

A Narration of Dissertation Defense Sessions: An ethnographic Research

Shirkoh. Mohammadi^{1*}, Koestan. Mohammadian Sharif², Jamal. Salimi³

¹ Assistant Professor, Semnan University, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran

² Lecturer, Semnan University, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran

³ Associate Professor, University of Kurdistan, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Kurdistan, Kurdistan, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: sh.mohammadi@semnan.ac.ir

Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Mohammadi, S., Mohammadian Sharif, K., & Salimi, J. (2023). A Narration of Dissertation Defense Sessions: An ethnographic Research. *Quarterly Journal of Research and Planning in Higher Education*, 29(2), 133-152.



© 2023 the authors. Published by Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education (IRPHE), Tehran, Iran. This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License.

ABSTRACT

Today, academic identity has been constantly criticized by some researchers. They claim academic identity has lost. But some academics do not accept this criticism to all disciplines and they consider the humanities and social sciences to be ineffective. One way to find out this identity is to explore the discourse that governs dissertation defense sessions. The present research aimed to investigate the issue in a marginal university through ethnographic method. Due to achieve the aim, 31 observations of senior and doctoral defense sessions in various fields as well as 35 interviews with students, referee and guidance team were conducted. The results showed that only chemistry and physics disciplines rely on professional identity in defense sessions and accordingly the content of the dissertation is scrutinized. But in other academic disciplines, the dominant discourse of defense sessions is a formalist discourse in which the refereeing and supervisory teams devote all their time to the dissertation form and ultimately the method, and forget the content produced. Based on the institutional theory, the disciplines that have been formalized cannot be considered ineffective. Because the external environment of the university accepts and legitimizes the discourse of experimental disciplines, and because of this, there is an opportunity for professional discourse. This issue is not true to other disciplines, and its actors have no choice except to resort to form and method to protect their identity.

Keywords: academic identity, university culture, ethnography.

Introduction

Universities have always been subjected to various judgments. In such a way, many thinkers have seriously criticized university mechanisms and considered university mechanisms as a hegemonic instrument. Others have criticized some university mechanisms in responding to the external environment, but they have considered the university as a necessary institution for the development of society. Academic criticisms can be divided into two categories. One of them is criticism of the existing identity of the universities, which means that they have criticized the identity that the university has adopted. These criticisms showed the existing identity is inappropriate and insufficient. The second category of criticism views some universities as formal institutions and its mechanisms are trapped in formalism. These researches have shown that Iranian universities, as a whole, don't have any special identity. Because academic activists do not follow any specific identity in their educational,

research or consulting mechanisms. Research has shown that although there has been an increasing emphasis on the production of new knowledge through research in Iranian universities, this emphasis has only led to an increase in the number of articles and at the same time, the production and application of knowledge has been marginalized. The most obvious evidence of the problem that the production of new knowledge is on the marginal can be seen in the global reports that Iran's position in the world innovation index has decreased to the sixth level. Being on the marginal of the production of new knowledge and neglecting the content has led to the emergence of a phenomenon called formalism. In the academic system of formalism, compliance with the form of knowledge creation becomes important, and the content and honesty in collecting data and writing a scientific report are ignored. Formalism is indeed a clear sign of the anonymity and confusion of universities. This is despite the fact that universities always experience various pressures from the external environment; pressures that are contradictory. On the one hand, universities are expected to try to assimilate with other social institutions, and on the other hand, they are expected to be creative, which itself requires diversity and differences. In other words, universities are expected to respond to homogeneity and diversity at the same time. Understanding this contradictory response depends on the understanding of the organizational identity of the university. This is the identity that gives meaning to the mechanisms of a university and that is the reason why group identity is considered the most key part of organizational culture. The present research aimed to find out the identity by using ethnography. One of the mysteries that can be explored is the defense sessions of master's and doctoral theses. In the defense meetings, academic identity can be identified by exploring the discourse of the meeting. In fact, identifying the academic identity requires a long-term presence in the academic context, and one of the specific manifestations of this identity is the research identity that appears in the defense meetings.

Research question

What kind of identity exist on the discourse of the defense meetings?

Methodology

The current research explored the identity of the defense meetings with the assumption that culture is a human and social construction. It means that social actors interact with each other to build their own world and give meaning to the phenomena. This assumption leads us to the social constructivism paradigm, which assumes culture is a social construction and to understand it, we must understand life from the perspectives of the actors of each cultural group. In this regard, the ethnographic research method was used. Ethnography is considered as the study of culture. The field of observation was one of the public universities in the west of Iran, which was ranked C (third-level universities) according to the academic classification of the Ministry of Science. Researchers participated in the defense meetings of students' theses for a long time and prepared and edited detailed and in-depth notes of the conversations that were exchanged in these meetings. To accurately record the conversations, the checklist was used. Everything that took place in the conversation between the students, referees and guidance team was recorded exactly in the checklist. Accordingly, 31 observations were made from different disciplines. The research process took one year and nine months. After collecting each observation, memos were conducted to provide a deep and accurate interpretation of the data. In order to discover and understand the discourse of the defense meetings, interviews with professors and students of different disciplines were used simultaneously. In the interviews, practitioners were asked to introduce the criteria for refereeing the thesis. Therefore, 35 interviews were conducted. After each interview and observation, open codes were extracted. Then, in the second step, the process of abstracting the data was continued until the axial and selective codes were also extracted. To validate the data, four methods were used including the external audit, member checking, triangulation and reflectivity.

Findings

The initial assumption of the current research was that universities, at least the universities on the margins, do not follow a specific identity and this problem has caused the confusion and instability of academic actions. Thus, when the identity of a university is unclear or lost, a specific content is not followed in that university and only the forms are important. If this assumption is true, the discourse of defense meetings is based on formal and methodological issues. Accordingly, the concern of research practitioners is about editing and writing forms, referencing methods, methods of problem statements, literature review forms and so on. Another part of the discourse is concentrated on methodological issues such as research methods, data collection methods, data analysis and validation methods, etc. In both discourses, there is no mention of the achievements of the research, its innovation, the theoretical base of the research, the intellectual position of the researcher and so on. The

findings showed that although academic formalism has become a social and pervasive trait in defense meetings, some academic disciplines have a specific identity. In fact, some academic disciplines, physics and chemistry, have a certain content and the academic practitioners in the research process also keep that content in mind and based on that content, they judge the theses. Thus, we were faced with two types of discourse at the defense meetings. One of them was the discourse of professionalism, which appeared only in the defense sessions of physics and chemistry and the other was the discourse of formalism, which was actually focused only on forms and methods. Professional discourse was a discourse that explored the semantic foundations and content of the research rather than involving itself in forms. For this reason, the nature of the critiques that the thesis judges put forth focused on content critiques and methodological critiques. What is important for the jury is the content and quality of the thesis that has been done, and they do not spend their time and energy on the appearance of the thesis, the writing style, or the formal structure. On the other hand, the thesis supervision team also defends the thesis and explains the reason for the content and method used, relying on a professional identity that has been manifested in the leaven of academic action. The discourse of formalism was a discourse that focuses more on the format, form, writing and editing aspects of the thesis, and the content of the thesis and its potential to solve the issues and problems of a field are marginalized. The discourse creates an atmosphere in which the nature of the critiques focuses on formal and methodical critiques.

Conclusion

According to the institutional theory, organizations (in this case, universities) try to accept the norms, principles and discourses that are considered valuable for the external environment and institutionalize them in their mechanisms and at the same time, avoid tending to what is counter-value for the external environment. By using this method, universities can gain legitimacy and be accepted. Based on this, what has caused disciplines such as physics and chemistry to have a stable identity is that the external environment has not only pressured them to create and homogenize but also accepted the discourse that governs this discipline. In other words, the nature of the discourse of these disciplines has been accepted by the external environment, and that is the reason why the activists of the defense meeting have focused on content issues. But in other disciplines, especially humanities and social sciences, the external environment puts pressure on these disciplines to be creative and homogenous, but the nature of the discourse of those disciplines does not accept or at least agrees with only some of them and considers other aspects incompatible with its values. This problem leads these disciplines to be constantly accused of being ineffective while being creative and effective is impossible without academic freedom. Such a situation leads to a kind of fake response. As a result, non-experimental academic disciplines must follow only the forms and methods that are accepted. In such an approach, the thesis and its criticism and defense are reduced to only forms.

References

- Ataie-Ashtiani, B. (2016). Curbing Iran's academic misconduct. *Science*, 351(6279), 1273-1274. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.351.6279.1273-c>
- Baskarada, S. (2014). Qualitative case study guidelines. *Başkarada, S. (2014). Qualitative case studies guidelines. The Qualitative Report*, 19(40), 1-25. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2559424
- Bolandhematan, K., & Mohammadi, S. (2015). Why elites refuse to immigrate: Representing the identity of faculty members. *Strategy of culture*, 8(31), 127-153. https://www.jsfc.ir/article_14924.html
- Bush, T. (2006). Theories of Educational Management. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 1(2), n2. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1066693>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage publications. <https://eduq.info/xmlui/handle/11515/19498>
- Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into practice*, 39(3), 124-130. http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip3903_2
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications. <https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1570291224971344640>
- Gall, M. D., Borg, W. R., & Gall, J. P. (1996). *Educational research: An introduction*. Longman Publishing. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1996-97171-000>

- Ghoraishi Khorasgani, M., Janavi, E., & Nazarzadeh Zare, M. (2021). Explaining the Phenomenon of Scientific Formalism in Iran's Academic System: Factors and Solutions. *Journal of Science and Technology Policy*, 14(2), 51-66. <https://doi.org/10.22034/JSTP.2021.14.2.1306>
- Hatch, M. J. (2019). Organization theory: Modern, symbolic, and postmodern perspectives. *South Asian Journal of Management*, 26(4), 215-218. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/f57dd62196b4bd3690cdd41de25526a4/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=46967>
- Hosseini, S. H., & Tavakol, M. (2023). Value-relevance of the social sciences field; thematic analysis of a case study of doctoral dissertations. *Research and Planning in Higher Education*, 27(2), 59-87. https://journal.irphe.ac.ir/article_703027_en.html?lang=fa
- Index Global Innovation. (2020). The Global Innovation Index 2020: Who Will Finance Innovation. WIPO, Geneva.
- Janavi, E., & Shahmoradi, B. (2019). Determining Iran's Scientific Competitiveness Ranking Using Scientific Complexity index (A Comparative Study in Middle-Eastern Countries). <https://doi.org/10.22070/rsci.2018.698>
- Ladner, S. (2016). *Practical ethnography: A guide to doing ethnography in the private sector*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315422251>
- Landreman, L. M. (2005). *Toward social justice: A case study of multicultural practice in higher education*. University of Michigan. <https://www.proquest.com/openview/490c0546c03a3ca3776ebf1435380647/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>
- Larson, C. L. (2010). Responsibility and Accountability in Educational Leadership: Keeping Democracy and Social Justice Central to Reform. *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly*, 4(4), 323-327. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ942990>
- Macfarlane, B. (2006). *The academic citizen: The virtue of service in university life*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203003442>
- Mohammadian Sharif, K., Salimi, J., Azizi, N., & Mohammadi, S. (2020). Structural origins of the academic corruption in higher education in Iran. *Journal of Educational Sciences*, 27(2), 159-182. <https://doi.org/10.22055/EDUS.2021.33499.3031>
- Nazarzadeh Zare, M., & Mohammadi, S. (2020). Recruiting Graduates of Insider at University: Challenge or Opportunity? *Journal of Science and Technology Policy*, 13(1), 91-104. <https://doi.org/10.22034/JSTP.2020.12.1.1155>
- Pandeli, J., Sutherland, N., & Gaggiotti, H. (2022). *Organizational ethnography: an experiential and practical guide*. Routledge. <https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1130294396581648409>
- Patton, L. D., & Croom, N. N. (2017). *Critical perspectives on Black women and college success*. Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315744421>
- Powell, W. W., & DiMaggio, P. J. (2012). *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis*. University of Chicago press. <https://nyuscholars.nyu.edu/en/publications/the-new-institutionalism-in-organizational-analysis>
- Salami, R., Mirzaei, H., & Safardoust, A. (2017). Moving towards a Knowledge-based Economy by Examining the Internal Relationship between the Input and Output Dimensions of the Global Innovation Index. *Roshd-e-Fanavari*, 13(51), 16-25.
- Schein, E. H. (2010). *Organizational culture and leadership* (Vol. 2). John Wiley & Sons. <https://www.ethixbiz.com/s/Schein-E-Organizational-Culture-and-Leadership.pdf>
- Shafaii Moghaddam, E., & Niazi, M. (2023). Investigation the rate of postgraduate students' commitment to academic and post academic norms. *Research and Planning in Higher Education*, 27(2), 89-115. https://journal.irphe.ac.ir/article_703028_en.html?lang=fa
- Silver, H. (2003). Does a university have a culture? *Studies in Higher Education*, 28(2), 157-169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0307507032000058118>
- Stensaker, B. (2015). Organizational identity as a concept for understanding university dynamics. *Higher Education*, 69, 103-115. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-014-9763-8>
- Stensaker, B., & Norgård, J. D. (2001). Innovation and isomorphism: A case-study of university identity struggle 1969–1999. *Higher Education*, 42, 473-492. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1012212026597>
- Zare Bandadokouki, M. R. (2018). Study of Iran's Position in Global Innovation Indicators. 15th International Conference on Industrial Engineering, Yazd University,

