

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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N1 | Beaumaris Lounge

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Graduating Together: The Experience in Graduate School of a Group of Arab Israeli Women From Families With no- or Limited Academic Background

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Research Domain: Access and widening participation (AWP)

Abstract:

The aim of this phenomenological study was to describe and understand the experience of Israeli Arab women who are first generation students in academia in order to identify what can enhance or impede attainment of a Master's degree among an educationally disadvantaged population. The participants had low predisposition and academic readiness for graduate studies and were included as a group in an intensive academic support program. All 10 students in the group were interviewed. Results indicated that participants had misgivings about attending the program because of fears they would fail. During their studies they felt they acquired valuable professional knowledge and academic skills, as well as experiencing increased self-esteem, confidence and self-reliance. Sources of support during graduate school were their family, the group members and the college personnel. The results suggest that an intensive support system in higher education can lead to successful completion of graduate school among disadvantaged populations.

Paper:

Aim

The aim of this study was to learn about the experience in graduate school of Arab Israeli women that are first generation students or come from families with limited academic background.

Rational

First Generation Students (FGS) have been internationally studied (Aburabia-Queder, 2011; O'Shea,

2016; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). A substantial FGS research is based on Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) conceptual framework. According to this theory, FGS are perceived as lacking the right cultural capital needed for higher education. Students of a different background/culture, joining higher education institutions are expected to learn the new environment and to adapt to it.

Arabs in Israel are a minority and attend Israeli Hebrew speaking universities and colleges. Studies addressing the higher education experience of Arab Muslim women in Israel have had different foci, such as the effect of cross cultural transition (Aburabia-Queder, 2011), factors explaining the accessibility of graduate studies for Arab women (Oplatka & Lapidot, 2012), the implications of higher education experience on identity formation (Arar & Masry-Herzalah, 2014) and more. The existing research focuses on students with predisposition to higher education and the right academic competence but who lack the cultural capital associated with Israeli higher education institutions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

The current study

In the current phenomenological qualitative study we focused on a group of Arab women who are FGS or come from families with a limited academic background, and who enrolled in the same Master's program together as a group on a special track. Our aim was to describe and understand their experience in order to identify what can enhance or impede attainment of Master's level education among an educationally disadvantaged population. In comparison with previous studies, the participants in this study did not only come from a different culture but also had very low predisposition and academic readiness for graduate studies. They were included in an intensive academic support program especially designed by the college.

We posed the following research questions: 1) What is the meaning of studying in graduate school for the participants? 2) What is the experience of studying in graduate school? 3) What helped and what impeded studying during graduate school? 4) What are the advantages and disadvantages of studying in graduate school?

Method

Participants

The participants were a group of 10 Israeli Arab Muslim women who had just completed their last year in a Master's program in school counseling in a college in Northern Israel. Prior to their studies at the college, they completed bachelor's degrees from a non-accredited program in a non-Israeli institution and were not able to work professionally in Israel based on their degrees. A special program was developed for them at the college requiring that they complete a year of bachelor's level classes in education and those that met the requirements were accepted to the program on a separate track as a group studying together.

The participants' mean age was 35.30 ($SD=6.8$, range 25-47), 7 were married, 1 divorced, and 2 were single. Eight had children ($M=2.75$, $SD=.89$, range 2-4) ranging in age from 2 months to 22 years ($M=11.87$, $SD=5.77$). The parents of 9 out of 10 participants had no academic background and the parents of one participant had a bachelor's degree. Half the participants had siblings with an academic degree.

Measures, Procedure and Data Analysis

The measures consisted of a demographic questionnaire and a semi-structured interview based on the research questions. Participants were interviewed in private and the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Analysis was based on Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method (see also Demir & Ercan, 2018). Several verification steps were taken to increase the study's rigor and trustworthiness (e.g., bracketing, seeking the participants' input on the results).

Results

The experience of studying in graduate school: A process of personal and professional empowerment

When the participants were approached with the opportunity to go to graduate school at an Israeli college, they couldn't believe their good fortune. Most of them did not consider graduate school as a possibility previously and were the first generation in their family in academia. Eight expressed concerns that the degree would be demanding and that they would fail. Half felt that it was an opportunity to change their lives and the lives of their family members.

All participants mentioned that their studies enabled them to acquire valuable knowledge as well as professional and academic skills. All mentioned that they also experienced personal changes including increased self-esteem and confidence. Six also felt more independent, responsible and self-reliant. A negative aspect in their experience was the lack of time to invest and spend with their families and friends.

What helped and what impeded studying during graduate school?

Participants mentioned three sources of support that aided them during graduate school: their family, the other group members and the college and instructors' help. Difficulties and stress at home were the main problems mentioned.

The advantages and disadvantages of studying in graduate school

Participants mentioned three main types of advantages: professional (e.g., knowledge, easier to find a job), social (e.g., higher social status and worth), and personal (e.g., personal development, better emotional regulation). Very few disadvantages were mentioned and the main one was the stress and strain of school work and busy weekly schedule during their studies.

Discussion

This study aimed at describing the graduate school experience of Arab Muslim women who come from families with no- or limited academic background and have low predisposition and academic readiness. Students reported a challenging experience with highly satisfying academic and personal results. In terms of cultural capital, (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977) the students had to deal with two main gaps. One, Arab versus Israeli culture and the other one FGS versus academic culture. They were able to bridge the gaps due to the intensive academic support provided by the college, their families' help and their help to each other. The implication is that academia can be accessible even for the disadvantaged. This can be done with the right accommodations and support provided.

Keywords: Arab Muslim women, first generation students, graduate studies.

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