

EMOTIONAL EXPRESSIONS AND EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES OF JUVENILE INMATES

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DOI. <https://doi.org/10.52472/jci.v9i1.633>

Journal of Correctional Issues
2026, Vol.9 (1)

Politeknik Ilmu
Pemasyarakatan

Review
04-05-2026

Accepted
04-06-2026

Abstract

Adolescence is a developmental stage characterized by emotional changes, identity exploration, and a strong need for social interaction. Incarceration may disrupt these developmental processes and expose adolescents to significant psychological challenges. This study aimed to explore the emotional expressions and emotional experiences of juvenile inmates during their incarceration. A qualitative study using a descriptive phenomenological approach was conducted with 36 male juvenile inmates. Data were collected through expressive writing activities in which respondents described pleasant and unpleasant experiences, emotional expressions, and emotional experiences during imprisonment. The data were analyzed using Colaizzi's thematic analysis method.

Three main themes emerged from the analysis: (1) forms of emotional expression, including forced smiles, hidden tears, heightened sensitivity, changes in tone of voice, and physiological reactions associated with fear and anxiety; (2) pleasant and unpleasant events, encompassing positive memories of family visits, friendships, and recreational activities, as well as experiences of loneliness, family separation, interpersonal conflict, and uncertainty; and (3) emotional experiences, reflecting a transformative process from fear, stress, anxiety, and loneliness toward self-acceptance, gratitude, and emotional adjustment. The findings suggest that expressive writing provides a meaningful medium for juvenile inmates to explore, understand, and regulate their emotions while facilitating reflection on their life experiences.

This study highlights the importance of emotional expression and family support in the psychological adaptation of juvenile inmates. Expressive writing may serve as a practical, low-cost, and accessible psychological rehabilitation strategy that can be integrated into correctional programs to promote emotional well-being and healthy emotional regulation among incarcerated adolescents.

Keywords:

expression emotions, experiences emotional, adolescent inmate, expressive writing

Introduction

Adolescence is a dynamic developmental phase characterized by physical, cognitive, behavioral, and emotional changes. During this period, adolescents are also developing social and emotional competencies that are essential for understanding themselves, managing emotions, and navigating social relationship (Abd Hadi et al., 2023). Problems that often occur in adolescents can be in the form of social problems, emotional aspects, physical and family aspects, schools, and peer groups (Stuart & Sundeen, 2013). Adolescents have a tendency to be at risk for emotional problems, behavioral problems, hyperactivity, and relationship problems with peers and can experience emotional mental disorders if not handled properly (Devita, 2019). In the process of finding their identity, adolescents tend to be involved in juvenile delinquency problems. The scope of juvenile delinquency includes socially unacceptable behavior to criminal acts (Astuti & Maretih, 2018).

Become prisoners and serving their sentences in institutions correctional facilities cause teenager feel ostracized by society, regret his behavior and experience very strong mental upheaval and pressure. Teenagers who live in institution correctional facilities experience heavy mental pressure and stress where interaction social become reduced. Feeling ostracized by society in institutions correctional institutions and

society in general, freedom limited, teenagers No Ready face situation in the institution Correctional facilities (Nurwela & Rindu, 2022). Prison own pressure social, strict rules, and space limited so that prisoners face difficulty in manage their emotion. Therefore, that is very important for support the rehabilitation process and mental health of prisoners with interventions that can help they express and control their emotion like expressive writing (Laws & Crewe, 2015).

Expressive writing can be therapeutically for someone who is experience stress and events traumatic (Kupeli et al., 2019). Writing about past failures and negative events can change affective and emotional to positive direction, giving benefit for improvement cognitive (DiMenichi et al., 2019). The limitations room for being expressive make teenager prisoners relatively hide their motion so that own risk experience maladaptation emotions. Expressive writing can become receptacle for they exploring and managing their emotion and getting a sense of relief and calm after writing their experiences and feelings (Nur et al., 2022).

Qualitative studies based on consensus expert find that lots structural problem related with mental health problem, especially those faced by groups prone to like adolescents and people living in institutions closed like prison. This includes lack of access to services, interventions-based evidence, and lack of approach contextual

considerations factor culture and social local (Basrowi et al., 2024). Reflective intervention method like expressive writing becomes interesting used in psychological for teenager prisoner. *Expressive writing* can help teenager prisoners understand themselves, dealing with trauma, and relieving negative emotion. Some studies revealed that expressive writing increase individual subjective wellbeing and help in managing stress and anxiety (Sargunaraj et al., 2021; Shen et al., 2018).

In context teenagers who are in prison situation, which is often colored by deep emotional experiences, expressive writing can help they for express as well as reflect their feeling. This is important in supporting their psychological healing and self-growth. Writing with involving emotion can help conducting a cognitive reappraisal to stress experience. A study conducted for students show that expressive writing can reduce exam anxiety with attention push shift from negative to positive (Park et al., 2014; Shen et al., 2018). Another study also found that expressive writing not only help in processing traumatic experiences, but also help their individual emotion control effectively, which in turn produce better results (Cheung et al., 2021).

Although previous studies have demonstrated the benefits of expressive writing in promoting emotional regulation and psychological well-being, little is known about how juvenile inmates experience and express their emotions within the context of incarceration. Given the unique psychological challenges faced by adolescents in correctional settings, a deeper understanding of their emotional experiences is needed to inform

rehabilitation and mental health support programs. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the emotional expressions and emotional experiences of juvenile inmates during incarceration through expressive writing using a descriptive phenomenological approach.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach based on Husserlian phenomenology to explore the emotional expressions and emotional experiences of juvenile inmates during incarceration.

Descriptive phenomenology is appropriate for understanding and describing individuals lived experiences as perceived and interpreted by the participants themselves (Oluka, 2025). This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of how juvenile inmates experienced, expressed, and made meaning of their emotions while serving their sentences (Sudarsyah, 2016).

Respondents and Setting

The study was conducted at a juvenile correctional institution in Mamuju, Indonesia. Respondents were recruited using purposive sampling based on predefined inclusion criteria, a sampling strategy commonly used in phenomenological research to identify individuals who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation). A total of 36 male juvenile inmates participated in the study. Respondents were eligible if they (1) were currently serving a sentence in the correctional institution, (2) were able to read and write, and (3) were willing to participate in the study from beginning to end. Individuals who were in the process of release preparation at the time of data

collection were excluded from participation.

Although several respondents were older than 18 years, they remained housed within the juvenile correctional system because they had entered the institution as minors and continued their rehabilitation process under juvenile correctional supervision. Therefore, they were included in this study as part of the juvenile inmate population.

Data Collection

Data were collected using an expressive writing activity. Expressive writing was selected because it provides participants with an opportunity to privately reflect upon and communicate emotions and experiences that may be difficult to express verbally (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016). Previous studies have shown that expressive writing facilitates emotional disclosure, emotional regulation, self-reflection, and psychological adjustment (Sargunaraj et al., 2021).

Respondents were provided with a workbook containing structured writing prompts designed to facilitate reflection on their emotional experiences during incarceration. The workbook invited respondents to describe pleasant and unpleasant life experiences, stressful events, emotions they experienced, forms of emotional expression, and strategies used to cope with stress. Written instructions and topic descriptions were provided to guide respondents in completing the activity while allowing sufficient freedom to express their personal experiences and perspectives. The expressive writing activity was conducted individually, and the written narratives generated by respondents served as the primary data source for the study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method, which is widely used to identify and interpret the essential meanings embedded within participants lived experiences (R & S, 2021). The analysis followed seven stages: (1) reading all participant narratives repeatedly to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon; (2) identifying significant statements relevant to the research focus; (3) formulating meanings from significant statements; (4) organizing meanings into categories and subthemes; (5) developing overarching themes; (6) constructing an exhaustive description of the phenomenon; and (7) validating the findings through member checking with selected respondents to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences.

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the Health Research Ethics Committee of Makassar Health Polytechnic (Approval Number: 138/KEPK-PTKMKS/II/2019). Participation was voluntary, and all respondents were informed about the purpose of the study prior to data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process, and respondents were assured that their decision to participate or withdraw would not affect their status within the correctional institution.

Characteristics	f	Percentage (%)
Age		
15-17 Years	3	8.33
18-24 Years	33	91.67
Education		
Elementary School	6	16.7
Junior High School	8	22.2
Senior High School	20	55.6
College	2	5.6
Occupational Background		
Students	15	41.7
Laborer	4	11.1
Self-employed	16	44.4
Civil Servant	1	2.8
Length of Sentence		
≥ 1 Tahun	18	50
< 1 Year	18	50

Result

Respondents in this study consists of 36 respondents with characteristics as following:

Table 1 Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Most respondents were aged 18–24 years (91.7%), indicating that the sample was predominantly composed of late adolescents and young adults who

Theme	R Code	Respondent Narrative
Forms of Emotional Expression	R14	Happy, restless, always wanting to go out
	R 8	Smiles are forced and unenthusiastic, sometimes I cry
	R10	Voice is louder, more sensitive (especially when hearing news about problems), more indifferent
	R4	If I feel afraid, I will feel short of breath
Pleasant and unpleasant events	R 17	When I went on vacation with friends to climb Mount Semen, I felt so happy to be with them and see the scenery and the vast expanse.
	R28	I felt happy, excited, laughed, proud, and satisfied because I could indulge my hobby.
	R 7	When I was a fugitive, in the middle of the forest, I felt hungry, mosquitoes were everywhere, and anxious because the police were looking for me.
	R 11	Separated from my family like now and celebrating Eid al-Fitr in prison.
	R 13	When my trial was postponed by the judge.
	R 15	Yesterday, my friend's family came to visit, but I had no one to go to. There was no news from them. I felt neglected.
	R26	I am sleeping and being disturbed by my roommate. He also often asked for my help forcefully even though he could do it himself.
Emotional Experience	R 29	Very tense, scared, and finally gave in and was ready to face anything.
	R 1	At first, I had trouble sleeping and my appetite decreased.
	R32	When we exercise together with friends, we feel happy because our sense of community grows stronger here.
	R20	Yesterday, my family came here to visit me, and I hugged them one by one.

remained under juvenile correctional supervision. More than half of the respondents had completed senior high school education (55.6%), while only a small proportion had attended higher education (5.6%). Regarding occupational background prior to incarceration, the largest proportion of respondents reported being self-employed (44.4%), followed by students (41.7%). The distribution of sentence duration was evenly divided between those who had served less than one year and those who had served one year or longer (50% each), providing perspectives from individuals at different stages of incarceration.

Analysis of the expressive writing narratives yielded three overarching themes that describe the emotional lives of juvenile inmates during incarceration: (1) forms of emotional expression, (2) pleasant and unpleasant events, and (3) emotional experiences. These themes illustrate how respondents expressed their emotions, reflected on meaningful life events, and interpreted their emotional journeys while serving their sentences. Each theme is described in detail below and supported by representative excerpts from respondents' narratives.

Theme 1: Forms of Emotional Expression

The first theme describes the various ways juvenile inmates expressed their emotions while living in a correctional environment. Emotional expressions were manifested through verbal, non-verbal, and physiological responses. Respondents described forcing themselves to smile despite feeling distressed, crying in private, becoming more sensitive or irritable, and experiencing physical reactions such

as shortness of breath when feeling afraid. These expressions suggest ongoing efforts to manage emotions within an environment where emotional vulnerability is often concealed

Theme 2: Pleasant and Unpleasant Events

The second theme captures the pleasant and unpleasant events that shaped respondents' emotional experiences during incarceration. Pleasant experiences were often associated with memories of freedom, recreational activities, friendships, and family visits. In contrast, unpleasant experiences involved separation from family, loneliness during important occasions, conflicts with fellow inmates, and uncertainty regarding legal processes. These events served as important emotional triggers that influenced respondents' psychological well-being.

Theme 3: Emotional Experiences

The third theme reflects respondents' emotional experiences and the meanings they attached to those experiences. The narratives revealed a dynamic emotional process characterized by fear, anxiety, stress, loneliness, and uncertainty during the early stages of incarceration. Over time, however, many respondents described developing greater acceptance of their circumstances, gratitude for social support, and a renewed appreciation of family relationships. These experiences illustrate an emotional transformation that occurred throughout the incarceration process.

Discussion

The form of emotional expressions written by juvenile inmates, such as forced smiles, silent crying, raised voices, and physical reactions such as

shortness of breath, reflect attempts to regulate emotions in stressful situations. This suggests that, despite being confined to a confined space, they still attempt to adjust their emotional displays to the expectations of their social environment. This finding aligns with James Gross's theory of Emotional Regulation (Gross, 2013) specifically the surface acting strategy, which involves adjusting external expressions without altering internal emotions. In environments like prison, where emotions cannot be freely expressed, inmates tend to use expression control to protect themselves from social vulnerability.

Emotions play a crucial role in human interactions. When someone displays an emotion, others perceive it and infer it. These emotional expressions can be facial, bodily, verbal, vocal, or symbolic (Lange et al., 2022). In this study, when asked to describe the emotion of happiness, respondents used a smiley emoticon. By forcing a smile, the juvenile inmate attempted to manipulate their feelings, which would then spread to those around them. This finding aligns with the concept that when exploring emotion arousal in prison, individual inmates grapple not only with their own emotions but also with how they attempt to evoke emotions in others (Laws, 2016).

The anger displayed by juvenile inmates is a manifestation of their helplessness in the face of conditions that limit their range of motion. As Keltner points out, when someone faces obstacles, changes in their feelings, cognition, physiology, motivation, and behavior occur. When someone is restricted or inhibited, they may develop hostile feelings, have aggressive thoughts, sweaty hands, be motivated to hit others, and frown. Collectively, these changes represent anger (Keltner et al.,

2019). Although they are able to express their emotions before and after entering prison, they still tend to avoid overly expressing these emotions to others. This aligns with research suggesting that most inmates try to hide anxious or nervous emotions in public because the public environment of prison does not respond well to such emotions (Laws, 2018).

Even in prison, they are still able to express their pleasant experiences. Adolescent prisoners are able to reminisce and write about joyful moments such as mountain climbing, exercising together, or family visits. Research shows that family visits and involvement in positive activities, even within the confines of a prison environment, can improve adolescents' adjustment and emotional well-being in prison by creating a context for social interaction and pleasant memories that can be expressed through writing (Sopiah et al., 2017; Utari et al., 2020). The experience of serving a prison sentence is a form of reflection on adolescent inmate's lives. Adolescents, when dealing with their problems, tend to isolate themselves and experience emotional fluctuations, which develop logical thinking skills that lead to reflection on themselves and others and assessment of new experiences (Ardi et al., 2022).

The experience of being a prisoner is described as an unpleasant one, as adolescents are restricted in their movement and deprived of all the things they find enjoyable, such as friends, family, and even their privacy. As Mansoor et al. found in their research, individuals in correctional institutions are also isolated from their families, lacking purposeful activities, lacking privacy, and lacking opportunities for quiet time (Mansoor et al., 2015). The experience of being detained in a correctional

institution is a highly stressful situation, involving frustration over the loss of freedom, autonomy, and various limitations (Talik & Skowroński, 2018).

The emotional experiences written by adolescent inmates describe a transformative process from fear, anxiety, and loneliness to acceptance and gratitude for the presence of those who support them. They also experience a kind of self-reconciliation, as demonstrated in narratives of hugging family members during visits. The emotional experiences of adolescent inmates often depict a journey from deep feelings of fear, anxiety, and loneliness to acceptance and gratitude for the support of those who love them. This aligns with the findings of several studies showing that social support is crucial for managing adolescent emotions, especially for those facing difficult situations, such as prisoners. Family, friends, and community can help reduce stress and improve mental health (Insan & P, 2022). The presence of supportive individuals plays a crucial role in helping juvenile prisoners navigate the emotional transformation process. Having supportive relationships allows them to engage in self-reconciliation, as demonstrated in narratives of family visits (Nasution & Fauziah, 2020).

Emotional regulation can also help understand this emotional transformation process. Adolescents' ability to understand and manage their emotions is considered crucial for healthy psychological development (Widyaswara et al., 2022). This ability is particularly important for juvenile prisoners because they are often exposed to stressful situations, which can trigger strong negative emotions. If they can learn to regulate these emotions, they will be able to view situations more positively,

which in turn will enable them to achieve acceptance and gratitude (Anggraini et al., 2023). The experience of hugging family members during visits is a significant event that demonstrates acceptance and reconciliation. These opportunities not only provide comfort to juvenile inmates but also serve as a reminder that they still have people who care about them and a place to call home. This also aligns with findings that ongoing emotional support from family is crucial for their emotional maturity (Hapsari et al., 2022). When inmates feel the full support of those closest to them, they are more likely to explore positive feelings and rebuild lost relationships.

Juvenile inmates in prison tend to choose to forget their sentences by engaging in various activities such as playing guitar, watching TV, socializing with other inmates, sleeping, and praying (Utari et al., 2020). Furthermore, by seeking out or avoiding certain people or situations, they can increase the likelihood of experiencing desired emotions and reduce the likelihood of exposure to emotionally stressful conditions (Laws & Crewe, 2015). Writing down experiences and feelings that arise when subjects write about past experiences can guide cognitive processes toward better understanding and self-acceptance or problem-solving (Rovieq et al., 2021). Adolescents' psychological state is strongly influenced by internal and external factors, including self-perceptions that are formed during developmental stages. Adolescents who experience psychological stress, whether due to biological or social factors, are at risk of experiencing decreased self-esteem, which in turn impacts their emotional stability and ability to respond adaptively to environmental pressures (Safitri, 2024). This aligns with the

findings of this study, which found that juvenile inmates exhibited negative emotional expressions related to feelings of shame, low self-esteem, and rejection of their condition. Positive self-acceptance led adolescents to feelings of gratitude and a greater appreciation for family visits. The emotional experiences they wrote about reflect on their experiences in prison wholeheartedly, reflecting on their lives before and after incarceration.

Conclusion

This study revealed that the emotional lives of juvenile inmates are characterized by three interconnected dimensions: emotional expression, significant life events, and emotional experiences. Juvenile inmates expressed emotions through both verbal and non-verbal forms, including forced smiles, silent crying, changes in tone of voice, and physiological reactions. Their narratives reflected both pleasant experiences, such as family visits and shared activities with peers, and unpleasant experiences, including loneliness, separation from family, interpersonal conflicts, and uncertainty about the future.

The findings further demonstrate that incarceration involves a dynamic emotional process in which feelings of fear, anxiety, stress, and loneliness gradually evolve into self-acceptance and gratitude. Expressive writing provided an important medium for adolescents to explore, understand, and regulate their emotions, enabling them to reflect on their experiences and reconstruct meaning from their circumstances. These findings highlight the potential value of expressive writing as a supportive psychological rehabilitation strategy for juvenile inmates

Implication

The findings of this study indicate that juvenile inmates experience a wide range of emotions, including happiness, sadness, anger, and fear, which are often expressed through both verbal and non-verbal forms such as forced smiles, silent crying, changes in tone of voice, and physiological reactions. These findings suggest the importance of providing structured opportunities for emotional expression within correctional settings. Correctional institutions should strengthen psychosocial support services that facilitate emotional regulation and self-reflection, enabling adolescents to process their emotional experiences in a healthy and adaptive manner.

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