

Self-Acceptance As A Cornerstone Of Social Integration: A Study Among Military Ex-Combatants In The Northwest Region Of Cameroon

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Abstract

The social integration of ex-combatants into civilian life presents complex psychosocial challenges, particularly in regions affected by protracted insecurity, such as Cameroon's northwest. Ex-combatants often face stigma, mistrust, and marginalization that hinder both their personal well-being and their ability to reconnect with their communities. This study investigates the impact of self-acceptance on social integration among ex-combatants, utilizing Ryff's multidimensional model of psychological well-being. A cross-sectional correlational mixed-methods design combines quantitative and qualitative data collection at a single point in time to explore the relationship and patterns between variables, providing a more comprehensive understanding. This study involves the simultaneous collection of numerical data for correlational analysis and narrative data for deeper insights, providing a richer understanding of a research problem from 45 ex-combatants residing in Bamenda through standardized Likert-type scales and participant interviews. Findings revealed a significant positive correlation between self-acceptance and social integration ($r = 0.51, p < .001$), with regression analysis indicating that self-acceptance explained 26% of the variance in social integration outcomes. Indicator-level analyses highlighted "inner peace" as the strongest dimension associated with community social integration, underscoring the importance of emotional reconciliation alongside material support. Qualitative narratives contextualized these results, revealing themes of identity reconstruction, stigma management, and the restorative impact of symbolic validation, such as pensions and family achievements. Together, these findings suggest that sustainable social integration cannot be achieved only through economic measures but requires targeted psychological support that enables ex-combatants to reconcile with their past and rebuild a coherent sense of self. The study calls for a paradigm shift in social integration policy in Cameroon that integrates trauma-informed, acceptance-based interventions into existing programs as a pathway to both ex-combatant wellness and broader social stability.

Keywords: Self-acceptance; social integration; ex-combatants; Cameroon.

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1. Introduction

The successful transition from military to civilian life represents a profound psychological and social challenge for ex-combatants worldwide (Wessells, 2006;

McMullin, 2013). This process, often termed social reintegration, is not merely about physical relocation but involves the complex renegotiation of identity, belonging, and purpose within a community fabric often altered by absence and trauma (Betancourt et al., 2010).

In post-military circumstances, the failure to facilitate this reintegration effectively can perpetuate cycles of marginalization, economic instability, and psychosocial distress among ex-combatants, ultimately undermining community cohesion and long-term peacebuilding efforts (Theidon, 2009; Knight & Ozerdem, 2004).

The predicament of ex-combatants is particularly acute in Cameroon's Northwest Region, a context scarred by the protracted Anglophone Crisis and a history of military engagements (Bang, 2022). Here, ex-combatants are often relegated to the status of a marginalized group, frequently perceived through a lens of stigma and fear by the very communities they once served to protect (Wessells, 2006). As detailed in prior research, these individuals contend with a dual burden: the psychological scars of combat-related trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and unresolved guilt, and the stark absence of structured deconditioning programs to aid their return to civilian life (Derluyn et al., 2015; Pham et al., 2010). Recruited for their physical vigor and subjected to a rigorous military socialization process that systematically strips away civilian identity, they are often discharged back into society psychologically ill-equipped to navigate the complexities and ambiguities of community life (Winslow, 1998; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010).

In response to this challenge, psychosocial support programs and economic empowerment initiatives have been implemented, albeit with limited scope and integration (Institute for Security Studies, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2019). However, a critical oversight persists within these interventions. While economic stability and community sensitization are undoubtedly crucial, there remains a conspicuous neglect of the foundational psychological dimensions that underpin an ex-combatant's capacity to reintegrate effectively. The prevailing models, both in practice and in research, often prioritize external, socio-economic factors over the internal, psychological reconciliation required for sustainable reintegration.

This study argues that this neglect constitutes a significant gap in both literature and practice. Within the multidimensional framework of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989), the construct of self-acceptance emerges as particularly salient for this population. Self-acceptance refers to an individual's ability to embrace themselves positively, including their past experiences

and personal limitations, without undue self-criticism or judgment (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Garcia, Nima, & Kjell, 2014). For an ex-combatant, this entails reconciling with often-traumatic military experiences, overcoming internalized stigma, and reconstructing a positive self-identity that is not solely defined by past combat roles (Boyle, 2014). It is the critical psychological groundwork upon which successful social integration is built; without it, vocational training or economic support may fail to yield lasting results, as the individual remains psychologically alienated from themselves and their community.

Yet, the specific relationship between self-acceptance and social integration among ex-combatants in Cameroon remains largely unexplored. International research suggests a strong link between self-acceptance and overall well-being (Ryff, 1989), and its deficiency is linked to social withdrawal and maladaptive behaviors (Willis et al., 2020). However, a definitive, empirical investigation within the unique cultural and conflict-laden context of Cameroon's Northwest Region is absent. This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap.

Grounded in Ryff's psychological well-being model, this research posits that self-acceptance is not merely a peripheral concern but a central predictor of successful social integration. It hypothesizes that ex-combatants who achieve higher levels of self-acceptance will report significantly greater levels of social integration into their local communities. By employing a mixed methods correlational design, this study aims to rigorously test this relationship, moving beyond anecdotal evidence to provide empirical data that can inform policy and practice.

The findings of this study are well placed to make a substantial contribution. By analysing the link between self-acceptance and social integration, it will provide compelling evidence base for advocating the integration of targeted psychological interventions such as cognitive-behavioral therapies and acceptance-based counselling into existing national reintegration programs for ex-combatants. It underscores a paradigm shift that sustainable reintegration in the Northwest Region of Cameroon must begin not just with economic opportunity, but with the fundamental psychological work of helping ex-combatants make peace with their past and reclaim their identity within the civilian world.

1.1 The Psychological and Social Plight of Ex-combatants in Northwest Cameroon

The experience of ex-combatants in the Northwest Region of Cameroon is inextricably linked to the socio-political turmoil of the Anglophone Crisis, a conflict that has fundamentally reshaped community dynamics and individual psyches (Bang, 2022). Unlike international paradigms where ex-combatants may be celebrated or supported by structured national programs, Cameroonian ex-combatants often return to a societal landscape marked by apprehension, economic precarity, and a profound lack of transitional support (McMullin, 2013; Institute for Security studies, 2023). Their plight is not merely one of unemployment but of a deep seated existential crisis, characterized by what Bourdieu (1990) terms 'hysteresis' a crippling disconnect between the military habitus they have internalized and the civilian field they must now navigate.

Psychologically, these individuals are frequently burdened by the aftermath of combat. Studies consistently show high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and substance abuse among combat ex-combatants globally (Sayer et al., 2011; Betancourt et al., 2010), and there is no evidence to suggest the situation is different in Cameroon. The constant intrusion of traumatic memories, coupled with deep-seated guilt over actions committed during their service ("atrocities committed at a call to duty," as noted in the thesis), creates a significant barrier to self-acceptance. They are often trapped in a cycle of negative self-referencing beliefs and internalized stigma, viewing themselves not as ex-combatants but as perpetrators or damaged individuals, unworthy of reintegration (Hamber, 2009; Ellis, 1962). This internal dissonance is the primary antagonist of their psychological wellness.

Socially, the challenges are equally daunting. Ex-combatants face a dual stigma: first, from a community that often associates them with the violence and trauma of the conflict (Wessells, 2006), and second, from a perceived loss of status and purpose. The structured, hierarchical, and mission-oriented world of the military is replaced by the unstructured and often ambiguous nature of civilian life, leading to identity confusion and a loss of direction (Seligman, 2011; Sayer et al., 2010). Furthermore, as your thesis indicates, family structures are often fractured; ex-combatants return to find broken marriages, estranged children, and an inability to assume their former roles as providers and partners. This social isolation exacerbates their psychological distress, creating a vicious cycle where a lack of self-acceptance

hinders social connection, and social rejection further deepens self-loathing.

Current institutional responses, such as those from the National Office for Ex-combatants, Ex-servicemen and War Victims (ONACAM), have historically prioritized financial compensation and pension management over holistic psychological and social rehabilitation (Presidential Decree No. 2001/195). While economic support is necessary, it is insufficient. The absence of robust, evidence-based psychological interventions focused on healing trauma and fostering self-acceptance means that the fundamental engine for successful reintegration remains unaddressed. Ex-combatants are given a pension but not the psychological tools to rebuild a life of meaning and connection, leading to the scenarios of despair, substance abuse, and social maladjustment vividly described in your thesis. Therefore, investigating the core psychological variables that can disrupt this cycle, beginning with self-acceptance, is not just an academic exercise but a pressing humanitarian and public health imperative.

2. Theoretical Underpinnings And Key Constructs

This study is conceptually anchored in a psychosocial framework that posits internal psychological states as critical precursors to successful external social outcomes. The investigation is primarily guided by Carol Ryff's multidimensional model of psychological well-being, which provides a robust scaffold for understanding the core variable of self-acceptance. Furthermore, the analysis is situated within the specific socio-cultural context of Cameroon's Northwest Region, requiring an integration of theory with the unique challenges faced by its ex-combatant population.

2.1. The Concept of Self-Acceptance stems from a global theory to a local reality

Within the context of positive psychology, self-acceptance is revered as a cornerstone of optimal human functioning. Carl Rogers (1951), in his person-centered theory, established its primacy by arguing that for an individual to achieve self-actualization, they must first possess an unconditional positive regard for themselves, embracing their experience without distortion or denial. Carol Ryff (1989), in her seminal work, operationalized this construct into a measurable dimension of psychological well-being. She defined it as a central pillar characterized by a positive attitude toward the self,

an acknowledgment and acceptance of multiple aspects of the self, including both good and bad qualities, and a feeling of satisfaction with one's past life. This is not an endorsement of one's past actions but a compassionate acceptance of them as part of one's history, which is a necessary precondition for growth.

However, for Cameroonian ex-combatants, this global concept demands a nuanced, context-specific definition. In this study, self-acceptance is conceptualized as the active and often difficult cognitive-emotional process through which ex-combatants in the Northwest Region consciously reconcile with their military past, integrate often-traumatic experiences into a coherent narrative of self, and ultimately achieve a state of inner peace and self-compassion that is devoid of guilt, shame, or self-condemnation. This transcends mere passive resignation. It involves a fundamental restructuring of identity from a military-centric self-concept to one that can incorporate a civilian future. It is measured through indicators such as the ability to accept oneself and one's past, feeling comfortable with oneself, and achieving a sense of inner peace, as detailed in the study's methodology. This conceptualization acknowledges the profound "hysteresis" or cultural lag (Bourdieu, 1990) they experience and positions self-acceptance as the essential psychological work required to bridge the chasm between their past and present selves.

2.2. The Concept of Social Integration goes beyond mere presence

Social integration is a complex, multi-level construct central to sociology and community psychology. It moves far beyond the simplistic notion of physical residence within a community. Classical theorists like Émile Durkheim emphasized its role in creating social cohesion and preventing anomie. Baumeister and Leary (1995) later underscored its fundamental nature, identifying the "need to belong" as a powerful human motivation. In essence, it represents the process by which individuals are absorbed into the social fabric of a group, adopting its norms, values, and patterns of behavior while also contributing to them. It is a dynamic, two-way process that requires both the individual's agency to engage and the community's capacity to accept.

For this research, social integration is defined as the successful and multi-faceted assimilation of ex-combatants into the socio-economic, cultural, and relational structures of their local communities in Northwest Cameroon, manifested through active civic

participation, the formation of trusting and reciprocal interpersonal relationships, and the subjective experience of belonging, acceptance, and support from community members. This definition captures both observable behaviors (e.g., participation in community activities, joining social groups) and internal emotional states (e.g., feeling accepted, feeling supported). It aligns with the work of Nsamenang (2005), who, in the Cameroonian context, stresses that mutual understanding and cooperation are non-negotiable for genuine reintegration. Successful integration, therefore, signifies that the ex-combatant has not only returned geographically but has been psychologically and socially validated as a valuable, contributing member of the civilian collective, having successfully negotiated a new identity that is recognized and respected by others.

2.3. Linking Self-Acceptance and Social Integration: The Theoretical Pathway

The proposition that self-acceptance is a critical antecedent to social integration is supported by a confluence of theoretical perspectives, which together chart a clear pathway from internal reconciliation to external connection. The foundation of this link is best articulated through the lens of Carol Ryff's model, which posits that the six dimensions of psychological well-being are not isolated but are dynamically interrelated. Within this framework, a positive attitude toward the self (self-acceptance) generates the psychological security and self-efficacy necessary to pursue and maintain meaningful connections with others. An individual preoccupied with internal conflict, self-loathing, or a fractured identity lacks the emotional resources and confidence required to navigate the complexities of social bonding. Thus, self-acceptance is theorized to be the bedrock upon of the dimension of "positive relations with others" is built, which in turn is a direct manifestation of successful social integration.

This pathway is further illuminated by Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of development. Many ex-combatants struggling to reintegrate can be understood as facing crises in the adult stages of "Intimacy vs. Isolation" and "Generativity vs. Stagnation." Their inability to form deep, intimate bonds or to contribute meaningfully to their community (generativity) often stems from an unresolved identity crisis a fundamental lack of self-acceptance of who they are now that their military role is gone. The process of achieving self-acceptance allows them to resolve this identity

confusion, thereby freeing up psychosocial energy to engage authentically with others and seek out generative roles within their families and communities, thus avoiding the pitfalls of isolation and stagnation.

From a cognitive-behavioral standpoint, the link is equally compelling. Ex-combatants often carry deeply ingrained negative self-schemas and irrational beliefs ("I am damaged," "I am unworthy of forgiveness," "Civilians will never understand me") that are direct products of unresolved trauma and guilt. These cognitive distortions, as outlined by theorists like Aaron Beck (1976) and Albert Ellis (1962), automatically trigger maladaptive behaviors—social withdrawal, hypervigilance, aggression, and an inability to trust—that are profoundly antisocial and thus sever the very connections needed for integration. Therapeutic interventions aimed at fostering self-acceptance work precisely by challenging and restructuring these maladaptive cognitions. By replacing them with more rational, self-compassionate beliefs, the ex-combatant's behavioral repertoire shifts towards prosocial actions: reaching out, building trust, and participating communally. Therefore, the theoretical pathway is clear: self-acceptance facilitates the cognitive restructuring necessary to enable the prosocial behaviors that underpin successful social integration, positioning it not as a peripheral concern, but as the foundational psychological pillar for sustainable reintegration in post-conflict settings.

3. Methodology

Study Site and Design

The study on self-acceptance and social integration of military ex-combatants was carried out in the Northwest Region of Cameroon, a region profoundly affected by the protracted Anglophone Crisis. Data collection took place in the city of Bamenda (Mezam Division), which serves as a primary hub for ex-combatants who have relocated from more volatile rural areas for security and economic reasons. The design was mixed, utilizing a survey for opinion gathering on the psychological state of ex-combatants and their social reintegration outcomes. A cross-sectional approach was employed to collect data at a single point in time, allowing for the examination of relationships between variables within this specific population.

Participants and Sample

A total of 45 ex-combatants were recruited for the study. The sample was predominantly male (86.7%, n=39), reflecting the gendered composition of the Cameroonian military, with a mean age indicative of an older cohort, most of whom were retired after extensive service periods of 21-30 years (77.8%, n=35). The majority had served in the Army (62.2%, n=28) or Gendarmerie (37.8%, n=17) and had attained a secondary school education or less (84.4%, n=38).

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Initial contact was made through leaders of informal ex-combatant associations in Bamenda. These initial contacts then referred other eligible colleagues, a method necessary to access this often-concealed population. The inclusion criteria required participants to be former members of any branch of the Cameroonian military who were no longer in active service. Despite significant challenges related to insecurity and trust within the region, the willingness of respondents and the collaboration of key informants were commendable, resulting in a high participation rate.

Measures

In order to assess the core constructs of the study, measures of self-acceptance and social integration were used to gather information. Each item contained behavioural and attitudinal characteristics, and participants were requested to indicate to what extent it applied to them. A five-point Likert-type scale was used for participants to rate their level of agreement and disagreement and interview questions were used to allow self-expression.

Measure of Self-Acceptance: This subscale was designed to measure the ex-combatants' ability to accept themselves and their past. The scale was developed by the researcher based on the theoretical framework of Ryff (1989) and adapted for the ex-combatant context. It was made up of 5 items with the following indicators: acceptance of self and past, comfort with self, confidence, sense of personal value, and achievement of inner peace. The scoring norm was Strongly Disagree=1, Disagree=2, Neutral=3, Agree=4, and Strongly Agree=5. The internal reliability analysis for the sub-scale was performed ($\alpha = 0.88$; $M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.94$).

Measure of Social Integration: This scale was designed to assess the degree to which ex-combatants were successfully assimilated into their communities. It was developed by the researcher and inspired by literature on

social integration (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The scale had items with the following indicators: participation in community activities, comfort in social situations, involvement in social groups, feeling accepted by others, and feeling supported by others. The scoring norm was Strongly Disagree=1, Disagree=2, Neutral=3, Agree=4, and Strongly Agree=5. The internal reliability analysis for the sub-scale was performed ($\alpha = 0.83$; $M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.79$).

With regard to ethical conduct, applicable codes of the American Psychological Association (APA) were strictly respected. Furthermore, authorization was obtained from relevant ex-combatant group leaders. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the administration of the instrument. The respect of confidentiality and integrity of the participants was paramount, and the participants could withdraw at any time from the study in case of any discomfort.

4. Findings of the Study

4.1 State of Self-Acceptance among Participants

The analysis reveals a complex psychological landscape characterized by both resilience and significant challenges in self-acceptance among ex-combatants. As detailed in Table 1, participants demonstrated the strongest endorsement for items measuring confidence and self-worth, with 71.1% agreement for both "I feel confident in myself" and "I have a positive sense of personal value." However, more fundamental aspects of self-acceptance showed considerable difficulty, with only 60% of participants endorsing items related to accepting their past and achieving inner peace. Notably, nearly one-third of respondents (33.3%) expressed active disagreement with statements about self-acceptance and inner peace, indicating substantial ongoing psychological challenges related to reconciling with past experiences and current identity.

Table 1: Frequency Distribution and Agreement Rank for Self-Acceptance Items (N=45)

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total Agree+ Strongly Agree	Rank
I feel confident in myself	3 (6.7)	4 (8.9)	6 (13.3)	18 (40.0)	14 (31.1)	71.1%	1
I have a positive sense of personal value	3 (6.7)	3 (6.7)	7 (15.6)	21 (46.7)	11 (24.4)	71.1%	1
I accept myself and my past	11 (24.4)	4 (8.9)	3 (6.7)	20 (44.4)	7 (15.6)	60.0%	2
I am comfortable with myself	7 (15.6)	8 (17.8)	3 (6.7)	20 (44.4)	7 (15.6)	60.0%	2
I am at peace with myself internally	10 (22.2)	5 (11.1)	3 (6.7)	20 (44.4)	7 (15.6)	60.0%	2

4.2 Correlation between Self-Acceptance and Social Integration

A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between the composite self-acceptance score and the composite social integration score. The analysis revealed a statistically significant positive correlation between self-acceptance and social integration ($r = 0.51$, $p < .001$). The

95% confidence interval [.26, .70] does not include zero, confirming the reliability of this relationship. The large effect size indicates this relationship is not only statistically significant but also practically meaningful. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis (H_0) that there is no significant relationship between self-acceptance and social integration, and accept the alternative hypothesis (H_a) that a significant positive relationship exists between these variables.

Table 2: Detailed Pearson Correlation Analysis for Self-Acceptance and Social Integration

Statistic	Self-Acceptance	Social Integration	Correlation
Mean (M)	3.52	3.20	—
Standard Deviation (SD)	0.94	0.79	—
Variance	0.88	0.62	—
Pearson's *r*	—	—	0.51
95% Confidence Interval	—	—	[0.26, 0.70]
t-statistic	—	—	3.87
Degrees of freedom (df)	—	—	43
p-value	—	—	<.001
Effect Size Interpretation	—	—	Large

4.3 Indicator-Level Correlation Analysis

The indicator-level analysis provided detailed insights into how specific aspects of self-acceptance relate to social integration. As shown in Table 3, all five indicators demonstrated significant positive correlations with social

integration ($p < 0.05$), with varying strength. The strongest relationship emerged for inner peace ($r = 0.47$, $p = 0.001$), suggesting that emotional stability and resolution of internal conflicts may be particularly important for successful community reintegration.

Table 3: Detailed Pearson Correlation Analysis: Self-Acceptance Indicators and Social Integration (N=45)

Variable / Indicator	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	Social Integration (r)	p-value
1. SA1: Accept myself & past	3.38	1.30	—					0.42	0.004
2. SA2: Comfort with self	3.36	1.26	0.68**	—				0.45	0.002
3. SA3: Confidence	3.80	1.12	0.52**	0.61**	—			0.38	0.011
4. SA4: Sense of value	3.76	1.10	0.59**	0.63**	0.71**	—		0.44	0.003

5. SA5: Inner peace	3.29	1.34	0.72**	0.69**	0.48**	0.57**	—	0.47	0.001
Composite Self-Acceptance	3.52	0.94	0.88**	0.89**	0.82**	0.85**	0.87**	0.51	<.001
Social Integration	3.20	0.79	0.42**	0.45**	0.38*	0.44**	0.47**	—	—

*Note: ** p < .01, * p < .05*

4.4 Regression Analysis: Predictive Relationship between Self-Acceptance and Social Integration

The regression analysis examined the predictive power of self-acceptance on social integration. As shown in Table 4, self-acceptance accounted for 26% of the

variance in social integration scores ($R^2 = .26$, $F(1,43) = 15.01$, $p < .001$). For each unit increase in self-acceptance, social integration increased by 0.50 units ($\beta = .51$, $p < .001$), indicating a substantial predictive relationship between these variables.

Table 4: Regression Analysis of Self-Acceptance on Social Integration

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of Estimate	F	df1	df2	Sig.
1	0.51	0.26	0.24	0.69	15.01	1	43	0.000
Predictor	B	SE	β	t				
(Constant)	1.42	0.31		4.58				0.000
Self-Acceptance	0.50	0.13	0.51	3.87				0.000

Note: Dependent Variable: Social Integration

4.5 Qualitative Findings: Contextualizing the Quantitative Landscape

The quantitative results established a significant link between self-acceptance and social integration. Qualitative data from interviews provides the narrative behind these numbers, revealing a complex journey of psychological adjustment and explaining the mechanisms of this relationship.

The theme of Identity Reconstruction Post-Service directly explains the quantitative finding that accepting one's past was a major challenge. Ex-combatants described a profound existential crisis upon leaving the military, captured in feelings of worthlessness: "I no longer have value, at least I felt so, since I left military service" (R6). This internal struggle clarifies why items like "I accept myself and my past" had the lowest

agreement rates.

Furthermore, the theme of Managing Stigma elucidates the external social barriers that hinder integration. Ex-combatants reported hyper-vigilance and concealing their past, succinctly stated as "At the moment, I live everyday being very careful for my life as I don't know what my neighbour feels about me..." (R1), a response to actual community suspicion and negative reactions. This external stigma directly hampers the formation of the positive relationships essential for social integration.

Finally, the theme of Rebuilding Self-Worth identifies the pathways to self-acceptance. Validation was key. A pension provided not just income but symbolic recognition, creating pride ("I felt so proud when my pension was available..." - R5). Familial success, like a child's achievement, also restored dignity and purpose ("I

was so happy when they recruited my son into public service" - R1). These factors facilitate the cognitive shift toward self-acceptance that the quantitative results show is critical for integration.

5. Discussion

This study set out to investigate the relationship between self-acceptance and social integration among military ex-combatants in the Northwest Region of Cameroon. The findings provide robust empirical evidence that self-acceptance is not merely a peripheral aspect of psychological well-being but a central, powerful predictor of successful social reintegration in this post-conflict context.

The analysis revealed a statistically significant, positive correlation between self-acceptance and social integration ($*r* = .51$, $*p* < .001$), with self-acceptance accounting for 26% of the variance in social integration outcomes. This substantial effect size underscores that a ex-combatant's internal psychological reconciliation is a critical driver of their external social assimilation. This result resonates strongly with Ryff's (1989) multidimensional model of psychological well-being, which posits that a positive attitude toward the self is foundational for cultivating positive relations with others. Our findings empirically validate this theoretical pathway in a previously unstudied, high-stakes population, suggesting that ex-combatants who achieve self-acceptance possess the psychological security and self-efficacy necessary to engage proactively and authentically with their communities (Boyle et al., 2014; Garcia, Nima, & Kjell, 2014).

Delving deeper into the components of self-acceptance, the indicator-level analysis offered crucial nuance. The strongest correlation with social integration was found for the achievement of "inner peace" ($*r* = .47$, $*p* = .001$). This suggests that the emotional stability and resolution of internal conflict—moving beyond mere cognitive acknowledgment of one's past to a state of emotional calm—may be the most critical element for successful community reintegration. This aligns with therapeutic models like Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which posit that psychological flexibility and freedom from experiential avoidance are prerequisites for valued living and social engagement (Hayes et al., 2006). For ex-combatants burdened by traumatic memories and guilt, achieving this inner peace is likely the key that unlocks their capacity to trust others and participate in community life.

However, the data also paints a sobering picture of the psychological challenges faced by this population. The fact that 33.3% of participants actively disagreed with statements about self-acceptance and inner peace highlights a pervasive struggle with identity and self-worth post-service. This finding is a stark reflection of the "hysteresis" or cultural lag described by Bourdieu (1990), where the military habitus internalized by ex-combatants is profoundly mismatched with the demands of civilian life. The qualitative narratives powerfully contextualize this quantitative result, revealing an existential crisis of "worthlessness" and the constant management of external stigma. This persistent internal and external conflict creates a vicious cycle: a lack of self-acceptance leads to social withdrawal and maladaptive behaviors (Willis et al., 2020), which in turn invites further social rejection, thereby deepening self-loathing and hindering integration (Ellis, 1962; Beck, 1976).

The regression model further cements the primacy of self-acceptance, demonstrating its significant predictive power. This finding challenges the prevailing socio-economic paradigm of many Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs, which often prioritize vocational training and financial support (Institute for Security Studies, 2023; McMullin, 2013). While economic stability is undeniably important, our results argue that it is insufficient. A pension can provide material support, but, as a participant noted, it is the symbolic validation and restored dignity that facilitate the cognitive shift toward self-acceptance. Without this foundational psychological work, economic interventions risk being undermined by unresolved trauma, identity confusion, and ongoing psychosocial distress.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. The cross-sectional design, while effective for establishing correlation, prohibits causal inference. The sample size, though adequate for the analyses conducted, was relatively small and recruited via purposive and snowball sampling in one urban center (Bamenda), which may limit the generalizability of the findings to ex-combatants in more rural settings or other regions of Cameroon. The reliance on self-report measures also introduces the potential for social desirability bias.

Future studies should employ longitudinal designs to

trace the causal relationship between self-acceptance and social integration over time. Research with larger, randomized samples across multiple regions would enhance generalizability. Most importantly, there is a pressing need for intervention-based research to develop and test the efficacy of culturally adapted therapeutic models such as trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT), ACT, or narrative exposure therapy (NET) specifically aimed at fostering self-acceptance among Cameroonian ex-combatants.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study makes a compelling empirical contribution to the literature on ex-combatant reintegration in post-conflict settings. It moves beyond anecdotal evidence to demonstrate that self-acceptance is a strong and significant predictor of social integration for ex-combatants in the Northwest Region of Cameroon. The journey from soldier to citizen is, fundamentally, an internal psychological process. Ex-combatants must first make peace with their past and reconstruct a positive self-identity before they can successfully negotiate their place within the civilian social fabric.

The implications of these findings are clear and urgent. They advocate for a paradigm shift in Cameroonian reintegration policy and practice. Programs led by entities like ONACAM must evolve from a primarily socio-economic focus to incorporate evidence-based, psychological interventions as a core component. Sustainable reintegration begins not just with a job or a pension, but with helping ex-combatants heal their psychological wounds, overcome internalized stigma, and achieve the inner peace necessary to rebuild a life of meaning and connection.

By investing in the psychological well-being of those who have served, we invest in the broader social cohesion and long-term stability of communities recovering from conflict. Helping ex-combatants accept themselves is the cornerstone of helping communities accept them back.

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