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Gender Intersection with the Emotional Identity of Female Ph.D. Students

Amitida Roozegar ¹, Kourosh Fathi Vajargah ^{*2}, Kambiz Poushaneh³

1. Ph.D. student, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran
2. Corresponding Author: Professor of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran E. Mail: kouroshfathi2@gmail.com
3. Assistant Professor of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Psychology and Education, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran.

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Abstract

Aim: This study aims to identify the experiences that affect gender intersection with the emotional identity of female students during the doctoral course through a qualitative approach and hermeneutic phenomenology. One of the applications of phenomenological research is to study life's evolution and the various courses of action in which a woman can experience the world as a woman. The participants of this research are four Ph.D. students of humanities and basic sciences in public universities. These women's narratives regarding their emotional lived experiences in the university were collected through a phone interview and the additional steps were taken through WhatsApp Messenger. The data attained from identification and isolation of themes were analyzed using the interpretive analysis approach. Findings emerged in two themes: "gender-neutrality attitude of male professors" and "gender-specific attitude toward students" which indicates that "university culture in gender equality" and "the metanarrative of authority in female professors" affect the gender intersection with the emotional identity of these women.

Keywords: *Phenomenology, Gender, Gender neutrality attitude, Gender-specific attitude, Emotional identity.*

Introduction

Identity can be defined as a collection of concepts that characterize how individuals think about themselves when they are considering themselves (Stets 2015). The central identity aspects such as gender, social class, age, race and ethnicity, religion, and emotions play a significant role in constructing a variety of opportunities and challenges, as well as in how one perceives and experiences the world.

Considering that experience is dependent on the body, which itself is a medium that serves to collect experiences and perform sensory actions (Knoblauch, 2011), the present study focused on female students to investigate the existence of gender effects on their emotional experiences in higher education. Recognizing the experiences that affect the female students' emotional identity intersections during the doctoral program provides a deeper understanding of being a woman in the world. Sheldon Stryker's identity theory and Peter Burke's identity control theory were applied in this study to interpret the participants' experiences.

Stryker suggests that identities are roles that individuals assume in relation to their position in the social structure (Iman and Rouhani, 2013). The roles with a constructive and empowering effect in certain situations will reinforce an individual's engagement in a certain identity. Nonetheless, if the effect or emotional reaction toward that certain identity is not positive, the individual experiences negative emotions and tries to improve the performance of their role. Reciprocally, if the individual does not tend to improve that certain identity, their commitment to that role will decrease (Turner, 2012). In the identity theory, whether an individual has positive or negative emotions in a situation depends on the correspondence between how they think of themselves in

that situation regarding the standard definition of their identity for that particular situation. Higher correspondence or identity verification with an individual's perception regarding a certain situation will generate positive emotions, while lower correspondence or identity rejection will generate negative emotions (Burke and Stets, 2009).

Methodology

This research was conducted with a qualitative approach using hermeneutic phenomenology. Regarding academic teaching, Van Manen suggests that "pedagogy requires a way with language in order to allow the research process of textual reflection to contribute to one's pedagogic thoughtfulness and tact" (1990). Two general steps were considered for the data interpretation, in correspondence with Van Manen guidelines.

Step 1: Identification or isolation of themes: In this section, the wholistic or sententious approach was applied to the work to identify and isolate the themes. The wholistic approach regards the text as a coherent entity in which the central idea is to identify the one vital and critical meaning of the text. Thereafter, we would try to convey that meaning in an expression, sentence, or phrase that would be able to represent the whole body of text within itself.

Step 2: Application of the interpretive analytical approach: In this approach, the data obtained from interviews are interpreted using the mentioned theories. Steps 1 and 2 are not separated, but simultaneously conducted to interpret the themes as they are being identified.

The participants of this study were four female Ph.D. candidates. This small sample was selected because this study needed specific detailed interpretive descriptions and a deeper interaction with each individual. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted through phone calls, and the additional steps were taken through WhatsApp Messenger. The interviews were transcribed immediately, and the final transcripts were handed over to the participants for review.

Results

Two central themes were obtained by analyzing the lived experiences of the participants: gender-neutrality attitude of male professors and gender-specific attitude toward students. All four students in the study had experienced the gender-neutrality attitude of their male professors and expressed its significance on their lives. In the lived experiences of these students, the behaviors of the male professor which are aligned with these women's standards are the rejection of social classifications such as gender and the abandonment of stereotypes and archetypes that serve the destruction of identity and emotion. The correspondence or identity verifications build a constructive emotional reaction and help improve their subsequent actions. Conversely, gender-specific attitudes of some male or female professors led to disturbance and incompatibility in these women's perceived standards and situational understandings. Therefore, they tend to oppose this disturbance to have their identity verified by their professor. Male professors' ignoring student's efforts in class, female professors' poor performance in supporting female students during pregnancy or obtaining job positions, and not receiving the necessary care and compassion in the educational environment by the female professors are some of the cases mentioned in students' narrative experiences. Only one of the participants did not make any direct or implicit reference to the professors' gender-specific attitudes. She did not regard some of the negative behaviors of the professors to be gender-dependent and considered them to be due to the professors' tendency to make students obedient. Furthermore, the participants mentioned their need to build emotional bond and intimacy with female professors by embracing them, as well as scarcity of female professors in universities.

Discussion and conclusion

The study participants aim to elevate the status of women and call for a humane view of their gender. They are interested in a gender-neutrality attitude both for themselves and their professors. These women strive to develop a critical awareness and they struggle to create meaning in this complex and paradoxical world in order to construct and reconstruct their emotional identity .

Female professors use an authoritarian approach in their words and actions to keep their presence and survive the male hegemony of the university, thus, they dissociate themselves from their lived experiences as a woman

and, compared to male professors, establish a weaker relationship with female students. However, when the authoritarian metanarrative diminishes and the supportive role toward students increases, the established relationship develops into a strong and effective connection. Thus, the need for a sense of intimacy in the academic social interactions of female students in order to construct and reconstruct their emotional identity can also be alleviated to some extent. The contrast between social classifications such as race, class, and gender is a source of power. The presence of such views in the academic settings, even covertly, should not legitimize them since they can cause an imbalance in the emotions that eventually lead to “identity trauma” in students.

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