

Academic Freedom Construction in Iranian Academic Society

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Abstract

Aim: This study aimed to understand the process of academic freedom construction in the academic society of Iran and was carried out using a qualitative approach and grounded theory strategy. Participants in the study were 17 faculty members from Iranian universities. Purposeful and theoretical sampling was performed with maximum variety. A deep interview protocol was used to collect information, and the interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. Information was analyzed using theoretical coding model of Strauss and Corbin (1990). Guba and Lincoln's four criteria were used to validate the findings. The findings of the research were based on 38 core categories and 13 selective categories, which were placed in the final model based on the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin. The central phenomenon was named as "academic custom and inevitable academic subject" in a two-core form. Academic agents have chosen strategies such as "rethinking academic identity, wellness cocoon and self-investment" to face the central phenomenon. The output of this mechanism of strategies and interactions has finally led to cautious action in the academic field, which we have called "anxious academic freedom".

Keywords: *Academic Freedom, Precautionary action, Academic Identity, Autonomy, Grounded Theory*

Introduction

Freedom to teach and freedom to learn without interference is the right of faculty members and students. The assumption that faculty members should be able to teach and conduct research and students should be able to study without interference has been defined as academic freedom. The meaning of academic freedom is different in different contexts based on historical periods and specific universities. The importance of academic freedom is perceived in relation to the functions of universities. The four major functions of universities include: generation and transmission of ideology, selection and formation of the dominant elites, production and application of knowledge, and training the skilled labor force (Castells, 2001, p. 210). The concept of academic freedom is widely discussed in the international arena but in the context of Iran it is not a matter of public debate, neither concerning how academic freedom is perceived nor how academic freedom in Iranian universities can be balanced. Little empirical research has been performed to describe the perceptions of academic freedom so, its requirements have remained unknown to the Iranian scientific community in many ways. Narratives of faculty members and students about their professional life and limitations are less heard in legal institutions and among people, and they were judged mostly based on common stereotypes. Understanding the thoughts and lived experiences of the professors and describing them in their language can have a great effect on increasing our knowledge compared to the activists whom we have had limited

understanding and knowledge. This research has explored the interpretation of scientific freedom among Iranian professors and students.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study with grounded theory strategy. Participants in the study were 17 faculty members from Iranian universities. Purposeful and theoretical sampling was performed with maximum variety. A deep interview protocol was used to collect information, and the interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. The qualitative data were collected and analyzed simultaneously, that is, researcher used an emerging method to collect and analyze the data immediately, and not waiting until all data are collected due to their theoretical value. In qualitative studies, the researcher assesses the findings using specific methods and assesses their accuracy and validity through presenting the components described by the interviewees to them (Creswell, 2009). The reliability of each category and unit provided by the researcher was reassessed by other people. Finally, once agreement was reached, units and categories were encoded. The following strategies were used: prolonged engagement of researchers in the field of study, use of an audio-recorder and camera to record data, triangulation of data, preparing a codebook to produce consensus among encoders, finding heterogeneous evidence, and obtaining participants' feedback after encoding.

Results

The findings of the research were based on 38 core categories and 13 selective categories, which were placed in the final model based on the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin. The central phenomenon was named as "academic custom and inevitable academic subject" in a two-core form. Academic agents have chosen strategies such as "rethinking academic identity, wellness cocoon and self-investment" to face the central phenomenon. The output of this mechanism of strategies and interactions has finally led to cautious action in the academic field, which we have called "anxious academic freedom". The core category or central phenomenon in understanding the process of academic freedom construction is a two-faceted core category. Its first aspect is based on the macro level of the institution of science and second aspect is based on the micro level of subjectivity. It can be said that academic freedom in its current state can be seen as the result of institutional meaning-making forces of organizational and social activists who support these meanings during recent decades and have been able to impose their own meanings and identity on science and make it a custom. On the other hand, the bearers of this academic tradition do not see themselves as free in choosing the type of action. A kind of semantic duality has been observed here between academic agents. Despite the strong semantic tendency towards academic freedom, its means and desirable results among professors, in practice, a cautious tendency toward academic freedom has been chosen out of necessity. Isaiah Berlin believes that positive freedom is based on rational autonomy, that is, the freedom of will that is established based on the existing realities of the individual by relying on the rational power of others.

Discussion and conclusion

A significant part of the studied faculty members and students, under the influence of increasing conservatism -as Fish (2014) believes-, are carriers and activists of the conventional university culture. Some descriptive notions can be applied to the few professors who consider themselves university citizens. Striving to be in the public arena and adopting some kind of communication action, fulfilling civic responsibility, the role of enlightenment, criticizing the structure and the existing situation without fearing the costs and its consequences on their professional and personal life, is one of the distinctive features of these people who consider the desirable outcome of academic freedom in the society-oriented view of university and science.

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