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RESEARCH

The Family at the Core: Neutralization and Narratives in Latin American Homicides

Martín Hernán Di Marco[1] · **Gustavo Fondevila Pérez**[2]

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the narratives of homicide perpetrators across three Latin American countries, focusing on the ways in which they construct the moral meaning of harm. Bridging neutralization theory and narrative criminology, it examines how perpetrators in Latin America construct stories centered on familial harm. Thematic analysis was conducted on interviews with 27 cisgender men and women convicted of homicide in Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia. First, homicide was often reframed, minimized, or interpreted primarily in terms of its relational consequences. Second, perpetrators commonly portrayed their own families as the unfair victims of the crime, reconfiguring rather than simply deflecting responsibility away from themselves and sometimes toward the state. Third, the suffering of the victim's family was depicted as both an inevitable consequence of the act and a profound, enduring rupture extending beyond the immediate loss, disrupting emotional well-being and social relationships. We argue that these narratives constitute a culturally embedded form of moral displacement, in which responsibility is not simply denied or neutralized, but reorganized around harm to the families. We further suggest that cognitive-behavioral interventions should not only emphasize the acceptance of responsibility but also attend to the forms of harm that perpetrators themselves identify. Recognizing the suffering of their own families may open an additional analytical lens for understanding processes of reflection and relational desistance, with local reintegration programs potentially benefiting from engaging with family ties rather than focusing solely on guilt or confession.

Keywords Narrative criminology · Neutralization techniques · Homicide · Desistance · Pain and family

Introduction

In interviews with men and women convicted of homicide in Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile, the act of killing was rarely the center of the story. Instead, perpetrators spoke at length about families—particularly their own. Their narratives were not often organized around the victim or the violence itself, but around the emotional, social, and material consequences for relatives. The moral weight of the crime was not only denied; it was displaced, reoriented toward the suffering of those closest to them. This recurring narrative pattern raises a fundamental question: what happens when the primary locus of harm is no longer the victim, but the offender's and victim's families?

This pattern sits uneasily within classical neutralization theory, which explains how offenders justify or excuse wrongdoing through techniques such as denying responsibility, harm, or victimhood, condemning condemners, or appealing to higher loyalties (Fritsche, 2005; Sykes & Matza, 1957). Rather than reflecting adherence to deviant values, these accounts are understood as processes through which individuals retrospectively neutralize violations of normative expectations (Copes, 2003). While this framework has been widely used, it largely assumes that neutralization operates by minimizing or deflecting the act itself.

The five major neutralization techniques (Sykes & Matza, 1957), much like moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999), have been expanded to include more complex ways of neutralizing responsibility. The concept has also been revitalized through broader theoretical frameworks that seek to understand the narratives that promote violence and other

✉ Gustavo Fondevila Pérez
gustavo.fondevila@uab.cat

Martín Hernán Di Marco
m.h.di.marco@fgga.leidenuniv.nl

[1] Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands

[2] Political Sciences and Public Law Department, Autonomous University of Barcelona, Cerdanyola del Vallès, Spain

criminal activities, such as narrative criminology (Di Marco & Sandberg, 2023; Presser & Sandberg, 2015).

In the study of violence, and specifically homicide, neutralization has proven particularly valuable, by shedding light on how aggressors negotiate the meaning of harm. This process involves minimizing the harm caused, justifying the act (e.g., framing violence as an act of care, as discussed by Balliet, 2024 and Castilla, 2017), or shifting blame onto the victims through various narratives (Di Marco & Evans, 2020; Ellis, 2017). The framework has been applied across a wide range of contexts, from serial killing (Pettigrew, 2020) to genocide perpetration (Anderson, 2017). In the context of intimate partner homicide, for instance, this approach has been instrumental in understanding the intentionality of the crime within the broader male-chauvinistic knowledge frameworks available to perpetrators (Di Marco et al., 2025).

In the initial fieldwork conducted for our large-scale project on the life stories of incarcerated individuals in Latin America (CRIMLA[1]), we found that a significant portion of the conversations with homicide perpetrators did not focus on the murder itself, as we had initially hypothesized. While interviewees still neutralized the crime, the discussions were more centered on the impact of the homicide on both the perpetrators' own families and the victims' families.

In this paper, we argue that neutralization and narrative strategies among homicide perpetrators in Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia operate not merely by denying or minimizing harm to victims, but by *displacing moral attention* onto the suffering of families. We focus on individuals charged with the homicide of people they knew (colleagues, relatives, neighbors, or gang members). Analytically, we treat neutralization not as a causal driver or etiology of offending, but as a retrospective process through which offenders reconstruct the meaning of their actions (Maruna & Copes, 2005), with implications for engagement in desistance programs (Di Marco & Evans, 2020).

We conceptualize our findings as a culturally embedded form of moral displacement, grounded in the centrality of familism in Latin America, where responsibility is not fully rejected, but narratively reorganized around familial harm. The pattern that we found suggests that individuals distance themselves from culpability by shifting the moral focus of their narratives—framing harm in terms of secondary or relational consequences rather than the direct victim. The resulting shift points to a more nuanced, situated operation of neutralization. In this form, responsibility is not erased but reorganized, offering new insight into how such narratives may also intersect with processes of desistance. Our contribution lies in demonstrating that family-centered narratives function as a distinct mechanism through which responsibility is reframed and moral meaning is reoriented.

This argument resonates with narrative criminology, which views stories not only as connected to harm but also as a gateway to understanding engagement with institutions and desistance processes (Di Marco et al., 2025; Presser, 2009). Within this framework, we draw on narrative approaches (Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009) to interpret the displacement of harm onto family as a reorientation of moral attention rather than a denial of culpability. These findings also point to the relevance of family as a morally salient domain through which responsibility is negotiated, a theme we return to in the discussion.

This paper first reviews classical techniques of neutralization in the context of subsequent research on neutralization, and bridges this literature with scholarship on familism in Latin America. Next, we present the corpus used in this study, consisting of interviews with individuals convicted of homicide. In the analysis, we focus on how neutralization operates in these accounts, particularly through the displacement of moral attention onto family-related consequences, illustrated with selected cases and verbatim excerpts. Finally, the paper discusses the implications of these findings for understanding homicide narratives and desistance processes, highlighting what a family-centered reconceptualization of neutralization contributes to the study of violent offending.

Neutralization and Familism

The concept of neutralization was originally presented in the mid-20th century as an alternative to subcultural theories that portrayed offenders as adhering to values opposed to the dominant social order. Sykes and Matza (1957) argued instead that most offenders broadly accept conventional moral norms, particularly those that condemn harm and value law-abiding behavior. Lawbreaking, in this view, does not stem from deviant values but from the use of justifications that render transgressions acceptable within the offender's moral framework. Neutralization techniques allow individuals to suspend internalized constraints by aligning their actions with socially available accounts that excuse or mitigate wrongdoing, thereby preserving a self-image as fundamentally moral actors despite violating societal norms.

In the last fifty years, neutralization theory has had considerable influence on explanations of crime, especially on the role of offenders' justifications for their own behavior. This has also extended to non-criminal behaviors, e.g., marijuana use (Peretti-Watel, 2003), drinking (Durkin et al., 2005), compulsive consumption (Barnes, 2007), environmental pollution (Eliason & Dodder, 2000; Fritsche, 2005). But its central place remains in the criminological literature as an explanation of violence and aggression (Agnew, 1994;

[1] For more information about the research project, visit: https://www.crimeinlatinamerica.com/.

Byers et al., 1999; Cavanagh et al., 2001; Tomita, 1990). To some extent, neutralization theory became, in the research of Agnew and Peters (1986), Arnelang et al. (1988), Atkinson (1999), Khoo and Oakes (2000), Shields and Whitehall (1994), Strutton et al. (1994), Teevan and Dryburgh (2000), a true etiology of crime (Maruna & Copes, 2005). However, Maruna and Copes (2005) challenge this interpretation, arguing that neutralization is better understood as a framework for analyzing how offenders retrospectively construct justifications for their actions and how these narratives relate to processes of persistence and desistance, rather than as a causal explanation of criminal behavior. From this perspective, neutralizations are not primarily conceived as pre-offence cognitive mechanisms, but as narrative resources that are mobilized in the aftermath of offending, although they may reflect broader interpretive schemas that pre-exist the act.

The area where neutralization theory has probably had the greatest impact is in the correctional treatment of offenders, especially in relation to cognitive psychological treatments (Gendreau et al., 2000). In fact, some authors consider that this theory applied through cognitive programs has been the dominant pattern during the last decade in rehabilitation and social reintegration programs for inmates particularly within Anglophone correctional systems in the Global North (Bullock & Condry, 2013; Miller, 2022; Vanstone, 2000). This dominance reflects the central idea of cognitive correctional programs: that crime is made possible by a cognitive mindset that justifies, rationalizes, and culturally enables the offender's criminal activity (Sharp, 2006), which, in other words, represents a near-perfect overlap with neutralization theory (Maruna & Copes, 2005). And this "criminal thinking" that works by subtracting responsibility from the aggressor, transferring it to others, to fate or to luck, can only begin its "deactivation" from the recognition of that responsibility.

Recent research confirms that confronting offenders with the concrete harm they have caused (and addressing the rationality that sustains denial) is central to effective rehabilitation. For instance, a major meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials in prisons shows that psychological interventions reduce recidivism partly by promoting responsibility-taking and correcting offense-supportive thinking (Beaudry et al., 2021). Likewise, systematic reviews of community-based treatment programs indicate consistent improvements in offenders' cognitive distortions, acceptance of responsibility, and victim awareness (Barros et al., 2022). More recent empirical work shows that multimodal intervention programs can measurably decrease denial and increase personal responsibility among violent offenders (Friedman et al., 2022). In addition, meta-analytic evidence from restorative justice programs indicates that these interventions reliably enhance participant accountability and recognition of harm, even when reductions in recidivism are modest (Fulham et al., 2025). Together, these findings indicate that fostering acceptance of harm and confronting denial remain core mechanisms in contemporary offender rehabilitation.

Additionally, building on the cognitive variation of neutralization theory, narrative criminology has broadened the understanding of the uses and effects of discourse (Presser & Sandberg, 2015). This framework centers on the concept of self-identity as a narrative that organizes and explains one's behavior. It is conditioned, though not fully determined, by available social discourses (Fleetwood et al., 2019). While mediated through social interaction, narrative identity shapes behavior to the extent that people act in relation to the stories they have created about themselves. A key aspect is that these discourses are socially embedded and available as part of a repertoire of actions (Di Marco & Evans, 2020; Ievins, 2019; Presser, 2008). The neutralization of responsibility is one of the most relevant dimensions of the narrative, as it connects self with the legitimacy of an action. In fact, neutralization techniques are a constitutive part of the narrative of the self and its moral cohesion, even in the face of criminal behavior.

In spite of these developments, contemporary scholarship indicates that neutralization theory has not undergone the conceptual refinement needed to address its unresolved theoretical problems. Cardwell and Copes (2021) note that the theory still lacks clarity about the conditions under which individuals employ neutralizations, whether such techniques precede or follow offending behavior, and how they relate to persistence or desistance across the life course. Likewise, recent overviews continue to present neutralization theory through the same five techniques originally formulated, with little theoretical development (Kaptein & Van Helvoort, 2019). Adopting this perspective, neutralizations are understood here as narrative resources mobilized after the act, which reveal how offenders make sense of responsibility and relate these accounts to broader processes of persistence and desistance. Empirical studies further show that offenders today continue to rely on these same classical neutralization techniques, suggesting that the framework has remained largely static (Lazarus et al., 2026). Moreover, current research links persistent use of denial and responsibility-avoidance to higher recidivism risk, while reductions in denial predict better outcomes in rehabilitation (Friedman et al., 2022).

The particular turn that homicide narratives took in our interviews conducted in Latin America points to a displacement of moral attention: rather than neutralizing the act through denial or justification alone, this pattern can be interpreted as perpetrators reorienting harm toward their own families. This suggests not a variation of existing techniques, but a situated reconfiguration of neutralization, in

which responsibility is redistributed within a familial moral framework. This shift directs attention to the cultural conditions that make such reorientation possible, pointing in particular to the structuring role of familism.

Familism in Latin America

Familism is a core cultural value that emphasizes support, attachment, loyalty, honor, and obligation toward family, significantly shaping family dynamics and individual development in Latin America (Zinn, 1982). It is a multifaceted traditional value in Latin cultures that establishes norms, expectations, and beliefs about the family. One of its essential features is the subordination of individual needs to those of the family unit (Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003). As a result, familism is associated with higher levels of loyalty and a strong sense of familial obligation (Sabogal et al., 1987). Another component is obedience and respect toward authority figures within the family, such as parents and elders (Calzada, Fernández, & Cortés, 2010; Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2007). It also fosters feelings of unity and cohesion among relatives (Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003).

Familism manifests in at least three main dimensions: structural, behavioral, and attitudinal (Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994). The structural dimension sets the spatial and social boundaries within which behaviors occur and attitudes are developed. These boundaries depend on the presence or absence of close and extended family members, as well as the physical distance between them. The behavioral dimension refers to actions that reflect attitudes and feelings toward the family, such as making phone calls or visiting relatives (Sabogal et al., 1987).

The attitudinal dimension, also known as the normative dimension of this phenomenon, involves the commitment of family members to the family and its relationships, prioritizing them over individual interests (Luna et al., 1996). It has been defined as a cultural value that emphasizes an individual's identification and attachment to their family, promoting loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among its members (Cauce & Domenech-Rodriguez, 2002; Cortés, 1995; Marín & VanOss Marín, 1991; Sabogal et al., 1987). The classic definition of attitudinal familism (Burgess et al., 1963) includes: (1) the perception of the family as a central group of belonging, while others are considered external; (2) the integration of individual activities based on family goals; (3) the view of material possessions as shared family property, implying a duty to support family members; (4) the obligation to defend family members from external attacks; and (5) concern for the continuity of the family, supporting the economic development of adult children and their establishment of a new home.

In summary, bringing together the literatures on neutralization, narrative criminology, and familism allows us to reinterpret how offenders account for lethal violence. Rather than focusing exclusively on the justification of the act itself, attention can be redirected toward the consequences of the crime for the offender's own family. In this sense, neutralization can be understood not only as a set of techniques for denying or justifying harm, but also as a process through which moral meaning is reorganized around socially salient domains such as the family. While neutralization theory has traditionally focused on how offenders justify wrongdoing, it has paid less attention to how the act itself may be decentered in narrative accounts. This perspective highlights how, in specific socio-cultural contexts, the family may become a central locus through which responsibility is reframed and moral evaluation is negotiated.

Methods

This study draws on data from a broader multi-country project (CRIMLA) aimed at developing a culturally and contextually sensitive criminology in Latin America. A secondary objective of the project was to gain deeper empirical insight into the roles of family, employment, culture, and the state in shaping criminal trajectories across the region.

The present paper focuses on life history narratives told by men and women convicted of homicide in Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile. We specifically analyze individuals who committed homicide against acquaintances, a category commonly used in criminal justice systems in the region and recorded in legal case files (e.g., Ministerio de Seguridad de la Nación Argentina, 2025). We use the term *acquaintance homicide* to refer to killings involving non-intimate social ties, including neighbors, colleagues, friends, peers, and extended or non-cohabiting relatives. This category excludes intimate partner and intra-household family homicides, allowing us to focus on the most prevalent form of interpersonal homicide in the region.

Sample

The sample comprises 27 cisgender participants (16 men, 11 women) from Argentina, Chile, and Bolivia. All participants had been convicted of homicide at the time of the interview, and all acknowledged committing the offense. There were no additional selection criteria beyond those of the broader project; cases were selected solely on the basis of being homicide convictions.

Participants were eligible if they: (a) were cisgender men or women, (b) had been convicted of homicide in Argentina, Chile, or Bolivia, (c) acknowledged committing the homicide, and (d) were willing to participate in repeated life history interviews. There were no additional selection criteria regarding the circumstances of the crime, prior convictions,

or length of incarceration. Cases were identified in collaboration with prison staff familiar with inmates' histories.

At the time of the offense, participants' ages were distributed as follows: 18–25 years ($n=5$; 18.5%), 26–35 years ($n=9$; 33.3%), 36–45 years ($n=7$; 25.9%), and ≥ 46 years ($n=6$; 22.2%). At the time of the interview, ages were: 18–25 years ($n=2$; 7%), 26–35 years ($n=7$; 26%), 36–45 years ($n=9$; 33%), and ≥ 46 years (n = 9; 33%). On average, participants had been incarcerated for approximately four years following conviction for homicide.

Regarding educational attainment, the majority had not completed secondary education: unfinished primary ($n=2$; 7.4%), unfinished secondary/high school ($n=15$; 55.6%), and completed secondary/high school ($n=10$; 37.0%). Nineteen participants (70.4%) reported prior convictions; in some cases these resulted in shorter custodial episodes, while in most they involved pretrial detention and judicial proceedings.

Concerning the index homicide, 17 (63.0%) had killed an acquaintance (including relatives and neighbors) in the context of a quarrel; 7 (26.0%) had killed an acquaintance in the context of another crime (most commonly a robbery); and 3 (11.0%) were convicted of other types of homicide (e.g., gang-related killings or personal vendettas). Table 1 summarizes participant characteristics.

While the sample allows for analysis of narrative meaning-making across cases, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the use of a convenience sampling strategy limits the generalizability of the findings. The participants were not selected to be statistically representative, but rather to enable narrative analysis. Second, most participants had served relatively short periods of incarceration, which may have shaped the emotional tone and retrospective framing of their accounts. Longer-term prisoners may reconstruct their narratives differently. Third, the study focuses exclusively on individuals convicted of acquaintance homicide, and the patterns identified here may not extend to other forms of lethal violence, such as organized crime-related killings or femicide, where the dynamics of violence, social meaning, and moral positioning may be distinct (e.g., Di Marco & Evans, 2020). Fourth, while the analysis highlights the importance of family in the way harm is narrated, this should be understood as situated within broader socio-cultural contexts. The findings do not establish causal relationships but instead point to recurring patterns in meaning-making that merit further exploration across different settings and populations. Finally, while the analysis engages with broader Latin American scholarship on violence and moral reasoning, these connections are interpretive and contextual rather than empirically tested within the present sample, and should therefore be understood as theoretical extensions rather than direct findings.

Table 1 Sociodemographic and general characteristics

		n	%
Gender	Men	16	59
	Women	11	41
Country	Argentina	10	37
	Chile	8	30
	Bolivia	9	33
Age at Time of Crime	18–25 years	5	19
	26–35 years	9	33
	36–45 years	7	26
	46 years or older	6	22
Age at Time of Interview	18–25 years	2	7
	26–35 years	7	26
	36–45 years	9	33
	46 years or older	9	33
Educational Attainment	Unfinished primary education	2	7
	Unfinished high school education	15	56
	Completed high school	10	37
Prior Convictions	With previous criminal record	19	70
	Without previous criminal record	8	30
Type of Homicide	Killed an acquaintance (relatives or neighbors) in a quarrel	17	63
	Killed an acquaintance during a crime (e.g., robbery)	7	26
	Other types (e.g., gang disputes, vendettas)	3	11

Procedure

Interviews were conducted between January 2022 and September 2023 in prison facilities in Buenos Aires, La Paz, Cochabamba, and Santiago de Chile. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and digitally recorded.

Due to the constraints of prison fieldwork, we used a convenience sampling strategy. After obtaining permission from the relevant authorities (either the Ministry of Security or Justice, depending on the country, or the prison director), we liaised with prison staff familiar with inmates' case histories to identify candidates who met the project's inclusion criteria. Sampling quotas were applied to approximate balance by (a) gender and (b) age group. The overall interview rejection rate was low (5%).

Interviews took place in visiting rooms, common areas, or educational facilities inside the prisons. Correctional officers or other personnel were not present during interviews, and participants were not monitored by criminal justice staff. On average, each participant was interviewed three times over a four-week period; each session lasted about 80 min. Repeated interviewing fostered rapport and often encouraged deeper engagement in participants' life stories (Di Marco & Sandberg, 2023).

The interviews followed a semi-structured life history format (Atkinson, 1998), covering ten broad domains: familial context, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, circumstances of the crime, detention, legal process, institutional weaknesses, life in prison, and victims. Each domain included subdomains with specific prompts—for example, the childhood domain covered primary socialization, recreational activities, schooling, contact with the state, work activities, and substance use.

Life history interviewing permits access to individuals' perceptions of past experiences across life stages and generates open-ended, interpretively rich responses (Tagg, 1985). Aligned with narrative criminology (Fleetwood et al., 2019; Presser & Sandberg, 2015), interviews emphasized participants' stories about emotions and reflections concerning harm inflicted on victims and on their own families. Rather than privileging positivist notions of reliability, the narrative framework foregrounded the meanings participants attributed to their actions and the interpretive processes by which they made sense of them.

Following Kohli's (1981) referential function of life stories, the open-ended structure encouraged accounts in temporal sequence while providing an organized conversational framework. The repeated-interview design allowed participants to foreground themes they considered important; family suffering (particularly that of kin) emerged as a recurrent and richly described theme.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review boards (Gino Germani Research Institute of the University of Buenos Aires, Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Chile, and the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés). All procedures adhered to established ethical protocols in line with the Declaration of Helsinki. Identifying information was removed from transcripts and potentially sensitive details were anonymized or modified to protect confidentiality while preserving analytic integrity. Only quotations cited in this paper were translated into English, with care taken to preserve meaning and contextual nuance.

Analysis

The transcriptions were analyzed in their original language by an interdisciplinary team consisting of a sociologist, psychologist, political scientist, and criminologist. We began with an exploratory analysis of the data, generating hypotheses based on the narratives and their focal points, a process described by Corbin and Strauss (2008) as "waving the red flag." Following this preliminary phase, we conducted thematic analysis for the current study (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The analysis was guided by the following research questions: How do interviewees make sense of homicide, and how do they integrate it into their narratives? What role does family play in these accounts? And what do these narrative patterns reveal about processes of neutralization? These questions oriented both the initial coding and the subsequent interpretation of themes.

Themes were initially extracted inductively from the data, then further refined through collaborative peer discussions in regular team meetings, drawing on key concepts from the research literature on neutralization techniques, narratives, and the potential for desistance through acknowledgment of harm (i.e., justifications, vindications, resistance). Each member coded independently, and discrepancies were debated until consensus was reached, ensuring that the final themes reflected both participants' narratives and the team's interdisciplinary perspectives. Thus, our thematic analysis was informed both by the data itself and relevant theoretical frameworks. The final set of emerging themes was developed through two iterative cycles of coding and analysis, and included codes such as "crime committed," "homicide," "family," "mother," "suffering," and, central to this paper, "pain inflicted."

Testimony selection and the final content were determined through a process that involved moving between data-driven themes and theory-driven research questions. This approach allowed us to integrate the participants' narratives with established theoretical frameworks, so that both empirical insights and scholarly concerns informed the analysis.

Results

We identified three key themes in participants' discussions about homicide and its impact on their lives: (a) naming the crime, (b) the impact on their own family, and (c) the impact on the victim's family. The first theme operates as a latent or meta-theme, reflecting broader styles in participants' discourse rather than explicit statements. In contrast, the second and third themes are semantic themes, focusing on the explicit content or 'surface' of the interviews (Byrne, 2022). Table 2.

Naming the Victim and the Crime

Homicide was not named consistently by all participants. For most interviewees ($n=21$), the term 'homicide' was rarely used. Instead, they referred to the crime in indirect ways, avoiding words like killing, murder, or even crime. A small number acknowledged it more directly ($n=6$), but usually with some form of justification. However, for the majority, other aspects of their stories took precedence over the homicide itself.

In general, interviewees tended to use *ellipsis* or vague references to signify the act. When the homicide occurred during the commission of another crime (typically robbery or theft), the lesser crime took center stage, while the killing was minimized or left unspoken. For instance, Santiago (32 years old) was convicted of killing his neighbor in Buenos Aires after breaking into his house to steal. During the interview, he repeatedly described the scene where the fight took place but never used the word homicide. Instead, he framed it using indirect expressions such as "*what happened*", "*the event*", "*my case*", or simply "*it*".

This pattern of avoiding explicit references to homicide was consistent across the sample. Unlike individuals convicted of other crimes such as robbery, those convicted of homicide spoke about their crime in a much more indirect or evasive way. Darío (27, Chile), for example, referred to the homicide only as *it* throughout multiple interviews, never directly naming the crime, except in the very first conversation. "I can't believe how something as stupid as not planning a job well (a theft) led to all this mess (…) But like I said, the truth is, it was an accident, bad luck and terrible, terrible timing."

This elusiveness in naming the homicide, along with the use of indirect narrative strategies—omitting details, avoiding the victim's name, or framing the event as an accident—was not gendered in our sample. Both men and women in the sample exhibited this pattern. It functioned as a basic neutralization technique, stripping the victim of humanity by not naming them or acknowledging their existence in a direct way.

Another example is Sagi (21, Argentina), who framed the homicide as just another consequence of his troubled life, without mentioning any specifics: "What happened that day was just the result of years of struggle, of growing up in that environment, of dealing with that problem that day. But nothing would have happened if things in the neighborhood had been different."

This pattern repeated throughout most of the interviews ($n=21$). The homicide tended to be framed as something that 'happened to them', rather than an act they committed. As a result, interviewees did not accept guilt associated with the crime—not because they denied responsibility outright, but because they never reached the point of acknowledging it. By framing the homicide as something beyond their control, they removed themselves from any sense of agency, making it impossible to discuss moral responsibility. Juliana (33, Bolivia), for instance, said:

> You think you've got things under control, that you have everything figured out, and then something happens: BAM, everything changes. It's not like I was

Table 2 Main themes in the narratives about homicide and harm done

Main themes in the stories	Sub-hemes	
Naming the crime	- *Renaming*	- Metaphors - Ellipses
	- *Prioritizing*	- Swapping other crime-homicide
The impact on their family	- *Direct impacts*	- Economic and material strain - Emotional turmoil - Shifting social support structures
	- *Anticipated impacts*	- Derailed personal-collective expectations - Sowed uncertainty - Disrupted future plans and time loss
The impact on the victim's family	- *Collateral damage*	- Emotional toll - Social disruption
	- *Direct impacts*	- Emotional - Social disruption

> super organized or anything, but I had things more or less sorted. And then this happened. And everything went to hell.

A similar pattern emerged among those who committed homicide *outside* the context of another crime, though in these cases, the references were even more indirect. These participants also tended to frame the homicide as something that "just happened," often emphasizing situational factors, emotional escalation, or fate, rather than describing the act in concrete terms. In this sense, the absence of another crime did not lead to more direct acknowledgment; rather, it reinforced narrative strategies that minimized agency and foregrounded circumstance.

When examining how homicide was positioned in relation to other crimes, a pattern of role reversal emerged. Lesser offenses—primarily thefts and robberies—were given more narrative weight: they were described in detail, explained, and often morally neutralized. In contrast, the homicide itself was pushed to the background, reframed as a vendetta (embedded in ongoing interpersonal conflicts or cycles of retaliation that rendered the violence expected or unavoidable), a tragic accident, or simply an occupational hazard. By minimizing the killing in this way, interviewees downplayed its moral significance and diluted their own agency. As Ana (40, Chile) puts it, "It was just how things played out. There was no other way."

In sum, the narratives constructed by those convicted of homicide were marked by a persistent effort to distance themselves from the act through linguistic evasions and narrative reframing. Whether by minimizing the event, omitting the victim, or subsuming the killing within broader stories of misfortune or criminal routine, the act itself was rarely given full narrative presence. This avoidance did not necessarily equate to denial, but rather reflected a discursive strategy that neutralized culpability by rendering the homicide unspeakable—something that simply "happened," rather than something they did.

The Impact on their Family

When discussing the consequences of the homicide, interviewees touched on various topics: ongoing legal proceedings, the collapse of their aspirations, and the disruption of future plans. Yet the most central and emotionally charged theme was the impact on their families. This concern permeated their narratives and was closely tied to their reflections on daily life in prison: it served as an index of how they made sense of their experiences. For most ($n = 19$), their families were the primary recipients of the crime's consequences.

Interviewees' views on the impact of family dynamics included both the immediate and long-term repercussions of the crime: *direct immediate impacts* (including: a) economic and material strain, b) emotional turmoil, and c) the shifting social support structures), as well as *anticipated impacts* (i.e., a) derailed personal-collective expectations, b) sowed uncertainty, and c) disrupted future plans and time loss). The conversations tended to focus on the short-term effects on their families, with particular attention given to parents, siblings, partners, and children, depending on the perpetrator's age.

The *economic consequences* of their imprisonment manifested in various ways. For some, incarceration meant an inability to contribute financially to their household. For others, their absence from home meant the loss of responsibilities, such as household chores, that they once managed. Moreover, some highlighted the new financial burdens their families now faced due to their imprisonment, including expenses like bringing them food, toiletries, or even the costs of traveling to the prison. As Jacobo put it: "My mom and sister, every time they come here, it's like two and a half hours on public transport each way. And they bring me a soda, some food. That ain't nothing for them" (27, Argentina).

Emotional distress and regret were frequently framed through the suffering of their relatives. Much of the emotional discourse surrounding the aftermath of the homicide revolved around how the crime and subsequent incarceration altered their relationships with family members, particularly mothers, partners, and children. Their stories emphasized the suffering of their relatives, their families' concerns about their conditions in prison and future circumstances, the emotional work through which participants sought to sustain a moral self-image despite the crime, in the eyes of both family members and acquaintances. Sergio reflected on this emotional strain, stating:

> Yeah (quietly)... but not in the sense of going back to committing crimes or getting involved in those things, but to go back to being the person I was before I got into this world... to be with my family... to be healthy, really, like when I didn't smoke marijuana... Yeah (quietly) (...) I just want to be better, to actually care about my parents and my brother, because life isn't forever. (37, Argentina)

This illustrates how concern for family serves as both a personal motivation and a culturally embedded way of 'proving' moral worth, linking neutralization strategies to family-centered narratives of responsibility.

Social support was often discussed alongside the economic and emotional impacts of incarceration. The immediate and most significant effect of imprisonment—confinement itself—led interviewees to reflect on the role of their families in their lives and their own commitment to them. In other words, they came to realize how much they

relied on their family environment. Nearly all interviewees ($n = 25$) pointed to a 'lesson learned' through their time in prison: discovering that their family was the most important thing in their lives. The contrast between their past and present appreciation of family was a recurring theme in their narratives. Pipo, for instance, said:

> Did you really care about your family when you were out? Or were you just worried about going to work, coming home, feeding them, going to sleep, and then going to work again the next day, living with your family? No. So why do you miss your family now? If you didn't live with them! Now that you're here, now you talk about family. (20, Bolivia)

For those who experienced a reduction in family support, the suffering caused by the homicide and imprisonment was linked to the participant's own absence from family life, which they framed as both a source of family hardship and a personal loss. This sense of dual impact was constant, compounded by the discomforts and restrictions of prison life, such as the loss of intimacy and freedom. In other words, participants often reflected on how their absence negatively affected their families (through missed support, disrupted routines, or emotional strain) while simultaneously experiencing the pain of being separated from loved ones themselves. Many described the most painful and unacceptable aspect of imprisonment as the inability to be present for their families, highlighting how incarceration disrupted mutual bonds of care and responsibility.

> There are people who don't smile, some are angry or resort to bad words, whatever. But it's all suffering for everything, a response to what they're suffering from not being at home with their family. (Raúl, 29, Bolivia)

For those who reported not having a loss of support—particularly those whose families had prior experience with incarcerated relatives and were familiar with the penitentiary system—a family-related impact of the homicide was the aftermath in the neighborhood. Since most of these homicides were committed against acquaintances, interviewees expressed concern about potential vendettas directed at their families or changes in the daily dynamics of the neighborhood. "For me, it was an issue, because I didn't want them to go after my family [the victim's brothers]. They know where my parents live, everything" (29, Bolivia).

The anticipated impacts of the crime also became a central theme in the interviewees' reflections, as they envisioned how their families would face future challenges. Many of them anticipated changes in how their families would be perceived by others, with concerns over stigmatization, judgment, and the possibility of further violence or tension. As one interviewee put it:

> Even after all this, my family will have to deal with it... they already suffered enough, but now it's like... they're gonna have to deal with people looking at them differently, talking behind their backs... and I don't want them to suffer more because of me, you know? (37, Chile)

Others feared the impact of their actions on the future of their children. They worried about the legacy they were leaving behind, unsure how their families, particularly their children, would be affected in the long term. "I think about my kid… what will he think of me when he's older? I don't want him to hate me or think I'm a bad person… I want him to understand that things are more complicated than just what happened. I hope he doesn't go down the same road" (22, Argentina).

The participants' conversations revolved around the *uncertainty* of how their families would be impacted by the homicide and how their *future plans* had been disrupted. These plans, however, varied in terms of their scope and feasibility. For some, grand aspirations of becoming successful lawyers or football players and helping their families in their idealized positions seemed to have been crushed. For others, smaller expectations, like helping their aging parents in the future, played a role. One interviewee reflected, "I'm here now, and he [father] won't live forever… He will need me soon, to be there, physically, and I won't be able to help."

Time was also re-evaluated, not so much as lost individually, but rather as lost for the family in terms of shared moments. In other words, the real loss caused by imprisonment was the loss of time spent with family. One interviewee expressed this poignantly: "And when you get here, you realize how much you're missed by your family, because the pain, you live it here, right? And you learn how to get used to these walls" (37, Bolivia).

Ultimately, the most profound consequence of the homicide, as narrated by the interviewees, was the harm inflicted on their families. While the emotional and economic burdens were most immediately visible, the long-term effects—social stigma, disrupted futures, and lost intimacy—shaped their self-understanding and moral reckoning. The extent and form of these consequences were mediated by their ties to family, their exposure to prison life, and their ability to reimagine their role within their family networks.

The Impact on the Victim's Family

The victim's family was a recurring theme in the interviews ($n = 24$). Perpetrators frequently employed neutralization strategies when discussing the victim's relatives, framing the harm as abstract or unintended in order to distance themselves from direct responsibility for the killing. Similar to conversations about their own relatives, participants often

redirected the discussion to the broader consequences of the homicide, emphasizing how it disrupted both families' lives. This theme consistently emerged when reflecting on the 'actual damage' caused by their actions, which was typically framed in two ways: as *collateral damage* or as *direct emotional* and *social disruption*.

For some, the effects on the victim's family were framed as an unintended consequence—an inevitable ripple of grief and loss. They described the victim's relatives as unwilling participants in a tragedy, forced to endure suffering they never chose. In narratives where the homicide was framed as situational, accidental, or arising from a conflict, perpetrators subtly shifted responsibility by implying that the victim's actions contributed to the events leading to their death—a strategy consistent with the neutralization technique of denying the victim. Still, the irreversibility of the crime was acknowledged, with the victim's family depicted as bearing a profound and lasting burden.

> It's not just my family that suffers, but theirs too. They never asked for any of this. The crime, it's like a wave that doesn't just hit me but crashes down on them as well. They're stuck in the aftermath, caught in a cycle of loss with no way out. What happened to her—it's not just the end of her life, it's the beginning of their suffering. (36, Argentina)

Others spoke about the more immediate emotional toll on the victim's relatives, particularly parents and siblings. While some mentioned the impact on partners and children, they often focused on how the death altered family dynamics. Many framed these shifts as the most significant aspect of the aftermath. Throughout the interviews, reflections emphasized the emotional weight of their actions, but they rarely acknowledged the victim as an individual. Instead, the focus remained on how the crime disrupted the lives of those left behind.

> I know what I did hurt a lot of people. Not just my family, but hers too. Her parents… I can't even imagine what they went through. If I were in their place, I wouldn't know how to keep living. But what can I do now? I can't go back. All I can do is think about the pain I caused both families. (22, Argentina)

While perpetrators often expressed regret over the harm inflicted, their narratives typically emphasized the suffering of the victim's family as a secondary consequence—an effect of their actions, but not the focal point of their guilt. The victim's relatives were portrayed as bearing an emotional burden that the perpetrators could acknowledge but not fully grasp. This acknowledgment often came with a sense of helplessness, with perpetrators highlighting the irreparable nature of the loss rather than engaging deeply with the lived experience of grieving relatives. This distancing mirrors the same neutralizing strategies used earlier in the narratives—transforming the killing into an abstract misfortune rather than a personally enacted harm.

In this section, the distancing appears through the offender's effort to redefine the killing as an impersonal event (something that happened rather than something they did). By reframing the act as a misfortune detached from deliberate agency, they shift attention away from their own role and reduce the moral weight of the harm. This rhetorical move allows them to speak about the event in general terms, avoiding concrete descriptions of responsibility or intent. In practical terms, the act becomes an occurrence stripped of authorship, enabling the offender to maintain emotional distance and soften the implications of their involvement. Making this implicit mechanism explicit clarifies how the narrative transforms a personally enacted killing into an abstract, almost accidental loss.

> I know her brothers are suffering. I know they're angry. But in the end, they won't have their sister back. And I'm sure they feel like there's nothing left. They don't know what to do with their lives now. I can understand that pain, but there's no way to fix it. (37, Bolivia)

Time lost was another dimension of regret. The disruption to the victim's family life was framed as another irreversible consequence—a severing of shared experiences and futures that could never be restored. This sense of irreversibility stemmed not only from the passing of time itself, but from the recognition that certain relational moments (birthdays, milestones, daily routines, small gestures of care) are unique and cannot be recreated once disrupted. Offenders acknowledged that their actions fractured the ordinary continuity of family life, altering dynamics and emotional bonds in ways that no future reparation could fully mend. What was lost, therefore, was not merely time, but the possibility of sharing a life trajectory that would have otherwise unfolded. This understanding deepened their perception of harm by highlighting that some consequences extend far beyond the immediate event and permanently reshape the lives of those affected. Some interviewees drew parallels between their incarceration and the loss suffered by the victim's family, different yet shared grief both sides endured.

> What I took away from her family was not just a daughter, a sister, but their future too. Her mother will never hold her again, never see her smile. And her father… he was never the same after that. I saw them when I got out, and I could see they'd been torn apart. It's something I can never undo, even if I wanted to. (Isabela, 40, Chile)

Beyond the immediate emotional toll, interviewees also reflected on how their crimes disrupted the social fabric of the victim's family. The homicide not only left them grieving

but also severed social ties and reshaped their place within their communities. Interviewees described how the victim's relatives became isolated, either due to stigma, fear, or the overwhelming burden of loss.

For some, this social rupture was framed as an unavoidable consequence—something that happened in the wake of the crime but was beyond their control. They spoke about how the victim's family struggled to maintain connections with friends and neighbors, as people either withdrew or found it difficult to navigate the family's grief. Some acknowledged that the murder had made the victim's relatives objects of pity or subjects of whispered conversations, forever marked by the tragedy. For instance, Sagi (21, Argentina) said: "They don't just lose their daughter, their sister. They lose a part of their lives. People don't know how to act around them anymore. Some avoid them, some stare, and others just don't talk to them the same way."

Others focused on how the crime reshaped the family's daily life, turning familiar places into painful reminders of absence. Homes, workplaces, and shared spaces took on new meaning—symbols of trauma rather than comfort. While some interviewees recognized this long-term impact, their reflections often centered on the broader social shifts rather than a deep engagement with the pain of the victim's family. "It's not just grief. It's like they're stuck in a world that doesn't make sense anymore. The places they used to go, the people they used to talk to—it's all different now, because she's not there" (27, Argentina).

In this way, the victim's family was consistently portrayed as an unintended but significant casualty of the homicide, though not the central focus of the perpetrator's remorse. The perpetrators' narratives implicitly shifted the harm towards the victim's family, redirecting the crime's impact into a broader sense of collective grief, never directly confronting the victim's specific suffering.

The victims' families played a dual role in the perpetrators' narratives. On the one hand, they were central to how perpetrators talked about the damage caused—often taking a more prominent place in their reflections than the killing itself. On the other hand, the harm inflicted on them was frequently framed as collateral, something unavoidable in the wake of the crime. Expressions of regret and sorrow dominated these accounts, yet they often remained abstract and emotionally distant.

Notably, economic repercussions for the victims' families were rarely emphasized. In contrast, participants spoke at length about the financial and emotional struggles faced by their own families, highlighting a tendency toward more abstract, idealized portrayals of the harm they caused—stories that seemed less grounded in the concrete realities of the victims' loved ones.

Since most participants had been convicted of homicides involving acquaintances, many had some knowledge of, and in certain cases, direct contact with the victim's family. Despite this, their reflections on the family's suffering often remained generalized, focusing less on the specific pain inflicted on loved ones—such as parents, children, or spouses—and more on their own regret over the broader consequences of their actions.

This theme reveals not only how perpetrators reflect on the ripple effects of their crimes but also how the available cultural narratives of homicide shape their descriptions of harm. The stories they drew upon to explain the impact of their actions were often limited, reinforcing a sense of detachment from the deep personal and social rupture experienced by the victim's family.

Discussion

How do perpetrators make sense of homicide? What role does family play in these accounts, and what does this reveal about their neutralization processes? In the interviews, homicide tended not to be presented as a morally condemnable act but rather as a consequence of a set of circumstances. The moral evaluation of the homicide was often overshadowed by narratives that emphasized the consequences for the participants' own families and daily lives. Rather than framing the act itself as a moral failing, participants focused on how the event disrupted their relationships, future plans, and material circumstances. Contrary to conventional assumptions about moral reckoning in cases of murder (Di Marco & Evans, 2020), within this moral economy the consequences for their own families became the central concern of their narratives, often eclipsing detailed consideration of the victim.

These family-centered narratives reveal a central tension: they can signal moral reckoning while also enabling self-exoneration. Expressions of concern for relatives often coexist with narrative moves that displace attention away from the victim and the act of killing. In this sense, the emphasis on familial harm seemed to function both as an articulation of emotional distress and as a culturally legitimate way of managing guilt without fully confronting responsibility (Di Marco & Evans, 2020). This duality suggests that concern for family can simultaneously challenge and sustain neutralization, pointing to the complex ways in which moral reflection is negotiated within available cultural frameworks.

The distancing from the homicide aligns with traditional neutralization techniques, particularly denial of responsibility (Copes, 2003; Sykes & Matza, 1957). While participants rarely deny that the victim suffered directly, they foreground the consequences of the crime for the families. In this framing of neutralization, the harm is acknowledged in the abstract but reframed around familial impact, emphasizing the emotional toll of incarceration, the disruption of

daily life, and missing time with children. The victim often becomes an abstraction, not through a denial of harm, but via narrative strategies that render the homicide peripheral while the offender's familial obligations and losses take center stage. Participants frequently described these consequences as "collateral damage," highlighting how the focus on family mediates moral reflection and responsibility.

The lens of familism in Latin American contexts (Lugo Sabogal et al., 1987; Steidel & Contreras, 2003) helps to understand how interviewees talked about homicide and how they created stories about it. Family loyalty, cohesion, and emotional bonds often formed the primary framework through which moral behavior was evaluated: it provided content and direction to their neutralization techniques. This shift towards family-centered narratives reflects a broader social-cultural context where family is considered the cornerstone of personal identity, moral responsibility and cohesion (Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003). This tendency to decentralize the victim and focus on family-related consequences aligns with prior scholarship on homicide narratives both in the region and in Europe (Adshead et al., 2015; Di Marco, 2025), highlighting how individuals may distance themselves from culpability by shifting the moral focus of the narrative.

Recent scholarship on violence and peace in Latin America further supports situating these findings within broader regional dynamics. For example, Maschietto et al. (2022) show how young people in Brazil construct understandings of violence, peace, and power through subjective frameworks shaped by structural inequalities, symbolic violence, and everyday experiences. Their emphasis on subjectivities resonates with our findings, suggesting that moral interpretations of harm are culturally grounded rather than reducible to individual cognitive distortions. In particular, their work highlights how relational moral frameworks tied to family and social belonging shape how violence is normalized. A similar alignment emerges in Ferreira's (2022) analysis of violence in Brazil, which underscores that patterns of violence must be understood within historical trauma and community-level forms of governance. From this perspective, moral reasoning is embedded in social expectations around loyalty, reciprocity, and protection within family and local networks.

Interpreted in this light, the family-centered neutralization observed in our data can be understood not simply as an individual narrative strategy, but as drawing on culturally available repertoires through which violence is negotiated and morally reframed (Di Marco & Sandberg, 2023). Situating our findings within this emerging literature reinforces the argument that the displacement of moral focus toward one's own family reflects a broader moral economy shaped by structural violence, precarious social relations, and culturally embedded notions of responsibility and care.

It is also important to note that familism may not function in a homogeneous way across gender, age, or national contexts, and our data suggest possible variations that deserve greater attention. For example, women in the sample tended to articulate family suffering through caregiving responsibilities, while some younger participants framed family harm in terms of future aspirations rather than past obligations. Likewise, differences in penal cultures and social support systems across the three countries may shape how family-centered moral narratives emerge and are interpreted. Although the study's design does not allow for systematic comparison across these dimensions, acknowledging these potential divergences is crucial, as familism may operate both as a shared cultural framework and as a differentiated moral resource depending on one's social location. Future research should examine whether these distinctions influence how neutralization strategies are constructed and whether family-oriented narratives carry the same moral weight across demographic and regional contexts.

Within neutralization theory, this pattern suggests not simply a minimization of harm, but a displacement of its primary locus. Rather than denying the consequences of the act, participants reorient moral attention from the victim toward the sphere of family obligations and relational ties. In this sense, responsibility is not rejected outright but reframed within a culturally salient moral terrain in which loyalty, care, and familial continuity become the dominant evaluative criteria (Downes, 2013; van Baak et al., 2023). This shift indicates a form of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999) that is less about the victim and more about the offenders' personal lives and the consequences for their families. Given recent criticism of applying desistance frameworks uncritically in Latin America—where mistrust in institutions can act as a barrier (Di Marco, et al., 2025) and crime may be perceived as a legitimate, unproblematic livelihood (Fondevila Pérez et al., 2025)—a contextualized understanding of the narrative work and the use of neutralization becomes essential.

Importantly, this displacement does not eliminate recognition of harm, but reorganizes its moral focus. By foregrounding the suffering of their own families, participants reposition themselves within a field of shared suffering, which allows them to maintain a moral self-image while avoiding sustained engagement with the victim. In this sense, displacement operates as a form of neutralization not through denial, but through the reallocation of moral attention.

Implications

Building on these findings, several implications emerge for correctional practice and desistance-oriented interventions. As discussed in the introduction, many correctional and

cognitive-behavioral interventions aimed at fostering desistance place a strong emphasis on individuals taking responsibility for their actions (Maruna & Copes, 2005). While this emphasis does not constitute a universal tenet of desistance theory—which more broadly highlights individual agency, identity transformation, and social context—it remains a central assumption underpinning numerous prison-based programs (e.g., Bonta & Andrews, 2016). However, in contexts where narratives prioritize the harm done to families over the suffering of direct victims, "full acknowledgment" of guilt may follow an alternative path toward reintegration.

While the expressions of regret and responsibility explored here may not align with conventional frameworks (Vanstone, 2000), they may nonetheless constitute an initial step toward desistance. For instance, therapeutic or reintegration programs that attempt to directly confront the offenders with their responsibility for the homicide might not be effective in these cases, as interviewees seem to be more concerned with the harm done to their families than with their responsibility for the killing. Rather than focusing solely on minimizing the neutralization mechanisms that absolve responsibility for the homicide, interventions could focus on the more concrete forms of harm that interviewees acknowledge (Marshall et al., 2001; Sharp, 2006), as also highlighted in research on intimate partner violence desistance, particularly in relation to fatherhood and family roles (Walker et al., 2015). This focus could offer a culturally-situated foundation for cognitive shifts that eventually lead to desistance.

Additionally, the empirical material offers several concrete narrative shifts that could be leveraged in other practical aspects. For instance, many participants spontaneously articulated moments in which the suffering of their families became newly visible to them—often described as realizations triggered by incarceration, missed milestones, or witnessing the emotional toll on parents and children. These narrative turning points could be incorporated into intervention programs by helping participants revisit and elaborate these moments, transforming them into motivational anchors for behavioral change. Similarly, the recurrent displacement of moral focus from the victim to the family could be used as an entry point for cognitive-behavioral work (Beech & Mann, 2002; Kendall & Pollack, 2003): practitioners might begin with the acknowledged harm to loved ones and gradually guide participants toward recognizing the broader implications of their actions. Rather than dismissing these narratives as mere deflections, interventions could harness them as culturally resonant foundations upon which deeper reflections about responsibility, repair, and future-oriented identity reconstruction can be built.

Any therapeutic program based on direct confrontation with responsibility for the crime (Kendall & Pollack, 2003) might be ineffective in these cases, as interviewees seemed to draw on widely prevalent discourses that legitimized their violence (Di Marco & Sandberg, 2023). Interventions could leverage the offender's self-narrative and existing acknowledgment of family harm as a foundation for cognitive change (Fleetwood et al., 2019; Presser & Sandberg, 2015). Rather than rejecting neutralizing responses that absolve them of responsibility for the homicide (Beech & Mann, 2002; Sharp, 2006), cognitive interventions could instead build upon the responsibility they do acknowledge.

Additionally, while desistance research has traditionally emphasized sociogenic factors, identity transformation, and the role of social relationships, comparatively less attention has been paid to how offenders' moral focus is redirected within their own narratives. By acknowledging the harm caused to their families, offenders may begin to reinterpret their actions and identities in ways that can contribute to shifts in self-concept associated with desistance processes (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). The realization that criminal behavior harms loved ones could be a turning point, motivating change and the abandonment of criminal behavior in favor of reconnecting with family. This resonates with identity-based theories of desistance (Bushway & Paternoster, 2014; Gadd, 2006; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), which conceptualize desistance as a process of narrative and moral self-reconstruction, involving a movement away from a "feared self" toward a socially recognized, prosocial identity.

These implications aligns with narrative criminology, which posits that identity shapes behavior through self-narratives influenced by social interactions. If an individual accepts the harm caused to their own family, this acknowledgment can reshape their perception of the social world and inform new life goals—for example, ceasing criminal behavior in order to be present for their family. This cognitive transformation creates a new life trajectory, in which individuals seek to become who they believe they are or who they aspire to be (Maruna & Copes, 2005). The focus is not on accepting harm but rather on reinforcing what disrupts the offender's moral cohesion—the harm done to their own family. This rupture, in turn, facilitates a reconstructed narrative identity in which criminal activities become unacceptable precisely because they cause harm to their loved ones.

Conclusion

Neutralization theory has been instrumental in explaining the denial of responsibility and the transfer of harm. By bridging neutralization theory and narrative criminology, this study illustrates how men and women convicted of homicide in Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile redirect the moral focus of their narratives toward the harm caused to families, rather than centering on the victims themselves.

These individuals often avoid discussing the crime itself but speak at length about the emotional, economic, and social toll on their families due to their incarceration, as well as the impact on the victim's family. We interpret these narratives through the lens of familism, a key cultural value in the Latin American region.

This shift in focus can serve as a starting point for cognitive change and offer an alternative path to desistance. This paper suggests that culturally-situated interventions could not only focus on accepting responsibility for the crime but also consider the collateral damage. Recognizing the harm done to their families may constitute a culturally resonant turning point, offering a concrete and emotionally salient foundation for desistance-focused programs. Reintegration programs could benefit from strengthening family ties as a more effective route to desistance, rather than focusing solely on accepting guilt for the crime itself.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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