Rethinking reintegration in Nigeria: community perceptions of former Boko Haram combatants

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Abstract

Since the emergence of Boko Haram and its terrorist activities in Nigeria, policy initiatives have included deradicalization and reintegration of former combatants to curtail extremism and bolster stability. Central to deradicalization is the efficacy of reintegration programmes. While much emphasis is provided to recidivism as a basis for determining the efficacy of reintegration programmes, studies on how communities perceive the reintegration of deradicalized former combatants, and labelled terrorists, are scarce. To address this issue on the quality of reintegration programmes, a qualitative method was employed for this study using semi-structured interviews. 24 Christian and Muslim participants were recruited from Lagos and Plateau states in Nigeria. Thematic data analysis was deployed from a social identity theoretical framework. It was found that there were perceived indifference and fear of the ability of former Boko Haram combatants to genuinely reform or repent from terrorist acts. The study, therefore, recommends the provision of context-specific counter-narratives which shift the perceived public fear of unrepentant former combatants to a more positive outlook. Such optimism can embrace reconciliation in order to aid the successful reintegration of former terrorist combatants into Nigerian communities.

Keywords: Boko Haram; community; former terrorist combatants; Nigeria; reintegration.

Introduction

There has been a recent interest among academics and policymakers on the possibilities for reintegrating prisoners with a background of involvement in terrorism and violent extremism back into society. Following the surge in extremist prisoners nearing the completion of their sentences and repentant former terrorist combatants embracing deradicalization programmes,

numerous countries have engaged in developing special programmes designed to address the issue of reintegration (Fink and Hearne, 2008).

While reintegration is important, it appears so far that emphasis has tended to focus on the deradicalization of terrorist members and the reliance on recidivism as a basis for determining effectiveness (Koehler, 2016; Altier, Boyle and Horgan, 2019). However, it remains unclear how such programmes may bring about successful reintegration into communities because reliable data tends to be anecdotal and scarce (Al-Rafie, 2015). By primarily focusing on the individual, 'deradicalization' fails to take consider the context into which the individual is being reintegrated (Marsden, 2017). To this extent, Dwyer (2013) contends that whilst willingness on the part of the ex-prisoner is essential, communal acceptance of the ex-prisoner is also crucial to enable them to effectively reintegrate into society. Hence, the need to shift the debate from the extensive focus on deradicalization to an understanding of how communal confidence in reintegration programmes can be improved based on how they construe former terrorist combatants.

This article makes an original empirical contribution to rethinking the positive reintegration of extremist offenders by exploring how extant communities perceive former Boko Haram members and combatants. The paper draws on social identity theory to situate the *successful* reintegration of former combatants as a product of a positive social context that encourages forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration. Accordingly, to improve reintegration, it argues on the need for policies to focus on changing the negative discourse and perceptions held by extant communities against former extremists which move beyond shaming, resenting and distrusting repentant combatants. To achieve this, the paper adopted qualitative methodology and reflected on data from semi-structured interviews conducted with 24 members of the Muslim and Christian religious groups recruited from Lagos and Plateau states in Nigeria. Thematic analysis from a social identity theoretical framework was adopted as a means of analysis for the dataset.

It is against the preceding backdrops that the paper commenced with an engagement with the debate in the literature on the community perspectives of former combatants from a social identity framework and its implications for reintegration. Drawing on these insights, the review explored the emergence and ideological underpinnings of Boko Haram and Nigerian efforts to reintegrate former combatants into society through programmes such as Operation Safe Corridors. The constraints associated with such programmes were also discussed, particularly

in light of its inability to address the challenges associated with the community aspect of reintegration. Alternative approaches aimed at improving the community ambit of reintegration were also explored as potential panaceas to the identified challenges. The paper draws on the implications of the findings to provide policy recommendations aimed at informing the successful improvement of the reintegration of former Boko Haram combatants into Nigerian society.

Community attitudes towards former combatants: An overview

Community perspectives towards former offenders is a subject of debate. Within the criminology discipline, existing studies have shown that released prisoners often face challenges when returning from prisons. These problems range from securing employment and housing to rebuilding relationships with their support network and families (Wodahl, 2006; Brazell and La Vigne, 2009). Compounded with the challenge of acceptance is the quest to avoid potential recidivism. Whilst prisoners are often faced with rejection, similar trends are applicable to former extremists that have completed deradicalization programmes. In a study concerning university students' perceptions of extremists in Kuwait, Msall (2017) reports that they held negative views concerning the genuine reformation of deracialized extremists. The societal context in which reintegration takes place and how communities perceive the reintegration of former terrorist combatants into society is important.

Schurman and Baker (2015) evaluate the Dutch experience of reintegration to highlight the importance of the social, cognitive and practical aspects of disengagement. This includes helping repentant combatants reintegrate back into their family and find jobs as integral to successful reintegration (Schurman and Baker, 2015). They further argue on the need to go beyond solely depending on the ability to change the offender's conviction to a more holistic approach that embraces the societal context in which reintegration occurs (Schurman and Baker, 2015). In Colombia, Kaplan and Nussio (2015) argue that one of the central challenges of reducing conflict is the social reintegration of ex-combatants. Implicit in social reintegration, Moreover, the social participation and engagement of former combatants within their settlements and communal acceptance of these combatants are integral to the promotion of reconciliation with victims to also minimize recidivism (Kaplan and Nussio, 2015).

Within the context of Nigeria, Clubb and Tapley (2018, p. 3) argue that by "over-emphasizing recidivism measures of success and underplaying reintegration into the social context,

deradicalization programmes are easy targets for being criticized as unsuccessful, unnecessary and nefarious." Clubb and Tapley (2018) further argue that there has been limited conceptual discussion on the relationship between deradicalization and reintegration. While their study highlights an important aspect for reintegration, a gap in the literature still exist concerning how the reintegration of former combatants are perceived by Christian and Muslim communities, while drawing on the social identity theory to further demystify these perceptions. A recent systematic review within the context of Nigeria also highlights the gap in the design of specialized reintegration programmes that is often devoid of community inputs and thus fuels resentment towards the reintegration of former terrorists in Nigeria (Ike *et al.*, 2020). Although the social perceptions of repentant former combatants may be negative, the input from the community level has the potential to improve positive attitudes towards reintegration programmes.

While acknowledging the role of specialized programmes, including deradicalization, Marsden (2017) argues that:

> Since identity is socially constructed and negotiated, securing long-term change depends not just on how one sees oneself but also on how one is seen by others, and how one sees one's place in society.

The social context and social identity seem central in facilitating the process of reintegration and the actualization of a new identity that conforms to the acceptable norms and values of a given society. Thus, the act of reintegration cannot be divulged from the social context since the latter plays a paramount role in ensuring acceptance and how any new identities are negotiated for successful reintegration.

Several theories have been associated with reintegration and identity theory. Identity theories often tend to focus on the de-labelling process of becoming known as someone that is socially acceptable rather than being stigmatized as an 'ex-offender.' A central tenet of this theorization is the "need to understand changes in people's narratives and personal and social identities" (Graham and McNeil, 2017, p. 6). This paper draws on social identity theory by exploring community perceptions of former Boko Haram combatants and the potential to improve their reintegration in Nigerian society.

Social identity theory

Social identity theory mainly focuses on intergroup processes (McKeown, Haji and Ferguson, 2016). Being part of a group gives one a sense of social identity and belonging to the social world. Tajfel (1972, p. 292) describes the proponent of social identity theory as "an individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership." Social identity is thus a result of social identification and social categorization processes (Spears, 2011). By social categorization, individuals classify people into certain groups due to the characteristics they share (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). These different groups then serve as a basis for categorization as people arrange the group they belong to by contrasting them with other groups that do not share similar characteristics and identities (with the in-group) (Hornsey, 2008; Spears, 2011). This explains the tendency to divide the world into "them" and "us" which is informed by the process of social categorization. Drawing on this concept, communities could see the group to which they belong (the in-group) as being different from others (the out-group) based on the value and features defined by such communities. Social categorization offers an explanation for prejudicial attitudes against others which leads to conflict between in-groups and out-groups.

While social identity could be construed as what binds individuals to the social group in which they consider themselves to be part of, it could also fuel antagonism and rivalry between groups (McKeown, Haji and Ferguson, 2016). This is partly because social identity could influence how communities define themselves and how they define others.

A key subject of debate is what drives people to engage in potentially conflict-producing processes shaped by social identity. Several studies have suggested that the self-esteem explanation which contends that people tend to emulate social comparisons that favour their own group over other out-groups enhances their self-esteem (Deaux, 1993; Spears, 2011). The implication of this is that negative social comparisons could provoke disparate reactions from people perceived as an out-group (Sindic and Condor, 2014). This could further pose tensions where the boundaries between a damaged in-group and a favourable out-group are perceived to be substantial. On this premise, the affected individual may opt to leave such collective groups for another, which provides a sense of acceptance (in a process coined social mobility) (Sindic and Condor, 2014). These effects that emanate from the tension between the in-group and out-group identity that is central to understanding communal perceptions of former Boko

Haram combatants to aid reintegration and avoid the potential tendency to reengage in violence.

Social identity and community perceptions of Boko Haram former combatants

Nigeria has had numerous ethnoreligious conflicts and a civil war since the country's independence in October 1960. However, Boko Haram's acts of violence and the use of suicide attacks has sparked recent global attention. Boko Haram whose official name is *'Jama'atu Ahli-Sunnah Lidda'awati Wal-Jihad*' (people propagated to the prophet teaching and jihad) is known for its wanton violence which has led to the flagrant loss of lives, properties and the displacement of people in the region (Abdulazeez and Oriole, 2017; Ike, 2018). While the emergence of Boko Haram is a subject of controversy, it has been acknowledged that the group was formed by Mohammed Yusuf in 2002 (Maza, Koldas and Aksit, 2020).

Several factors have been instrumental in Boko Haram's emergence. Iyekekpolo (2016) argues that while economic greed, extreme religious ideology and grievance played a role, political opportunities ignited Boko Haram emergence. Existing studies that have explored the drivers of Boko Haram radicalization have also found issues related to institutional fragility and governance failures as some of the contributing factors to the group's emergence (Aghedo and Osumah, 2012). Their study also found that members of Boko Haram include those drawn from a pool of uneducated school drop-outs, political thugs, jobless youths and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Aghedo and Osumah, 2012).

In addition to the conflation of socioeconomic and political grievances, Boko Haram draws on Salafist-jihadist ideology (Thurston, 2018). Salafism advocates Islam's return to its previous state while Salafi-jihadism represents a violent form of Salafism that upholds jihad as a means of achieving such aims. As a Salafi-jihadist group, Boko Haram denounced that Western influences had tainted the Nigerian government. Such beliefs also resonate in Boko Haram's quest to Islamize Nigeria through the reinstatement of strict Sharia laws and the abolishment of Western influence. From a social identity perspective, the group conjures the conflation of mixed perceptions among various communities. For instance, Christians perceived Boko Haram as a ploy by the Muslims to dominate the former while liberal Muslims construe the group as not representing their genuine interest due to their killing of fellow Muslims that does not support its ideologies (Onapajo and Usman, 2015; Thurston, 2018). However, Mustapha (2014) argues that while Nigeria has long been perceived as divided along religious lines –

between Muslims and Christians – there is also an equally important polarization within the Muslim population in beliefs, sectarian allegiance, and conflicting interpretation of religious texts. All these factors influence the emergence of Boko Haram. Notwithstanding, the conflations of identity among Christians and Muslims and how these are construed by various communities are also seen to play a role in how former Boko Haram members and combatants' reintegration are perceived.

Existing studies on reintegration have tend to focus on the fear of reprisals by the community or extremist groups. A study conducted on former involuntary members of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) found that there was a high degree of fear expressed by the respondents (Annan *et al.*, 2009; Riley *et al.*, 2017). Similar findings have been reported on former Boko Haram members that fear reprisals by the terrorist group (Botha and Abdile, 2017). This feeling of insecurity seems to form part of the reasons why former combatants might engage in crimes and violence after desistance coupled with the community reaction to their reintegration which has often tended to be negative.

The study conducted by Godefroidt and Langer (2019) explored civilians' willingness to accept ex-combatants into their communities. Their study relied on quantitative methods and focused on how the attitudes of 2,100 Nigerian university students are shaped by certain characteristics and backgrounds of former combatants. Based on the analysis, it was found that substantial resistance towards having to reintegrate former combatants of Boko Haram into society. It was also found that certain actions taken by the combatants after leaving Boko Haram can play a role in inducing more support for reintegration (Godefroidt and Langer, 2019). However, the study fails to address how existing constructs by the community might have an impact on reintegration and it did not adopt a qualitative approach in exploring these perceptions.

A similar trend also permeates other studies. The systematic review conducted by Grip and Kotajoki (2019) sought to identify and synthesize existing literature on deradicalization, disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration (DDRR) in conflict-affected states. The study found that varying experiences of the individual which comprised of the role undertaken in the organization, experiences of disillusion and insecurity may impact on the processes of DDRR (Grip and Kotajoki, 2019). These recommendations reflected on other case studies highlight the need for the engagement of former extremists, their families and the wider communities to contribute to peacebuilding objectives and mitigate conflict-affected contexts. However, such

communities existing construct were not addressed, and that may have implications for reintegration within the context of Nigeria.

Nigerian Reintegration Programme

Nigerian reintegration programmes initially commenced from its attempts at deradicalization following the consistent pressure for an alternative approach to the military based counter-terrorism model. The President Goodluck Jonathan administration established the National Security Corridor (NSC) under the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA). The NSC headed by Fatima Akilu, a psychologist, was designed to counter mobilization and recruitment into Boko Haram alongside rehabilitating defectors. Renegades were classified into three categories of low, medium or high risk. Disengagement, rehabilitation and reintegration were adopted to address the first two categories while the last category was referred for prosecution. However, as of 2015, there seems to be no significant impact of the programme on Boko Haram's ability to conduct attacks as that period experienced an increased surge in the group's terrorist activities (Onapajo and Ozden, 2020).

Following the emergence of a new administration in 2015, by 2017, President Muhammadu Buhari reintroduced another deradicalization programme code-named Operation Safe Corridor (OSC) to improve on the previous programme. The OSC is designed as a multisector approach. It incorporates 13 main government agencies including the Nigerian Prisons Services, the Office of the National Security Adviser, Nigerian Police Force, National Orientation Agency and the Armed Forces. Its key purposes are to deradicalize, rehabilitate and subsequently reintegrate defectors (Nwankpa, 2019).

The OSC was also designed to tackle the fighters' ideologies and initial grievances to help them get over their perceived grievances and learn new skills. The programme also serves as rehabilitation for low-risk Boko Haram members, including reintegrating women and children into their communities (Brechenmacher, 2019). Unlike the previous programme, defectors were categorized as either high risk or low risk with the latter referred to rehabilitation and reintegration programmes (Felbab-Brown, 2018). The programme primarily targets 'repentant insurgents', and not the extant community, for a 52-week intensive exercise geared at religious re-education, basic education, vocational training and deradicalization therapies aimed at reintegrating former insurgents into society (Felbab-Brown, 2018; Nwankpa, 2019). It is expected that repentant insurgents who successfully complete the programme are reintegrated

and monitored after their DNA and biometric samples have been collected by the military in order to prevent recidivism or constituting a threat to the general public. Although threatened and ostracized, approximately 1,800 women and children have returned to their communities (Felbab-Brown, 2018). In October 2019, the programme has integrated a batch of 132 inmates of the Bulumkutu centre having completed 12 months of rehabilitation (Onapajo and Ozden, 2020). The establishment of the OSC is thus worthy of applause.

However, the major problem associated with the programme relates to its neglect of the societal perceptions concerning the reintegration of former combatants. It has been alleged that some community groups such as the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) and community members attack repentant insurgents due to the perceived atrocities committed by them whilst they were members of Boko Haram (Onapajo and Ozden, 2020). Reports from the International Alert (2017) also suggested that children and girls rescued from Boko Haram camps are struggling with the problem of stigmatization and ostracism. For example, the report document that:

> Tragically, communities, families, and husbands don't always welcome returning women and girls with open arms, for a fear that they may have been radicalized in captivity. This problem is fuelled by a culture of stigma around sexual violence—especially if the girls return with a baby.

In most cases, individuals who were supposed to have been reintegrated following their completion of the programme still tend to overstay given their families and communities' refusal to accept them (Felbab-Brown, 2018). The failure of the programme to address communal concern hampers the effective attempts at reintegration.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative method, and the research was conducted in Lagos and Jos, Plateau states in Nigeria. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was sought from and granted by the University of East London Research Ethics Committee. The fieldwork took place between the periods of June 2017 to January 2018. A snowball sampling technique was employed to recruit 24 participants which equally comprised of Christian and Muslims participants. This technique involved participants identifying persons who shared similar interests on religion, knowledge and experiences in relation to the topic being researched. The

short demographic questionnaire which contained the preceding details alongside the participant information sheets and consent forms were administered to the participants before participating in the study. This was to ensure participants were aware of the aims of the study prior to participation or identifying others sharing similar characteristics. It is worth noting that only the results relating to this particular paper’s focus are reported here. That is, there were more questions and additional participants including their data relating to other themes than what we analyze in this paper.

The selection of locations for data collection (Lagos and Plateau states) and the sample population aimed to consider important diversity factors in Nigeria such as gender, age, religion, employment, status and state of origin. Another reason for including Lagos state is because it is cosmopolitan and may have residents that have fled due to Boko Haram activities. A further rationale for selecting Plateau state is due to Jos being an affected state that has experienced a contentious relationship between the Christian and Muslim communities. Moreover, Boko Haram have perpetrated a series of attacks in Jos with bombings and the destruction of churches and mosques with the aim of inciting chaos among the two religious’ adherents (Higazi, 2016; Saleh, Ogba, Lucas and Gandi, 2016).

The participants recruited fell within the age brackets of 18–69 and all participants were briefed of the purpose of the study before deciding to voluntary participate in the study and input their signatures on the consent forms. The participants' identifiable information was also anonymised and replaced with pseudonyms. The interviews with participants lasted approximately 30 minutes and were conducted in private office spaces including church premises mutually agreed by the researcher and the participants. Each interviewed participant was interviewed only once. The interviews were also recorded using a voice recorder and transcribed verbatim upon completion of the interviews.

As noted, the paper specifically sought to explore how communities comprising Christians and Muslims construe former Boko Haram combatants and their reintegration into society. Hence, the research question; “What are Christian and Muslims perceptions of former Boko Haram combatants and their reintegration into Nigerian society?”

Thematic analysis from a social identity theoretical framework was used to analyze the transcribed interview transcripts. This was used to underpin the recurrent patterns of meaning embedded in the dataset via a bottom-up process. The six-step analytical procedure articulated

by Clarke and Braun (2013) was used to analyze the data with the aid of NVivo-11 data management software. This involved a repeated reading of the verbatim transcribed data as a means of familiarizing oneself with the data. The next stage involved the generation of codes and identification of themes via an iterative process of continual reflection and review. Finally, the primary themes that emerged from the analysed data were consolidated, named and defined to capture their main meanings.

Results

The analysis of the findings through the lens of social identity theory offers a perspective on the participants' accounts which helps to present their perceptions of former combatants' successful reintegration into society. The three salient themes that emerged from the analysis include the: i) Societal structure as a contributory factor in fuelling the identity of former Boko Haram members; ii) Indifference towards the genuine repentance of former combatants; and iii) Distrust of the deradicalization process within institutional settings.

Societal structure as a contributory factor in fuelling the identity of former Boko Haram members

A recurrent pattern of meaning was the perceived construct among participants that the role of the society, parenting and the lack of suitable child-rearing breed terrorists that later metamorphoses to former combatants. 'Responsibility' on the part of the society is construed to play a central role in preventing individuals labelled as former Boko Haram members from initially joining the group. One of the Christian participants opined that:

> One, those that are former Boko Haram members are those that the society failed in their own part to cater for. Two, those [Boko Haram members] that their parents actually did not try to bring up in the right sense of mind. So the issue of all these Boko Haram members started from parents not being able to cater for the children they bring forth into the society. These children grew up and they needed to do other things that then led them to enter bad vices. That is why we are having a high rise of Almajiri in the northern part of Nigeria, which has been a problem for almost 50 years now. Tackling these issues in the first place will help prevent it rather than now having this conversation on the

> reintegration of former Boko Haram members. It is like seeking mercy after death.

A Muslim participant from Plateau state (Jos) also expressed that:

> The issue of human right abuses by the security agencies, especially the police and the army, resulted in the emergence of Boko Haram. I remember the incident when I was travelling. I was leaving Yola (the Adamawa state capital [located in northeast Nigeria] to one of the local governments) that was captured by Boko Haram members from Mubi [a town in in the Adamawa state]. It had taken over than seven hours to get to Mubi and on a normal day, it shouldn't be more than a two-hour drive. The police molest, harass and intimidate motorists on the highway. You will be baffled with the abuses and this is one of the reasons that people say let the government do its worst. This issue does not undermine the role of poverty and poor parenting as you will see in the north. Most poor families send their offspring to the Almajiri school where they learn nothing but the Quran and how to beg for alms. This exploitation of children seems to have resulted in them being used for bad purposes, including suicide bombing for Boko Haram. So, you see before we blame the former combatant, we must also be aware that the lack of good parental upbringing and poverty also contributes to their actions.

The conflation of 'societal neglect', 'human right abuses', 'poverty' and 'poor parenting' serves a purpose towards the recruitment into terrorism which then metamorphose into the identity of former combatants. These manifestations draw on existing historical notions which tends to reflect how governmental negligence invariably positions the northern region with a higher rate of poverty compared to other regions in the country. Such a construct is congruent with existing data presented by the National Bureau of Statistics (2012, 2016) reporting on such problems impacting on northern Nigeria. A more proactive approach – which avoids the tendency to provoke people to join a terrorist group that will later be labelled as 'former Boko Haram members' who are subject to deradicalization and reintegration – is needed. This reflects a practical prevention strategy to curtail a negative identity needing reintegration rather than a reactive approach that seeks to foster reintegration.

The participants' reference to the 'Almajiri system' is interesting considering how it is construed in terms of 'the family' and the role society plays in permitting its continued existence. The Almajiri system is an Islamic practice that emerged as a result of the historical migration of Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina. As a system of practice, it involves children and young adults between the ages 5 and 19 who are sent, mostly by poorer families, to attend informal religious school for the purpose of Islamic education (Abdullahi, 2020). The 'family' is central to the Almajiri practice. This serves in the decision-making process to donate their child to imams (spiritual leaders appointed by Allah as posterities of Prophet Muhammad) to acquire Islamic education and is perceived as an affordable and culturally acceptable practice embedded in their religious beliefs (Hoechner, 2011). Studies have also shown that due to the vulnerability of Almajiris, they are susceptible to crimes, and also forms part of Boko Haram membership (Agbigboa, 2013). This system, as perceived by the participants, is problematized as having a negative impact on society which implicitly constitutes Boko Haram gain.

Furthermore, the religious identity of being a Muslim and a Christian seems lost when issues of poor parenting and poverty were highlighted by participants as some of the drivers of radicalization and the subsequent creation of the identity of the former extremists. This highlights a need to improve parental upbringing and reform the Almajiri system. The system should attain Almajiri cultural heritage but be supplemented with formal education that can be directly applicable to society when graduating.

Indifference towards the genuine repentance of former combatants

A recurrent pattern that emanated from the participants' perceptions was the difficulty for people with radical extremist ideologies to repent. Participants across both religious groups expressed diverse suggestions such as distrust on changes in attitudes, which is contrary to the Nigerian ONSA strategic goal of the OSC programme. This distrust was construed from a 'us and them' stance which positions Boko Haram as the 'them' group seeking to eradicate the vulnerable population (the 'us' group) through its combatants. One of the Christian participants from Lagos highlighted that:

> They [the Nigerian government] brought them [Boko Haram members] out and now state that they have repented. Are the government sure they have really repented? The reason is because Boko Haram has already brainwashed [deceived] him [the member]. He has not repented, they [Boko Haram] have

> already brainwashed them with instructions to kill as their mission. So, when bringing him back to society, you are giving him more privilege to harm more people because he has not repented, he is just pretending.

The ideology and negative identity of the group is seen as central in influencing the participant's manifestations of the former combatant. The historical transition of Boko Haram ideological ties to Salafi-jihadism seems to undermine peaceful coexistence with other religions and liberal Muslims. For instance, notions such as the purification and reversal of Islamic religion to practices of pious predecessors seems devoid of an approach that embraces other adherents that do not follow such *radical* ideology. The participant's construct seems to infer a perceived inability to dissociate the ultimate aims of Boko Haram from its members even though its members are seen as indirectly cajoled into achieving the group's aims. The notion of 'pretence' is constructed as serving tactical and strategic goals to achieve terrorist aims. The tactical perspective is the early release from prisons while the strategic goal is the perceived infiltration into the country to wreak more havoc. Similar manifestations are resonated by one of the Muslim participants in Jos:

> The media and the world have seen that Boko Haram are almost the deadliest terrorist group in the world. Bona fide members of Boko Haram who have the mindset of terrorism are been given amnesty. It has been suggested that it is impossible for them to give up their terrorist mindsets. This suggests that they might pretend due to the current situations and the reality that they have given up the fight against terrorism. Then, if they have been integrated into the community and even recruited into the Nigerian military system as an effort to combat the remaining Boko Haram, it is probably not going to yield any results. In my humble opinion, I do not think the government is doing a good thing except if there are other ulterior motives behind that effort.

Therefore, 'pretence' and the perceived 'fear' of reintegrating former combatants into society are issues addressed by the participant. This framing infers a negative identity of former combatants and the inability to believe in a change in their behaviour and attitude. The implication of such a construct is the possibility to resist reintegrated former combatants. In addition, the 'media' is seen as serving an instrumental role in shaping the participant's construct. This reflects the impact media have in informing and shaping perceptions. Existing studies have shown how the media have reported the dynamic identities of Boko Haram which

spans from it being a religious fanatic group to an extremist and then terrorist group (Ezeah and Emmanuel, 2016). The depiction of activities of Boko Haram such as kidnapping, suicide bombing and the quest to secure political sovereignty for Allah tends to conjure a negative group identity. This in turn echoes the participant's concerns of the impossibility of Boko Haram members to dissociate from their objectives amidst deradicalization attempts.

Distrust of the deradicalization process within institutional settings

A common theme stressed from the Christian and Muslim participants is distrust of the deradicalization process. The participants used linguistic constructs which infer a negative connotation of the ability of the Nigerian deradicalization programmes to effectively deradicalize former Boko Haram combatants. A participant questioned the rehabilitative system for ex-Boko Haram members:

> Do we have the right system in the context of how to rehabilitate criminals and not to talk about terrorists? When you carry a common criminal and send him to jail, he comes back and becomes worse than he was when he was inside the system. The issue is the institution that carries out that change. Do they have all the resources? Do they have the resources that are needed to rehabilitate brainwashed people because the meaning of Boko Haram is against modernization? That is the real essence of Boko Haram. So, have you been able to have an institution that can bring their minds back to the reality of things and begin to help them to forgo all those things that they have been brainwashed about? Apart from that, does the system have that financial strength to be able to cater to these people's lack of education?

This manifestation drew on the ideological underpinnings of Boko Haram. The reference to the 'real essence' of the group as 'against modernization' is implicitly linked to an existing negative out-group identity. This dissociation positions Boko Haram as an anti-democratic and manipulative group that seeks further recruitment by allegedly brainwashing poor and lowly educated people. This construct also drew on 'education' which historically in the northern region of Nigeria has been known to constitute the least educated people when compared with their southern counterpart. Education is interpreted as serving a strategic purpose for Boko Haram as a means of 'brainwashing' (deceiving) recruits into its cause. This contends that the role of education serves an important aspect towards the reintegration of former combatants

which is linked with limited education and the inability to discern false teachings. The finding seems contrary to existing studies which suggest the contrary that education plays little or no role in joining terrorism (Berrebi, 2007).

Furthermore, perceptions doubt the capabilities of the Nigerian criminal justice system in dispensing successful deradicalization and reintegration programmes. In this case, 'trust' in the system is seen as integral and seems to draw on the ways in which the structure has handled previous prisoners convicted of crimes. This reflects existing studies on high rates of prison overcrowding due to the perceived increase in recidivism from convicted criminals. In addition, it reflects the views of existing literature which depicts a negative identity of Nigerian prisons based on findings that are commonly associated with "congestion, dirt and inadequate medical and rehabilitation facilities" (Otu and Nnam, 2014, p. 6). As a result, some inmates tend to reoffend a few months after their release while many falls ill and die before their trial or during their service time (Alabi and Alabi, 2011; Arc Foundation, 2019).

The perceived distrust could also be partly tied to the Nigerian criminal justice system and the historical views of neglect and limitations associated with it (Arc Foundation, 2019). The lack of a unified database has debatably had an impact on effectively combating crime. This is further compounded by the limited amenities security personnel have in dispensing their duties. Similarly, one of the Christian participants expressed that:

> Before you release [reintegrate] them [Boko Haram members] back into society, you must have something in place to monitor them properly. In the Western world, when a criminal is being released, they say he is on probation and they attach him to a probational officer who from time to time will monitor this same person. There is a register for sex offenders that are reintegrated into the system to know that this person has committed such previous offences and he remains on the watch list. They have rigorous checks kept in place for accepted reintegration. When reintegrated former Boko Haram members are back into the society, will they be accepted and act according to what they have been taught during their change [rehabilitative reform] process?

Once more, this perception reiterates a negative identity based on the lack of trust for the Nigerian criminal and rehabilitative system and its abilities to effectively achieve reintegration. The comparison with 'the Western world' arguably positions Nigeria in a weak light while the

former is construed in a position of strength and as a yardstick for a good criminal justice model. This manifestation seems to reflect Nigerian infrastructural weakness that hinders reintegration. The existence of a unified 'register' is seen to play an important role in the participant's view insofar that it is deemed useful to promote awareness and consistent monitoring of the reintegration process. This alleged lack of an adequate database echoes the effort the Nigerian government seeks to achieve by welcoming international collaborators in ensuring the creation of a database system which can track deradicalized combatants (Brechenmacher, 2018). Hence, a coherent database structure could mitigate the perceived distrust on the capabilities of the Nigerian criminal and rehabilitative system.

Discussion, conclusion and recommendations

The purpose of our study was to explore community perspectives of former terrorists in Nigeria and their reintegration into society. Our study highlights three key themes which will be discussed whist drawing on the wider literature and evidence from our study. Implicit in the identified themes, our study aims to fill a gap in the literature by providing a perspective that could inform policy change concerning the design of reintegration programmes and the important role of the community.

Firstly, our study found that societal structures and institutions serve as a contributory factor in fuelling the identity of being a former Boko Haram member regardless of the participant's religious identity. The identity of Nigerian criminal justice and law enforcement institutions were mostly negatively perceived that serves as a contributory factor in fuelling the emergence of the identity of Boko Haram members and subsequent ex-extremists. These Nigerian institutions were perceived to have failed to provide for the well-being of its citizens and did not reform Islamic practices, such as the Almajiri system, which was problematized as constituting one of the drivers into radicalization. This finding highlights similar manifestations expressed in the literature concerning the role of poverty and Almajiri system in promoting recruitment into Boko Haram (Aghedo and Osumah, 2014). Our study's findings also revealed that poor parental upbringing was perceived to breed terrorism. This finding highlights a slight shift in the negative perceptions towards the former combatants to the society and family functioning as the initial originator of Boko Haram's radicalization.

Secondly, our study found that there was a shared sense of indifference towards the genuine repentance of former combatants regardless of the religious identity of the participants. This

highlighted similar findings reported in Msall's (2017) study within the context of Kuwait where it was found that being a Muslim or members of other religions did little to change the negative perception towards deradicalized extremists. Our findings also resonate with Godefroidt and Langer's (2019) study which made similar findings within the context of Nigerian students. The ideology of Boko Haram and its alleged ability to deceive some people into joining the group were seen as irredeemable acts. Reintegration of what participants perceived as alleged repentant combatants seems characterized by the fear that these once extremists will harm members of the public due to their inability to reform from their previous behaviours. Similar findings were also reported in other studies in which fear and a lack of trust for former combatants were instrumental to communal resentment towards their reintegration processes (International Alert, 2017; Felbab-Brown, 2018; Ike *et al.*, 2020).

Thirdly, our study presents the perceived lack of trust for the deradicalization process within Nigerian institutional settings. Limited ability and issues of financial constraints within the prison system were construed as some of the constraints that may hinder Nigerian rehabilitation programmes from effectively reforming combatants. This resonates with similar findings in the literature which reports the deplorable states of Nigerian prisons and the limited ability to reform prisoners to reduce recidivism (Otu and Nnam, 2014). As found in our study, the negative identity of the Nigerian correctional facilities is coupled with the lack of trust for the system. This finding is also inferred in some of the concerns expressed in existing studies relating to the reintegration of former terrorist combatants (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2018; Felbab-Brown, 2018). For instance, the study conducted by Felbab-Brown (2018) found that the lack of transparency in the reintegration process fuels communal distrust.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that the Nigerian government invests in the improvement of the socioeconomic conditions in the northeast, especially through poverty-reduction and increased education schemes. The study also recommends the need for the Nigerian government to redesign the Almajiri system. This might help reduce the possibilities of being susceptible to radicalization that will subsequently degenerate into the status of being labelled a former terrorist in need of rehabilitation and reintegration.

The research indicated a reluctance on the part of the participants to accept the genuine repentance of former combatants. However, learning from other post-conflict research may suggest alternatives methods for improving trust such as the inclusion of a truth and reconciliation approach (as in the context of Northern Ireland) (Ferguson, 2016; Joyce and

Lynch, 2017) to change this narrative. This may involve a dialogue between the deradicalized and affected members of the community and this may be applied within Nigerian reintegration programmes.

In addition, drawing from the positive role former combatants could play in the community might prove helpful. Notable examples include Northern Ireland which tends to suggest that former extremists might play a constructive role on the community by preventing youths that are at-risk from radicalizing or engaging in extremist groups (Joyce and Lynch, 2017). It has also been argued that engaging with former extremists might also help provide important access to radicalized parts of society that other actors may find challenging to connect with (Joyce and Lynch, 2017). This may potentially facilitate early warning and peace processes.

Finally, the findings highlighted cynicism towards the Nigerian deradicalization programme. It is recommended that through the improvement of trust in the capabilities of the Nigerian deradicalization and reintegration programmes, there might be improved confidence in the programme from the perspective of the public. Such changes might be productively achieved through engagement with stakeholders such as the community leaders and the media in promoting messages that reinforce the ability to secure change for prisoners, avoid stigmatization and avert being labelled as a negative identity ‘out-group’ or ‘them’.

Collectively, the research indicates that there is a necessity to provide counternarratives which can build trust in governmental reintegration programmes as a panacea to address the problem of reintegration. The Nigerian government could also build trust by providing insight into their deradicalization programmes as well as showing that the government have the appropriate capacity to manage persons released into the society. This can include consistent surveillance and a good database system to build trust in the reintegration of former extremists. This may possibly help dispel negative perceptions as a result of previous ex-combatant behaviour as found in the study conducted by Godefroidt and Langer (2019).

The study has demonstrated that the key factors in exploring the issue of reintegration are a reluctance to see change occurring and a positive shift away from the identity of being a former Boko Haram combatant. The social construct of ‘reintegration of labelled former terrorist combatant’ seems fixed in a permanent state and thus a new approach is necessary. Such a fixed position may be partly influenced by the drivers of the Boko Haram insurgency which existing studies have found to include poverty, unemployment, religious extremism, heavy-

handedness of the Nigerian security forces and perceived governmental neglect (Aghedo and Osumah, 2012; Iyekekpolo, 2016; Thurston, 2018). Hence, a governmental proactive effort towards addressing the socioeconomic and political needs of society might transform negative to more positive perceptions towards the combatants. This strategy can thus build public trust in the capabilities of government agencies working to provide the reform and reintegration of ex-combatants. Preparing the community for a post-conflict scenario may require radical thinking from policymakers and reformers on reintegration and the potential for reconciliation. Challenging counternarratives is needed to reconstruct the narrative on terrorists. Moreover, policy initiatives can involve the inclusion of former terrorists as peacemakers, non-governmental organizations working on community leadership and the development of post-release resettlement programmes.

However, the limitations of the study comprise the sample size and the non-inclusion of former terrorists. As evident with most qualitative studies, the sample size is small and thus the results cannot be thoroughly generalizable. Future studies can better explore the comparison of the perceived views on deradicalized combatants with the public via mixed methods. The addition of quantitative methods, such as a wider survey, has the prospect of further investigating inconsistencies or overlapping areas to better inform policies targeted towards the reintegration of ex-combatants. Notwithstanding the limitations, the strength of our study rests on the change of existing negative perceptions towards former combatants to help avoid stigmatization and foster reintegration. This is informed by the study's findings which highlight the lack of trust and disbelief on the ability of former combatants to change as factors limiting reintegration. Changes on communal perceptions is important because how people are perceived or understood may shape their attitudes or response toward former extremists to accept their reintegration into post-conflict societies.

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