerns. This observation expands current understanding of systemic adaptation within highly constrained institutional environments and introduces protective hesitation as a counseling-relevant process worthy of further theoretical and empirical investigation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that family visitation functions as a naturally occurring therapeutic process in which emotional co-regulation, identity reconstruction, relational validation, and collaborative meaning-making emerge spontaneously without formal counseling intervention. The proposed NOSTI

framework therefore provides an integrative conceptual bridge linking correctional counseling, family counseling, and rehabilitation research.

Practical Implications for Counseling Practice

The findings have several important implications for counseling practice within correctional settings. If family visitation is recognized as a naturally occurring therapeutic process, counseling services should move beyond treating visitation as a routine institutional activity and instead integrate it into structured rehabilitative interventions.

Correctional counselors may prepare incarcerated individuals and their families before visitation by discussing realistic expectations, anticipated emotional reactions, and constructive communication strategies. Such preparation may help participants recognize that emotional ambivalence—including simultaneous feelings of hope, comfort, guilt, and sadness—is a normal aspect of family visitation rather than evidence of relational dysfunction.

Following each visitation session, counselors may also facilitate structured debriefing sessions that encourage incarcerated individuals to reflect upon their emotional experiences, identify adaptive coping strategies, and translate family support into concrete rehabilitation goals. These reflective conversations may strengthen psychological resilience while reducing the emotional burden associated with unresolved guilt or anxiety.

Where institutional policies permit, counselors may additionally incorporate observations of family communication patterns into individualized counseling plans. Particular attention should be given to recurring interactional processes such as emotional co-regulation, identity affirmation, and protective hesitation, all of which may provide valuable insights into family functioning and future reintegration needs.

Policy Implications

The present findings also have implications for correctional policy. Rather than evaluating visitation solely in terms of frequency or administrative efficiency, correctional institutions should recognize that the quality of interpersonal interaction during visitation substantially influences its psychological and rehabilitative value.

Accordingly, institutional policies should seek to create visitation environments that facilitate meaningful family communication. Possible initiatives include extending visitation duration where feasible, providing spaces that afford

greater privacy, reducing unnecessary environmental stressors, and offering basic communication training for correctional staff responsible for supervising visitation.

In addition, transportation difficulties and financial barriers experienced by families should be considered important rehabilitation issues rather than merely logistical concerns. Reducing these barriers may strengthen family engagement throughout incarceration and ultimately support successful community reintegration following release.

Finally, visitation should be incorporated more systematically into rehabilitation planning. Counselors, correctional officers, and community supervision personnel may collaboratively use visitation sessions as opportunities to discuss employment, parenting, family support, relapse prevention, and reintegration planning with incarcerated individuals and their families.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the research was conducted within a single correctional institution and involved only adult male incarcerated individuals. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to female populations, juvenile correctional settings, or institutions operating under different cultural or organizational conditions.

Second, the study relied on participants' retrospective accounts of their visitation experiences. Although Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis prioritizes participants' lived experiences and subjective meaning-making, self-reported narratives remain susceptible to recall bias and selective interpretation.

Third, the proposed Naturally Occurring Systemic Therapeutic Intervention (NOSTI) framework remains conceptual and exploratory. Additional empirical research is required to evaluate its applicability across diverse correctional contexts and to determine whether the identified therapeutic processes are consistently observed among different populations.

Future studies should therefore examine family visitation across a broader range of correctional environments, including women's correctional facilities, juvenile institutions, and culturally diverse settings. Comparative studies may further clarify how gender, age, cultural background, and family structure influence visitation experiences and therapeutic processes.

Longitudinal research would also provide valuable insight into whether communication patterns identified in the present study—particularly emotional co-regulation, identity reconstruction, and protective hesitation—predict longer-term

outcomes such as psychological adjustment, family functioning, institutional behavior, and post-release reintegration.

Finally, intervention-based research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of structured counseling models derived from the NOSTI framework. Examining whether pre-visitation preparation, post-visitation debriefing, and family-centered counseling interventions enhance rehabilitation outcomes would provide important evidence for translating the present conceptual framework into correctional counseling practice.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that family visitation extends beyond an administrative or welfare function to serve as a naturally occurring therapeutic space within correctional settings. The findings reveal that family visits provide incarcerated individuals with existential validation, enabling them to preserve meaningful social identities despite institutional stigma. At the same time, visitation evokes emotional ambivalence, as feelings of comfort, hope, and connectedness coexist with guilt and concern regarding the emotional and financial burdens experienced by family members. These findings suggest that emotional ambivalence is an inherent feature of family visitation rather than an incidental outcome.

At the relational level, family visitation functions as a dynamic systemic process in which family members engage in reciprocal emotional regulation, collaboratively reconstruct identity, renegotiate family roles, and maintain relational stability through protective hesitation. These interactional processes illustrate that therapeutic change may emerge naturally through ordinary family encounters, even in the absence of formal counseling interventions.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the introduction of the Naturally Occurring Systemic Therapeutic Intervention (NOSTI) framework. By integrating perspectives from Social Support Theory, Attachment Theory, and Family Systems Theory, the proposed framework conceptualizes family visitation as a naturally occurring therapeutic context in which emotional co-regulation, identity reconstruction, relational validation, and collaborative meaning-making develop through family interaction. This conceptualization broadens current understanding of correctional counseling by identifying family visitation as a meaningful psychological process rather than merely a rehabilitative support mechanism.

The findings also have important practical implications for correctional counseling. Integrating structured pre-visitation preparation, post-visitation

debriefing, and family-centered counseling interventions into routine correctional practice may enhance the therapeutic value of family visitation and strengthen rehabilitation and community reintegration. Recognizing visitation as an active component of counseling practice may enable correctional institutions to adopt more holistic, family-oriented, and psychologically informed rehabilitation strategies.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a single correctional institution and involved only adult male incarcerated individuals, thereby limiting the transferability of the findings to other correctional populations and cultural contexts. In addition, the proposed NOSTI framework remains conceptually grounded in qualitative evidence and therefore requires further empirical validation. Future research should examine the applicability of this framework across diverse correctional settings and evaluate the effectiveness of structured visitation-based counseling interventions in promoting psychological well-being, family functioning, and successful post-release reintegration.

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