

Symbolic Interaction and Meaning-Making among Female Drug Offenders: A George Herbert Mead Perspective

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Abstract

This study examines how female drug offenders construct meaning through symbolic interaction while serving their sentences at the Class IIA Pondok Bambu Women's Correctional Institution. Using a descriptive qualitative approach informed by George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolic interaction, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation with four primary informants and three supporting informants, then analyzed through the concepts of *mind*, *self*, and *society*. The central finding is that communication inside the correctional institution functions not merely to deliver information but as the primary mechanism through which inmates construct meaning: everyday interaction with family, officers, and fellow inmates, together with participation in guidance and religious activities, becomes a symbolic resource that informants interpret (*mind*), use to reconstruct a more positive self-understanding (*self*), and negotiate against the norms, support, and stigma of their surrounding social environment (*society*). Although the four informants followed a broadly similar adaptive trajectory, they diverged in which relationships and activities carried the most meaning for them, showing that identical correctional experiences can generate markedly different personal meanings. These findings extend communication studies by demonstrating that institutional and interpersonal communication within a correctional setting operates as a meaning-making process that shapes inmates' self-transformation and their orientation toward life after release.

Keywords: Communication; George Herbert Mead; Meaning-Making; Symbolic Interaction; Women Inmates

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana narapidana perempuan kasus narkoba memaknai pengalaman mereka melalui interaksi simbolik selama menjalani masa hukuman di Lembaga Pemasyarakatan (Lapas) Perempuan Kelas IIA Pondok Bambu. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif yang berlandaskan teori interaksi simbolik George Herbert Mead, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi yang melibatkan empat informan utama dan tiga informan pendukung, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan konsep pikiran, diri, dan masyarakat. Temuan utamanya adalah bahwa komunikasi di dalam lapas tidak sekadar berfungsi untuk menyampaikan informasi, melainkan menjadi mekanisme utama bagi narapidana dalam memaknai pengalaman mereka: interaksi sehari-hari dengan keluarga, petugas, dan sesama narapidana, serta partisipasi dalam kegiatan pembinaan dan keagamaan, menjadi sumber daya simbolik yang dimaknai oleh informan, digunakan untuk merekonstruksi pemahaman diri yang lebih positif dan dinegosiasikan dalam kaitannya dengan norma, dukungan, serta stigma dari lingkungan sosial di sekitar mereka. Meskipun keempat informan menempuh pola adaptasi yang secara umum serupa, terdapat perbedaan mengenai hubungan dan aktivitas mana yang paling bermakna bagi mereka; hal ini menunjukkan bahwa pengalaman pemasyarakatan yang sama dapat menghasilkan pemaknaan pribadi yang sangat berbeda. Temuan ini memperkaya studi komunikasi dengan menunjukkan bahwa komunikasi institusional dan interpersonal dalam lingkungan pemasyarakatan berperan sebagai proses pembentukan makna yang memengaruhi transformasi diri narapidana serta orientasi mereka terhadap kehidupan setelah bebas.

Kata Kunci: George Herbert Mead; Interaksi Simbolik; Komunikasi; Pembentukan Makna; Warga Binaan Perempuan

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INTRODUCTION

Drug abuse in Indonesia remains a problem affecting various segments of society, including women. Data from the National Narcotics Agency (Badan Narkotika Nasional/BNN) show that women are also involved in narcotics-related offenses, so this issue is no longer dominated by male perpetrators. Women's involvement in narcotics cases not only generates legal consequences but also various social and psychological impacts that affect their lives while serving their sentences (Humas BNN, 2025).

Women's involvement in narcotics offenses is an important phenomenon to examine because women who face narcotics cases often experience more complex consequences. In addition to undergoing legal proceedings, they also face social stigma related to their identity as women (Rohmatunisa et al., 2024). In many contexts, women are still regarded as responsible for upholding family honor and meeting particular social expectations. When women become involved in narcotics offenses, negative social judgment is directed not only at their actions but also at their identity as women. This condition gives women's experiences of serving a prison sentence distinctive characteristics that warrant deeper examination.

From a communication studies perspective, the correctional institution can be understood as a bounded communication

environment in which meaning is continuously produced, negotiated, and revised (Bahfiarti, 2020). Every relationship an inmate maintains, with family during visits, with officers during daily routines, and with fellow inmates during shared activities, is fundamentally a communicative relationship: it is through the exchange of verbal and nonverbal symbols that inmates come to interpret their circumstances, evaluate themselves, and orient their conduct toward the future. Understood this way, communication inside the correctional institution is not reducible to the transmission of instructions or information; it is the very process through which self-understanding and social belonging are constructed. This study takes that premise as its central argument: symbolic interaction among female drug offenders is, at its core, a communication process of meaning construction, and it is this process, rather than imprisonment as a legal or psychological condition in itself, that the study sets out to examine.

While serving their sentences in correctional facilities, female drug offenders encounter various social experiences, such as interactions with correctional officers, fellow inmates, and family members, as well as involvement in guidance activities. These experiences give rise to social symbols that are interpreted differently by each individual. The interactions that take place within the correctional environment are an important part of understanding how female inmates

interpret their experiences, build social relationships, and adjust to the correctional environment (Halik, 2024).

Various studies indicate that the correctional institution is a social space that brings inmates into contact with multiple forms of interaction, whether with correctional officers, fellow inmates, or family members. These interactions are best understood not as generic social contact but as communication processes in their own right: they are the means through which individuals develop self-adjustment, obtain social support, and attribute meaning to the experiences they undergo. The correctional institution can thus be understood as a communication space that helps shape changes in how inmates view themselves and their lives after release.

Research on female inmates has generally focused more on aspects of psychological well-being, self-concept, coping strategies, and the guidance process during imprisonment, most of it framed through psychology or social work rather than communication. Meanwhile, research that specifically examines the process of symbolic interaction among female drug offenders through the perspective of George Herbert Mead, and, more specifically, that treats this interaction as a communication process, remains relatively limited, particularly within the context of women's correctional institutions. A study by Destiana et al. (2020) on the interpersonal communication of

officers at the Class IIA Women's Correctional Institution in Pekanbaru shows that communication forms part of the inmate guidance process through the delivery of information, persuasive communication, and religious activities; however, that study centers on officers as communicators and does not examine how inmates themselves interpret and construct meaning from these communicative encounters. This gap matters for communication studies specifically: it shows that interaction within correctional institutions is not solely concerned with the delivery of information but also with the construction of meaning through interpersonal and institutional communication, precisely the entry point through which a study that does not directly address media, digital, or public-relations communication can still speak to the concerns of strategic and communication-process research. This gap forms the basis for the present study, which examines how meaning is constructed through the process of social interaction during imprisonment (Siregar, 2016).

This study aims to describe the process of symbolic interaction, understood here as a communication process of meaning construction, among female drug offenders while serving their sentences at the Class IIA Pondok Bambu Women's Correctional Institution. The study focuses on the interaction process, forms of interactional activities, and the symbols interpreted by

female inmates, which are then analyzed using the concepts of *mind*, *self*, and *society* within George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolic interaction, in order to clarify how interpersonal and institutional communication inside a correctional setting shapes meaning, self-understanding, and social relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

George Herbert Mead's Theory of Symbolic Interaction

Symbolic interaction theory explains that human behavior is formed through the process of social interaction and the attribution of meaning to symbols that arise in everyday life. Mead explains that individuals do not act solely on the basis of the stimuli they receive, but on the basis of the meaning attributed to symbols through the process of interacting with others (Mead, 1934). Such meaning can develop in accordance with the experiences and social interactions individuals undergo.

In symbolic interaction theory, Mead put forward three central concepts, namely *mind*, *self*, and *society*. *Mind* refers to the individual's capacity to attribute meaning to experience through the use of symbols; *self* refers to the individual's capacity to understand and evaluate oneself through interaction with others; and *society* refers to the influence of the social environment, norms, and expectations on the individual. These three concepts are interrelated in explaining the process of meaning

construction through social interaction (Mead, 1934). In this study, the concept of *mind* is used to understand how female inmates interpret their various experiences while serving their sentences, including their experiences of interacting with family, correctional officers, fellow inmates, and involvement in guidance activities.

The concept of *self* relates to the individual's capacity to understand and evaluate oneself through interaction with others (Halik, 2024). Through this process, individuals can form an understanding of themselves based on the social experiences they undergo. Meanwhile, the concept of *society* relates to the social environment, norms, and expectations that influence the process of meaning construction within the individual (Mead, 1934). These three concepts are not understood separately but complement one another in explaining the process of symbolic interaction. In the context of this study, *mind*, *self*, and *society* are used as an analytical framework to understand the experiences and meaning-making processes of female drug offenders while serving their sentences.

Siregar (2016) explains that symbolic interaction relates to the process of meaning construction through human interaction with the social environment. This concept places meaning, self-concept, and the relationship between the individual and society as important elements in understanding human behavior. Meaning is not formed directly but

develops through interaction and individual interpretation. This perspective is relevant to the present study because female inmates undergo various forms of interaction that enable them to interpret their social experiences and construct an understanding of themselves. This empirical grounding of symbolic interactionism in communicative practice is echoed in studies of marginalized communities' everyday interaction, such as Mailinda and Azeharie's (2018) analysis of symbolic communication between deaf workers and their customers.

Social Interaction

Symbolic interaction theory is used in this study to understand how female drug offenders interpret their experiences while serving their sentences at the Class IIA Pondok Bambu Women's Correctional Institution (Irawan, 2018). Interaction with correctional officers, family, and fellow inmates, as well as involvement in guidance activities, constitutes the space in which various experiences and social meanings are formed.

Social interaction is a process of reciprocal relations between individuals, between individuals and groups, and between groups within community life. Interaction forms the basis of social relationships because, through this process, individuals can influence one another, exchange information, and build relationships with their surrounding environment. The process of interaction involves not only verbal communication but also nonverbal communication, which enables

individuals to understand the meaning of actions and symbols that arise in everyday life (Adriansyah & Ananda, 2022; Harahap, 2020). In this process, social interaction takes place through social contact and communication that enable individuals to convey messages, provide responses, and construct shared understanding.

The Correctional Institution as a Social Environment

The correctional institution is a social environment in which various forms of interaction take place, enabling inmates to build social relationships, exchange experiences, and attribute meaning to the various symbols that arise in everyday life (Utami & Widodo, 2025; Huwae & Azeharie, 2022). This interaction occurs through communication with correctional officers, family visits, relationships with fellow inmates, and involvement in guidance activities. As a relatively closed social space, the correctional institution has a high intensity of interaction, making it an environment rich in the exchange of symbols and meaning. In this study, the Class IIA Pondok Bambu Women's Correctional Institution is understood as the social context in which the process of symbolic interaction among female drug offenders takes place during their imprisonment.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design. The qualitative approach was chosen because the

study aims to understand the process of symbolic interaction among female drug offenders based on the experiences, meanings, and social realities they undergo while serving their sentences. This approach enables the researcher to understand the phenomenon through the informants' perspectives and the social context underlying it (Syahrizal & Jailani, 2023).

The study was conducted at the Class IIA Pondok Bambu Women's Correctional Institution in Jakarta. This location was chosen because it is a correctional institution specifically for women, housing inmates convicted of various types of offenses, including drug-related cases, and because it provided the researcher with the opportunity to observe social interaction among inmates, correctional officers, family members, and the guidance environment.

No	Pseudonym	Case Type	Age	Sentence Length	Remarks
1	Mawar	Drug offense	26	4 years 6 months	Primary Informant
2	Melati	Drug offense	25	8 years	Primary Informant
3	Anggrek	Drug offense	25	7 years 4 months	Primary Informant
4	Tulip	Drug offense	25	10 years	Primary Informant

Table 1. Profile of Primary Informants

Source: Processed by the researcher, 2026

Research informants were determined using purposive sampling, namely the selection of informants based on criteria consistent with the aims of the study (Ahmad & Muslimah, 2021). The primary informants consisted of four women convicted of drug-related offenses who were serving their sentences, while the supporting informants consisted of three individuals, namely guidance officers

and a correctional psychologist who understood the guidance process and social interaction within the correctional environment.

The four primary informants ranged in age from 25 to 26 years and were inmates convicted of drug-related offenses. The length of their sentences varied, ranging from 4 years and 6 months to 10 years. This variation in sentence length provided a diverse backdrop of experience in living within the correctional institution, including in the process of interacting, adjusting, and interpreting various social experiences during imprisonment.

Informants' names were disguised to protect the confidentiality of their identities and to ensure their comfort throughout the research process. The researchers used flower names as pseudonyms, namely Mawar (Rose), Melati (Jasmine), Anggrek (Orchid), and Tulip. These pseudonyms were used because the informants were unwilling to disclose their real identities, and this arrangement had received approval from the Class IIA Correctional Institution in Jakarta as well as from the four female informants convicted of drug-related offenses.

In addition to the primary informants, this study involved three supporting informants who were connected to the guidance process and social interaction within the Class IIA Pondok Bambu Women's Correctional Institution. The supporting informants consisted of guidance officers and

a correctional psychologist who provided additional information regarding the guidance process and the conditions of social interaction experienced by the inmates.

No	Name	Position	Remarks
1	MS	Guidance Officer (PP)	Supporting Informant
2	DT	Correctional Psychologist (PL)	Supporting Informant
3	JL	Guidance Officer (PP)	Supporting Informant

Table 2. Profile of Supporting Informants
Source: Processed by the researcher, 2026.

Data collection was conducted from May to June 2026 through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format so that the researcher retained a set of guiding questions while also giving informants the opportunity to elaborate more broadly on their experiences and interpretations. Because audio recording was not permitted inside the correctional institution, interviews were documented through near-verbatim handwritten notes taken during each session; immediately afterward, the researchers expanded these field notes into fuller transcripts while the conversation was still fresh in memory.

Where a subsequent contact with an informant was possible, key quotations were read back to her to confirm that her intended meaning had been captured accurately, a form of member checking that, together with the triangulation procedures described below, was used to safeguard the accuracy of the quotations presented in this article. Observation was conducted as non-participant observation of activities and social

interaction within the Class IIA Pondok Bambu Women's Correctional Institution. Documentation was used as supporting data in the form of documents, archives, and research records (Intifada Zahroh et al., 2025). All interviews were conducted in Indonesian; the excerpts presented in this article have been translated into English by the researchers. Certain colloquial expressions and terms of address (e.g., "Kak," an informal and respectful form of address roughly equivalent to "sis") have been retained in their original form to preserve the tone of the original narrative.

The research procedure was carried out in stages, beginning with formulating the research questions and data collection procedures, followed by determining the data sources and informants in accordance with the research criteria (Mahendra et al., 2024). The next stage involved observation and in-depth interviews with informants, accompanied by the collection of relevant documentation. The data obtained were then organized and analyzed in stages based on the themes identified from the research findings. This approach follows the characteristics of qualitative research, which emphasizes understanding the words, actions, and meanings that emerge from informants' experiences.

Data analysis employed the model developed by Miles et al. (2014), which comprises three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification

(Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024). In the reduction stage, data obtained from interviews, observation, and documentation were selected and grouped according to the research focus. The data were then presented in narrative form, enabling the researcher to identify patterns and relationships among findings. In the final stage, conclusions were drawn based on the patterns and meanings identified during the analysis process. In qualitative data analysis, the systematic presentation of data helps the researcher discern patterns, differences, and relationships among findings, allowing conclusions to be drawn and verified in a more directed manner. Data that have been condensed from interviews, field notes, and other sources can be arranged into a form of presentation appropriate to the needs of the research, facilitating the process of analysis and interpretation.

After the data were reduced, interview transcripts and observation notes were coded according to information relevant to the research focus. Codes with similar meanings were then grouped into several categories and themes, such as the interaction process, forms of interactional activities, and the symbols interpreted by informants. The resulting themes were subsequently analyzed and mapped onto the concepts of *mind*, *self*, and *society* to examine how informants attributed meaning to their experiences, understood themselves, and interacted with their social environment. The results of this

mapping were then used as the basis for interpreting the research findings and drawing conclusions.

Analytical Category	Illustrative Code	Representative Data Excerpt	Mead's Concept
Interaction Process	Sustained family contact despite imprisonment	Mawar: family support helped her feel "still accepted" despite serving her sentence.	Self
Interaction Process	Child relationship as motivational anchor	Melati: her relationship with her child was "a source of motivation... and emotional pressure."	Mind / Self
Interaction Process	Officer and peer relationships built gradually	Tulip: "began to build relationships with fellow inmates and correctional officers."	Society
Interactional Activities	Correctional environment reframed as a learning space	Mawar: "I have become more grateful and I just make this place somewhere to learn."	Mind
Interactional Activities	Reflection on pre-imprisonment decisions	Anggrek: "I've come to realize that the decisions I made in the past... had a huge impact on my life."	Mind
Interactional Activities	Guidance activities as structured, dual-function programming	DT (psychologist): structured activities help inmates "rebuild their self-confidence."	Society / Mind
Symbols	Family support as continued belonging	Mawar: "I want to be together with my family again, live a better life."	Self
Symbols	Mother as symbol of hope and reason to change	Tulip: "The most important thing is that I want to make Mama proud again."	Self
Symbols	Anticipated societal stigma	Melati: "I realize there may still be people who view me negatively..."	Society
Symbols	Religious practice as emotional regulation	Anggrek: "When I'm sad or thinking about my family, I usually pray or recite the Qur'an."	Mind / Self

Table 3. Coding and Analytical Matrix

To ensure the validity of the data, this study employed source triangulation and technique triangulation. Source triangulation was carried out by comparing information obtained from the primary informants with that from the supporting informants, while technique triangulation was carried out by comparing the results of interviews, observation, and

documentation. This cross-checking was used to strengthen the credibility of the data and to ensure that the research findings were supported by multiple sources of information (Syahrizal & Jailani, 2023).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Interaction Process of Female Inmates during Their Imprisonment

The findings show that the interaction process of female drug offenders during their imprisonment occurs through relationships with family, correctional officers, and fellow inmates, as well as through the process of adjusting to the environment of the Class IIA Pondok Bambu Women's Correctional Institution. The four informants had different initial experiences upon entering imprisonment, ranging from sadness, fear, shock, and regret, to difficulty accepting their situation. However, as interaction with the social environment within the correctional institution continued, the informants began to build relationships and adjust to the life they were now living.

For informant Mawar (26 years old), the interaction process took place through relationships that remained intact with family, correctional officers, and fellow inmates. Family support made Mawar feel she was still accepted despite serving her sentence. This acceptance helped Mawar reduce negative judgments about herself and sustain her desire to improve her life after release. This finding is consistent with Elpinar et al. (2019), who show that family emotional support is

related to the condition of female inmates while serving their sentences. Such support may take the form of motivation, *advice regarding life after release, and attention* from family. Mawar also began to view the correctional environment as a place for learning, so that the adaptation process she underwent developed in a more positive direction.

"In my opinion, it has an effect, Kak. Because through those activities, I have things to do, I meet people, and I also learn new things."

(Mawar, 19/06/2026).

Mawar's experience shows that social interaction does not merely produce interpersonal relationships but also shapes how an individual understands herself. The acceptance she received from her family became an experience that Mawar subsequently interpreted as a form of support for herself. This condition can be understood through the concept of *self* in symbolic interaction theory, namely when an individual forms an understanding of herself through interaction with others. This finding is consistent with Insani and Yuliana (2023), who explain that self-concept is formed through the process of individual interaction with the social environment. In Mawar's case, family support became a social experience that helped shape a more positive view of herself and encouraged her desire to improve her life after release.

Unlike Mawar, Melati's (25 years old) interaction process was strongly influenced by her role as a mother. At the outset of her

imprisonment, Melati found it difficult to accept the reality of being separated from her child and family. Her relationship with her child became both a source of motivation and a source of emotional pressure during her sentence. Over time, communication with her family, relationships with correctional officers, and interaction with fellow inmates helped Melati adapt to life within the correctional institution. This experience subsequently encouraged her to improve herself and prepare for a better life after release.

"I try to build good relationships with both the officers and my friends here. In my opinion, mutual respect is important so that the atmosphere inside the correctional facility feels more comfortable." (Melati, 19/06/2026).

Melati's experience shows that the meaning attached to a social relationship can differ depending on an individual's position and experience. For Melati, her relationship with her child was understood not merely as a family relationship but also as a source of motivation for enduring her sentence. This illustrates the process of *mind*, in which social experience is not simply accepted as given but is thought through and interpreted, thereby producing particular meaning for the individual. The experience of separation from her child was thus understood as an impetus to improve herself and to prepare for life after release.

For informant Anggrek (25 years old), the interaction process began with feelings of sadness and regret over the events she had experienced. Family support was one of the

factors that helped Anggrek accept her situation. In addition, her involvement in guidance activities and religious activities helped her manage her emotions and adjust to life within the correctional institution. Her relationships with correctional officers and fellow inmates also provided social experiences that strengthened her process of adapting to the new environment.

"Alhamdulillah, it's good, Kak. I try to respect everyone here. My friends also remind each other whenever someone is feeling sad or has a problem." (Anggrek, 19/06/2026).

The findings for Anggrek show that the interaction process does not occur solely through direct interpersonal communication but also through individual involvement in a broader social environment. Guidance and religious activities provided Anggrek with a space to gain new experiences while also developing ways of coping with her current situation. This interactional experience thus became part of a gradual process of meaning-making.

Meanwhile, Tulip (25 years old) underwent an interaction process that began with difficulty accepting her situation after entering the correctional institution. Feelings of sadness, fear, and unfamiliarity with the new environment were the initial experiences she had to confront. Over time, Tulip began to build relationships with fellow inmates and correctional officers while continuing to receive support from her family, particularly her mother. This experience led Tulip to recognize the importance of choosing a better

social environment and preparing for a more responsible life after release (Murcahyaningrum et al., 2023).

"Alhamdulillah, it's good. Here I have also learned to respect other people. We talk with each other and remind one another whenever someone is feeling sad." (Tulip, 19/06/2026).

The shift in Tulip's outlook reflects a process of meaning-making regarding her past experiences and her current circumstances. Her mother's support came to be interpreted as a reason to change. This is evident in Tulip's hope of pursuing legitimate work and making her family proud. This statement shows that social experience can serve as a basis for individuals in shaping their orientation toward the future. From Mead's perspective, this process demonstrates the interrelationship between *mind* and *self*, as experience received through interaction is subsequently thought through, interpreted, and used to construct a new outlook on oneself.

Overall, the four informants exhibited a similar pattern in terms of the adaptation process, yet had different experiences and interpretations of meaning. Mawar interpreted her experience primarily through acceptance and learning, Melati through her relationship with her child and her role as a mother, Anggrek through family support and religious activities, and Tulip through her mother's support and her desire to improve her life. These differences show that the same social environment does not always produce the same meaning for every individual.

These findings reinforce the view that social interaction is an ongoing, evolving process. Interaction with family, correctional officers, and fellow inmates provided experiences that gradually helped the informants make sense of their circumstances. In other words, the process of adaptation within the correctional institution relates not only to the ability to follow institutional rules, but also to the individual's capacity to attribute meaning to the social experiences they undergo.

Forms of Interactional Activities among Female Inmates during Their Imprisonment

In addition to interpersonal relationships, the interaction process also occurs through various activities organized within the correctional institution. This is consistent with Saputra and Putri (2022), who show that symbolic interaction and interpersonal communication within correctional settings can play a role in shaping self-concept and the way individuals build social relationships. In their study, experiences within the guidance institution also influenced how individuals understood themselves and communicated with their social environment. In the present study, this process is evident in inmates' involvement in various shared activities that serve as a space for communication, adaptation, and building social relationships.

For Mawar, who stated, *"I have become more grateful and I just make this place somewhere to learn."* (Mawar, 19/06/2026), the correctional environment came to be

viewed not merely as a place to serve punishment but also as a place to learn values capable of changing an inmate's mindset, through the provision of education or counseling, religious education, formal education, and skills training. This shift in outlook emerged after Mawar experienced various forms of interaction while in the correctional institution. By participating in activities and interacting with her surroundings, Mawar gained experiences that enabled her to view her imprisonment as part of a life process that could offer valuable lessons (Ghozali & Rinaldi, 2023).

Unlike Mawar, Melati stated: *"At first it felt very heavy, Kak. What I thought about the most was my child. Time felt like it passed so slowly because I had to be far from my child and family. I often thought about how they were doing outside, and I felt sad because I couldn't carry out my role as a mother the way I used to."* (Melati, 19/06/2026).

The process of *mind* in Anggrek's case is evident when she began to reflect on the experiences and decisions she had made prior to her imprisonment. Anggrek explained, *"Because while I'm here I have a lot of time to think. I've come to realize that the decisions I made in the past actually had a huge impact on my life and my family's life. From there, I started learning to improve myself little by little."* (Anggrek, 19/06/2026).

Her experience during imprisonment also led Tulip to reconsider the way she had previously thought and made decisions. She

stated, *"Yes, there is a change. Now I think more before doing something. I've also become more careful. I don't want to easily trust or just follow other people anymore."* (Tulip, 19/06/2026). This statement shows that past experience became material for Tulip to reconsider her own actions. She began to realize that decisions need to be thought through beforehand and should no longer simply follow the direct influence of her surroundings. In this regard, the experiences gained while in the correctional institution were interpreted as a learning process that shaped how Tulip viewed herself and her social environment.

The informants' statements above are consistent with the purpose of the correctional institution in conducting guidance activities. The following are statements from three additional informants, namely correctional officers and the correctional psychologist.

DT (correctional psychologist) explained, *"When they have structured activities, they become more focused on what they are currently doing rather than continually dwelling on the past. Guidance activities also give them the opportunity to learn, develop their abilities, and rebuild their self-confidence."* (DT, 19/06/2026).

MS (guidance officer) stated, *"Because while they are here, they do not only serve their punishment but also take part in various guidance activities. From that, they learn discipline, responsibility, and how to interact*

with other people. That process is what gradually shapes the changes within them.” (MS, 19/06/2026).

Unlike MS, JL (guidance officer) said, *“Guidance activities help them fill their time with positive things. Besides gaining skills, they also learn responsibility, cooperation, and how to interact with other people. From that, we see changes in their attitudes as well as in how they view themselves.” (JL, 19/06/2026).*

This shows that guidance activities serve both a social and a symbolic function. Socially, these activities bring inmates together with others and create a space for interaction. Symbolically, these activities can be interpreted as opportunities to learn, improve oneself, and prepare for life after release. This process relates to the concept of *mind*, as individuals do not merely follow the activities as routine but also attribute meaning to the experiences gained through them.

Experience during imprisonment shaped not only how the informants thought but also how they viewed and evaluated themselves, as reflected in how they compared themselves before and after serving their sentences. Anggrek stated, *“I feel calmer now. In the past I was more driven by emotion, but now I try to think first before acting. I also appreciate my family more and feel more grateful for what I have.” (Anggrek, 19/06/2026).* A similar shift is evident in Mawar, who began to notice changes within

herself during her time in the correctional institution. She said, *“Now I appreciate time more, I appreciate my family more, and I can control my thoughts better.” (Mawar, 19/06/2026).*

This is also evident in the observations of DT, the psychologist who accompanies the inmates. She explained, *“At first, many inmates viewed themselves negatively because they felt guilty, ashamed, or had lost their self-confidence. However, after going through the mentoring process and taking part in guidance activities, some of them began to be able to accept themselves. They started to realize that this experience does not have to be the end of their lives and that there is still an opportunity to improve themselves.” (DT, 19/06/2026).*

These three statements indicate that experience during imprisonment brought about changes in how the informants saw and understood themselves. This change is evident in their increased capacity to value themselves and their surroundings, to accept their current circumstances, and to build the conviction that there is still an opportunity for self-improvement. Social experience within the correctional institution thus shaped not only the informants' actions but also their understanding of themselves.

Statements from correctional officers also show that guidance activities are designed to help inmates develop a more positive mindset, regulate their behavior, and prepare themselves for life after release. The

activities provided include personality development, skills training, religious activities, yoga, therapy, and sharing sessions. The officers emphasized that change also depends on inmates' own capacity for self-regulation.

From the perspective of society, these findings show that the social environment does not consist solely of family and the community outside the correctional institution: the internal environment of the institution, officers, structured activities, and fellow inmates, is equally part of the meaning-making process. As shown earlier, Mawar's and Melati's accounts of daily interaction with officers and peers and Anggrek's emphasis on mutual respect among fellow inmates all describe the same underlying pattern: reciprocal, everyday exchange inside the institution that helps inmates interpret and adjust to their circumstances. MS Sihotang, the guidance officer, corroborated this pattern from the staff's side, noting that sustained interaction is what "gradually shapes the changes" he observes in inmates (MS Sihotang, 19/06/2026).

This social experience is shaped not only by relationships within the correctional institution but also by how informants perceive their acceptance by society after completing their sentences. This is evident in Tulip's statement when discussing the possibility of negative judgment from society once she is released. She said, *"I know it will probably be there, Kak. But I can't force*

people to trust me right away. What I can do is prove it through my attitude. I want to show that I have truly changed and that I want to live a better life." (Tulip, 19/06/2026).

Religious activities also formed an important part of the informants' interactional experience. For Anggrek, religious activities helped her manage her emotions and adjust to life within the correctional institution. For Tulip, activities such as Qur'an recitation and choir helped fill her time with more positive activities and helped her build habits different from those of her previous social environment.

These findings show that guidance activities cannot be understood merely as activities carried out to fill time during imprisonment. They also constitute a space for social learning. Through these activities, informants gained opportunities to interact with others, learn the rules, develop skills, and build new habits. These experiences subsequently became part of the process of constructing meaning about the life they were currently living.

Taken together, the four informants' experiences show that forms of interactional activity are an important element in the process of symbolic interaction, though not a uniform one: Mawar and Anggrek drew their strongest sense of meaning from guidance and religious activities that helped them regulate emotion and reinterpret the past, while Melati and Tulip drew more of their meaning from relationships, with a child and a

mother, respectively, that activities such as skills training and worship then reinforced. This shows that symbolic interaction occurs not only through conversation or interpersonal relationships, but also through shared activities whose meaning is filtered through each individual's prior relationships and concerns.

Symbols Interpreted by Female Inmates

The findings show that several symbols were interpreted by the informants during their imprisonment, namely family support, children, societal stigma, religious activities, social environment, and guidance activities within the correctional institution. Although situated within a relatively similar environment, each informant attributed different meanings to these symbols according to her own life experience and social relationships.

Family support emerged as one of the most prominent symbols in the informants' experiences (Haris & Amalia, 2018). For Mawar and Anggrek, family support was interpreted as a form of acceptance, signifying that they still had a place within their family despite serving their sentences. For Melati and Tulip, meanwhile, their relationships with their child and mother, respectively, became a reason to improve themselves and to build a better life after release. Family thus served not only as a source of emotional support but also as a symbol of hope for the informants' futures.

This is evident in Mawar's statement, *"I want to become a better person, Kak. I want to be together with my family again, live a better life, and not repeat the same mistakes."* (Mawar, 19/06/2026). This statement shows that the presence of family was interpreted as part of Mawar's hope of improving her life after release.

This interpretation can be explained through the concept of *self*. Individuals see and evaluate themselves based on their experience of interacting with others. When an informant receives acceptance from her family, this experience can shape the way she views herself. Conversely, when an individual experiences pressure or negative judgment, this experience can likewise shape the way she understands herself.

This concept is evident in Mawar, who felt that she remained accepted by her family despite serving her sentence. This acceptance helped reduce negative judgment toward herself and sustained her motivation to improve her life. This finding is consistent with Shobrianto and Warsono (2023) and Sulistiyawati et al. (2021), who similarly find that self-concept develops through interaction with others and with a supportive social environment.

For Tulip, her mother held a more specific meaning as a symbol of hope and a reason to change. This is evident in her statement, *"She has always supported me, but I ended up disappointing her instead. That's what often comes to mind when I'm*

alone.” (Tulip, 19/06/2026). She also stated, *“The most important thing is that I want to make Mama proud again.” (Tulip, 19/06/2026).* This relationship shaped the way Tulip evaluated herself and gave rise to her desire to lead a more responsible life. Tulip no longer saw herself solely on the basis of her past experiences, but began to construct an image of herself as someone capable of working honestly, taking care of herself, and making her family happy.

In addition to family support, societal stigma also emerged as a symbol influencing informants’ process of meaning-making. The experience of being a female offender relates not only to legal status but also to social judgments regarding their identity as women. In this study, stigma constituted part of the social environment that shaped how informants understood themselves and their futures, consistent with findings on the image-restoration communication strategies former drug offenders use to manage such stigma after release (Mustafa et al., 2023).

This is evident in Melati’s statement, *“I realize there may still be people who view me negatively because I once served a prison sentence. But I hope society can give me the chance to start a new life.” (Melati, 19/06/2026).* This stigma reflects the aspect of *society* in Mead’s theory. Individuals exist within a social environment that carries particular norms and expectations. Judgment from that environment then becomes part of the social experience that individuals must

interpret (Novitasari & Kusmiyanti, 2021). However, the findings show that the informants did not passively accept such social judgment in its entirety. Instead, they engaged in a process of reflection and constructed a new understanding of themselves based on the experiences they underwent while serving their sentences.

Religious and guidance activities also carried symbolic meaning. For Anggrek, religious activities provided a sense of calm when facing sadness. She said, *“Because there I feel calmer, Kak. When I’m sad or thinking about my family, I usually pray or recite the Qur’an.” (Anggrek, 19/06/2026).* Mawar, meanwhile, explained that guidance activities gave her something to do as well as an opportunity to learn: *“Because through those activities, I have things to do, I meet people, and I also learn new things.” (Mawar, 19/06/2026).* For Anggrek, religious activities were part of the process of managing her emotions and adjusting to her circumstances, while for Tulip, activities such as Qur’an recitation, choir, and guidance sessions were experiences that helped her build new habits and fill her time more positively.

Within the context of *mind*, these various symbols do not automatically carry the same meaning for every individual; meaning is constructed through a process of interpretation. Purnomo and Indarti (2024) explain that interaction and communication enable individuals to attribute meaning to symbols that arise within social relationships,

and that such meaning develops through the individual's own process of interpreting their social experience.

The findings of this study show that the process of interpreting symbols occurs through the informants' experiences and social interactions. Family support, for instance, may be interpreted as acceptance by one informant and as motivation to change by another. Guidance activities may be interpreted as routine, as a learning opportunity, or as a space for building new habits. These differences indicate that symbols do not carry a single, uniform meaning, but instead acquire meaning through individual experience and the process of interaction.

These differences in interpretation show that the same experience within the correctional environment does not always produce the same meaning for every informant. For Mawar and Anggrek, family support was interpreted mainly as continued acceptance; for Melati and Tulip, it was interpreted more as an impetus to change, refracted through their relationships with a child and a mother, respectively.

Guidance and religious activities show a parallel split: Anggrek and Tulip drew on them chiefly for emotional regulation and habit-building, while Mawar and Melati emphasized the learning and self-improvement opportunities they offered. These differences are related to each informant's individual experience and social relationships, not to any

difference in the correctional environment itself, which the four informants shared (see Table 4).

Informant	Primary Relational Anchor	Meaning of Interaction Process	Meaning of Interactional Activities	Key Symbol	Dominant Mead Concept(s)
Mawar	Family and fellow inmates	Renewed sense of acceptance	The institution reframed as "a place to learn"	Family support as continued belonging	Self; Mind
Melati	Relationship with her child	Motivation coupled with emotional pressure	Coping mechanism amid separation from her child	Child as source of motivation	Mind; Self
Anggrek	Family support and religious/guidance activities	Emotional regulation and gradual acceptance	Calm, self-reflection, and habit change	Religious practice as emotional anchor	Self; Society
Tulip	Mother's support and peer relationships	Gradual trust-building	Habit change (recitation, choir, guidance sessions)	Mother as symbol of hope	Mind; Self

Table 4. Cross-Case Comparison of Meaning-Making across Informants

Analysis of Mind, Self, and Society in Symbolic Interaction

When the overall findings are analyzed through George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolic interaction, the interaction process among female inmates reveals a close relationship between *mind*, *self*, and *society*. These three concepts do not stand independently but operate together in shaping how informants make meaning of their experiences during imprisonment.

The aspect of *mind* is evident when informants engaged in a process of thinking and reflecting on their experiences. At the outset of their sentences, informants faced feelings of sadness, shock, fear, and regret, along with difficulty accepting their situation. However, through interaction with family, officers, and fellow inmates, as well as involvement in guidance activities, they began to reinterpret these experiences. The process

of interaction became the basis for the emergence of new ways of thinking about the situation they faced.

Mind is also evident through the activities the informants participated in. Skills training, religious activities, sports, reading, gardening, batik-making, knitting, cooking, and other activities became new experiences that encouraged informants to learn, adjust, and reflect on their life experiences. These activities thus functioned not merely as routine, but as a space that allowed new interpretations of life to emerge.

Estaswara et al. (2020) conceptualize communication as a process that occurs through interaction among actors to build understanding and cooperation. In the context of this study, the relationships that female inmates built with family, correctional officers, and fellow inmates show that communication functions not only as message delivery but also as a process of constructing understanding of the situation and social relationships they experienced during their sentences. Interaction among inmates, family, officers, and guidance activities formed part of a communication process capable of building understanding, encouraging cooperation, and supporting inmates' adjustment and rehabilitation. This ongoing interaction provided social experiences that, in turn, shaped how the informants understood their environment and themselves.

The aspect of *self* is evident in the changes in how informants viewed and evaluated themselves. Mawar began to see herself as someone who still had the opportunity to improve her life. Melati interpreted her role as a mother as an impetus for self-improvement. Anggrek built acceptance of her situation through family support and activities that helped her manage her emotions. Tulip, meanwhile, began to construct an image of herself as someone more responsible for her choices and her future.

The aspect of *society*, meanwhile, is evident through the roles of family, correctional officers, fellow inmates, guidance activities, and societal stigma. This social environment provided norms, expectations, support, and judgments that became part of the informants' experiences. However, the social environment did not shape all informants uniformly. Differences in background, experience, family support, and pre-imprisonment experiences led each informant to construct different meanings.

The findings thus show that symbolic interaction among female drug offenders during imprisonment is a dynamic, ongoing process. Interaction with the social environment provides experience; that experience is interpreted through the process of *mind*; it then contributes to the formation of *self*; and the entire process unfolds within the context of *society*. The relationship among these three concepts explains why

experiences within the correctional environment can produce different changes in outlook and meaning for each informant (Muawanah & Pratikto, 2012).

These findings also show that the correctional institution is not merely a space for serving punishment, but a social space in which the process of meaning construction takes place. Relationships with family, officers, and fellow inmates, together with guidance activities, form part of this process. Ongoing interaction gives informants the opportunity to make sense of their past experiences, evaluate their present circumstances, and build hope for life after release. George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolic interaction is therefore relevant for explaining how the social experiences of female inmates are given meaning during their imprisonment.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that, for female drug offenders serving their sentences at the Class IIA Pondok Bambu Women's Correctional Institution, communication is the mechanism through which imprisonment becomes a process of self-transformation rather than merely a period of confinement. Read through Mead's concepts of *mind*, *self*, and *society*, the relationships, guidance and religious activities, and symbols the informants encountered were not simply endured; they were actively interpreted, reworked into a more positive self-understanding, and weighed against the

norms and expectations of the surrounding social environment. The theoretical contribution of this study is to extend Mead's symbolic interactionism into the correctional communication context by showing that institutional and interpersonal communication inside a total institution functions as a process of symbolic re-signification: experiences that could easily be read as purely punitive or stigmatizing, imprisonment, surveillance, anticipated societal judgment, are, through sustained interaction, reinterpreted by inmates as resources for building a more responsible self and a hopeful orientation toward life after release. This reframes correctional communication not only as an instrument of information delivery or behavioral control, but as a meaning-making process central to rehabilitation itself.

Practically, these findings suggest that guidance, religious, and skills-training activities inside correctional institutions carry weight not only as programming but as communicative occasions through which inmates build relationships, reinterpret their past, and rehearse a different self-image, a function correctional programs might design for more deliberately. The symbols that mattered most to informants, family support, relationships with children, religious practice, and anticipated societal stigma, were not fixed in meaning but were actively negotiated by each woman, underscoring that rehabilitation support should attend as much

to how these symbols are communicated and interpreted as to the activities themselves.

This study has several limitations in its field data collection process. As explained in the Method section, interviews with informants could not be audio-recorded because of a policy of the Class IIA Pondok Bambu Women's Correctional Institution that prohibits the use of recording devices during interviews; the researchers mitigated this constraint by taking near-verbatim notes, expanding them immediately after each session, and confirming key quotations with informants where possible. Even so, this manual approach carries an inherent risk of minor phrasing differences from informants' exact words, which readers should bear in mind when interpreting the quotations presented in this article. In addition, this study did not receive external funding or financial support, so the data collection process was carried out using the resources available to the researchers.

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