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Faculty members' experience of student ethical problems: A qualitative research with a phenomenological approach

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: One of challenges that universities faces with it is student ethical problems. Students' unethical behaviors create a sort of weakness of moral commitment and irresponsibility. The purpose of this study is to explore the student ethics problems experienced by faculty members in Hormozgan University of Medical Sciences'.

Methods: In this study we used phenomenological approach that emphasizes on the perspectives held by Mandelbaum (1969). All faculty members of University were the participants of the present research paper. The method of choice for gathering the required data was purposive sampling with deep, face to face and semi-structured interview carried out individually. Qualitative data analysis method used herein was the ethical phenomenology proposed by Mandelbaum (17).

Results: After interviewing 20 professors from medicine, nursing and midwifery, paramedicine, Public Health, dentistry and pharmacy schools, the information reached to a state of saturation. 55% of the professors were men and 45% were women. After analyzing the interviews, finally three themes and nine categories were obtained. The resulting themes were named respectively value change, deviation and management challenges.

Conclusions: Paying attention to all three aspects of ethics and modifying the factors affecting the development of these subjects in students can lead to ethical development in educational settings. Given the serious challenges in the educational environment of students, the relevant institutions should be try to avoid development of such challenges.

Keywords: ethics, experience, faculty, student, phenomenology, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary world, higher education faces numerous challenges, some of which are unprecedented and unexpected. The increase in complexity of the role and responsibilities of higher education institutions are reflecting this fact (1). Therefore, universities and educational institutions should pay special attention to ethical training of the students, and since mere teaching of ethical issues does not change the behavior of students, the application of ethical principles and values by them should be monitored too (2). Because some cases like cheating, moral misconduct, and dishonesty have been increasingly reported both in the workplace and in higher education centers (3). Medical students have claimed that they are undergoing academic misconduct (4). M. Hrabak et al. (5) have shown in their studies that the majority of medical students have been cheating at least once during their education. Moreover, the major example of the misconduct reported by students has been signing the attendance tab for the absent students, and the minor misconduct has been bribing for passing the exam (5).

Scientific dishonesty often referred to as cheating has turned to common problem at all educational levels. Various researches have demonstrated that the level of cheating among students in universities has steadily increased over the past forty years (6). This problem creates a social perception that the graduates do not have the necessary knowledge (7). Although certain codes of conduct have been defined in many universities around the world, however, they still need

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specific professional and ethical standards for shaping the attitudes and behavior of young people who will have different jobs in the future (8).

The findings of the study conducted by Iorga et al. (9) demonstrated that more than 70 percent of students show unethical behaviors (9). According to researches, nursing faculty members have also increasingly faced students with rude behaviors both in classroom and clinical settings. Insofar as in the study conducted by Lashley and de Meneses (10), three destructive behaviors were identified in nursing students that include lack of attention in the class, attendance problems and late coming (10). Park et al. state that, according to some remarks, there are certain concerns regarding such unethical behaviors as plagiarism and cheating in South Korean nursing students (11). Nutt (12) showed in his study that the most frequent rude behaviors included class inattention, taking no notes, boredom and indifference of students (12). Students' unethical behaviors create a sort of weakness of moral commitment and irresponsibility, and these individuals in the future cannot function in a moral fashion (13). Furthermore, student's unethical behavior can cause problems for professors and managers (14). Faculty members and students claim that rude behaviors have a negative impact on learning, which is the chief goal of higher education (12). Such behaviors include the following types: class disturbance, serious inattention, insulting the professor or classmate, late coming or leaving the class, scientific dishonesty, and bullying. However, the International Center for Academic Integrity in 1999 has introduced five elements of honesty, trust, fairness, respect and responsibility as core values at the university in order to integrate the academic values worldwide (15).

According to the literature review, it has been revealed that little research has been devoted to the ethical problems of student, particularly in Iran. Underlining the fact that these investigations have paid serious attention to unethical behaviors, especially the lack of honesty on behalf of the students, and due to the importance of ethics in all areas and levels of society, the researchers decided to conduct a qualitative study aimed at explaining the faculty members' experience of student ethical problems. Phenomenology has been chosen as the core methodology of this research.

It needs to be noted that phenomenology is indeed the method of knowing others or their experienced phenomena by hearing their descriptions of their individual and subjective views (their inner world) based their own account as much as possible without interpretation and the inclusion of the investigator's subjective assumptions about that individual or phenomenon under study (16).

METHODS

In the present study, ethical phenomenology with an emphasis on the perspectives held by Mandelbaum (1969) was applied for gathering the data. Phenomenological method can be adopted for the survey of the features and structures of such various types of experiences as sensory, religious, aesthetic and ethical experiences (17). The phenomenon and the context in which it takes place together serve as interpretational factors for us to gain understanding of the participants' worlds and/or the studied events and incidents (18). The goal is study of the individuals, events, incidents and services is, indeed, gaining insight into our worlds and those of the others. The goal that is pursued by the qualitative scholar is reaching an agreement on the essence of the studied phenomenon. The objective is gaining a deep understanding and capturing the extract and the quintessence of a phenomenon and acquiring knowledge regarding given events and incidents (19).

The student ethics problems as a phenomenon are yet to be accurately elucidated in our country. There is a scarcity of the research in this regard. This experience cannot be studied in quantitative research since it is a completely subjective phenomenon. Therefore, phenomenology is envisaged as more appropriate an interpretation for the recognition of the structure and the essence of faculty experience from student ethics problems. Thus, the authors adopted the above mentioned approach to the study. Quantitative research does not offer the required flexibility and subtlety for exploring a live experience of the phenomena that are somehow connected to the way the human beings interact and the rest of the qualitative research are devoid of the necessary effect in this area; hence, the most appropriate method for gaining an insight into the depth of such phenomena's experience and meaning is phenomenology (20).

The main assumptions governing the current research paper correspond to the naturalism paradigm. The study is carried out in an environment of the universities and hospitals' faculty members. All faculty members in Hormozgan University of Medical Sciences were selected as the study participants who are diversely appointed from the men and women teaching and working in various fields of study in different departments. Sampling was based on a goal-oriented method and the faculty members willing to take part in the study were interviewed.

To gather the data, deep, face-to-face, and semi-structured individual interviews were performed after the official permits had been acquired. To perform interviews, firstly, a list of the various study fields and departments in Hormozgan

University of Medical Sciences was procured. Interview guides were applied so as not lose the track of the interview. Interview guide is a collection of the codified open questions designed based on the study objectives and the research team notions and they were revised repeatedly after each interview in case it was deemed necessary. Simultaneous data collection and data analyses greatly contributed to the interview guide's revision and correction. Of course, there were cases appeared in the course of interview that questions outside the interview guide were raised and asked as made necessary by the expediencies of the conversation trend. But, the existence of the guide helped the researcher have more control over the interview content and length. Every interview took 70 to 110 minutes.

Interviews continued up to a certain saturation point at which time it was thought that the interviews do not contribute any novel idea requiring a new code and the data had become reiterative. The researcher was forced to refer to the interviewee for a second time in three cases to perform another interview. The participants were asked to arbitrarily specify interviews' time and place. Before the outset of the interview regarding the study objectives, the interviewees were provided with the explanations on why the interview has to be recorded, their voluntary participation, interviewees' information and identity confidentiality, then they were asked to arbitrarily specify the time and the place of the interviews and finally a written letter of agreement was acquired from each of them. At the beginning of every interview, the participants were asked to introduce themselves in brief and questions were asked regarding their age, field of study and the place of education. Then, the questions pertaining to the phenomenon of concern were asked and investigations on the participants' experiences of student ethics problems continued. The discussions, having a consideration of time framework continued to the extent that the interviewer made sure that s/he has well understood the offered concepts. The interview form contained two sets of questions. One set comprised the major questions of the interview and the second set was considered as the follow-up questions. The questions had been designed based on the study objectives and the extant subjective knowledge and changes were made in case it was deemed necessary during the course of interview. The main questions were: what are your experiences regarding the student ethics problems? What are your memories of the student ethics and the challenges related thereto?

The researcher tried to exactly reveal the participants' answers to each of the aforementioned questions by using follow-up questions and sentences such as "could you explain more?" or ".... what do you mean?". Follow-up questions were raised based on the information offered by the participant so as to clarify the questioned concept.

Interviews continued until detailed and sufficient information had been obtained and they were recorded by asking for its permissibility from the participants and then each interview was exactly transcribed onto paper documents immediately after several rounds of listening on the same day so as to get the required feedback for the upcoming interviews and/or for data adequacy purposes. The transcribed interviews were again matched with the recorded information. The keywords or the intended codes were extracted from the text and then analyses followed.

Participants' demographic information was analyzed by the use of descriptive statistics. To prevent personal thoughts and beliefs to interfere and influence the study, the author identified and discarded them before starting the interview and also during the data collection and data analysis phases. The method applied for qualitative data analysis herein was ethical phenomenology as put forth by Mandelbaum (17). In analyzing the ethical experiences, Mandelbaum's phenomenological approach follows the thoughts and notions held by Hussrel, the founder of phenomenology. Through pondering over Hussrel's phenomenology, Spiegelberg defined this approach in several steps:

The first step initiates with the survey of trivial phenomena. The raw perception or the preliminary intuition of the phenomenon matters here a lot. In the next step after the preliminary intuition of the phenomenon is analyzing them. Of course, phenomena analysis does not mean that we divide them into separate components rather it means isolating the constituent element of the phenomena and clarifying their relationships with the similar phenomena. Through putting phenomena in certain sets, we can describe their features as well as their interrelationships. In the third step, those sets of such phenomena that revolve around a single pivot are segregated. In the fourth step, we deal with the survey of the way such phenomena have come to existence. The fifth step incorporates the analysis and the description of the way the phenomena have been shaped into our awareness. The sixth step is suspension in which we solely suffice to what resides only in our awareness and knowledge. This stage is called phenomenological reduction (17). With an abstraction of the concepts for the purpose of describing the studied phenomenon, a comprehensive definition of "the student ethics problems experiences by faculty members in Hormozgan University of Medical Sciences" was presented and then evidences were quoted from the data texts per every concept.

To confirm the validity and the accuracy of the present research, the four criteria offered by Lincoln and Goba, namely credibility, dependability, confirmability and data transferability were investigated. The increase in the number of the interviews was the first step that was devised by the author to augment the data accuracy. The researcher endeavored

Table 1: *Demographic characteristics of the participants as separated by gender*

	Variable	Male		Female		Total	
		frequency	percent	frequency	percent	frequency	percent
Faculty	Medicine	2	50%	2	50%	4	20%
	Nursing and Midwifery	1	75%	3	25%	4	20%
	Paramedicine	2	50%	2	50%	4	20%
	Public Health	2	50%	2	50%	4	20%
	Dentistry	2	100%	-	-	2	10%
	Pharmacy	2	100%	-	-	2	10%
	Total	11	55%	9	45%	20	100%
	Age (year)	44±5.08		42±3		43±4	
	Work record (year)	16±6		14±6.03		15±6	

to develop his relationship with the participants. After the interviews were written down, the participants were provided with the study findings and they offered their ideas regarding the findings' accordance with their experiences and evaluated the findings accuracy and credibility.

By preserving the written interviews as documents during the whole course of the research, the author guaranteed the research confirmability. The researcher's interest in the studied phenomenon, constant involvement in data collection and analysis, peers' revisions and qualitative research experts' reviews, searching for evidences and contradicting articles and also making efforts to acquire others' opinions in this regard were among the other factors contributing to the research confirmability. Moreover, the present study was performed in group and through asking for guidance and supervision from the practitioners all of which made feasible the data dependability and confirmability.

To insure dependability, besides the researchers, a peer group, specialist in qualitative research, was also asked to investigate the texts in order for the analysis process to be verified. Other activities that carried out in parallel to verify the research authenticity were: guiding the research based on the study plan, recording the participants' interviews and transcribing them. The present study took advantage of purposive sampling to increase data transferability and the participants' interviews were carried out in a different manner from the maximum diversity, direct quotations and examples.

To stay attentive to ethical considerations, the required permits and letter of recommendation were acquired for attending the study and data collection environment. In the entire stages, the author remained fully adhered to the participants' rights and respected their right to voluntarily take part in the study. Before gathering the information, the participants were provided with explanations regarding the study objectives, method of cooperation and the methods of data collection and recording and after it was ensured that the collected information would remain confidential, the participants were asked to provide written letters of consent. The participants were reminded that in every stage in the course of study they can refrain from continuing in which case the authors promised that the entire records would be erased and/or delivered to them. The participants' specifications were kept confidential during the research and even after. Their names were never mentioned on the tapes and on the transcribed texts and, instead, codes and numbers were used. During the entire course of the research, the authors obliged themselves to perfect trusteeship and honesty in making use of the sources and texts. The study is a result of a research proposal funded by the financial sponsorship of Hormozgan University of Medical Sciences with ethical code HUMS.REC.1395.98.

FINDINGS

In this qualitative phenomenological study, 20 faculty members from Medical, Nursing and Midwifery, Paramedicine, Public Health, Dentistry and Pharmacy departments of Hormozgan University of Medical Sciences were interviewed. 55% of them were male and 45% were female. The mean age of men and women was 44 ± 5.08 and 42 ± 3 years, and the mean of their work experience in men and women was 16 ± 6 and 14 ± 6.03 years, respectively. The demographic characteristics of the participants in the study by sex have been listed in **Table 1.**

After analyzing the text of the interviews, finally, three themes and nine categories were obtained. The resulting themes were named respectively value change, deviation and management challenges. The experience of faculty members of students' ethical problems was defined using the extracted themes and classes as follows: "In the pathological study of student ethics, using faculty members' experiences, we are confronted with value change and deviation in students. These changes cause such problems as indifference, lack of conscience, deception, being demanding, promotion of anti-values and incorrect patterns among students. Management challenges also exacerbate

these problems, and neglecting the needs of students, lack of empathy and discrimination among them can increase the ethical problems in students."

Value Change

Such values as respect for professional ethics, the sense of responsibility before tasks and the needs of patients, the importance of professional values and respecting others are among the issues that students should take into account in moral education. According to faculty members, issues like indifference, lack of conscience, deception, and being demanding are among ethical problems of students that are observed at the university.

Indifference

The lack of attention to the student's mission and values can lead to indifference in students and make them to have an equal notion of observing or disregarding ethical values. In this case, the only thing that will be important is ending education, earning academic certificates and graduation.

"Even if we take classroom to be a market place, the student receives expensive services, such as knowledge, in return for the costs involved. However, students have become more indifferent as compared to the past, and apparently prefer to pass the courses and get their degrees in the shortest time. Even some attend the class by force, and even they are physically present at the class they chat on the Internet and surf the web. "(Participant No. 3, Professor of the faculty of Medicine)

Lack of Conscience

Having conscience and a sense of responsibility and raising this sense in the students will have a great impact on their professional future and success. This could result in internal and external satisfaction on behalf of authorities, colleagues and clients.

"Students' sense of responsibility towards patients has declined. They mostly like to follow their personal matters. It does not matter to them that the tasks of the patient will end. Their conscience is low. Many times, they are playing with their phones by the patient's bed. They are always in social networks. For example, the patient's serum is not working and they take no action. "(Participant No. 9, Professor of Nursing and Midwifery faculty)

Deception

The prevalence of anti-ethical affairs can be seen among students stratum like other social classes, and unfortunately, some unpleasant behaviors such as lying and cheating are observed in some students and are prevalent among them.

"... Even one of the students had brought another student's article as his own assignment. He had only changed the names and would say that he himself had done the job with much effort. After a while, it was revealed what he had done"(participant No. 11, Professor of Nursing and Midwifery faculty)

Being Demanding

The new students have different feelings and views. Some changes have taken place in their dealings with colleagues and professors and many values and respect are ignored, while the past generations had more modesty and humility towards their masters, and behaved more respectfully.

"Students have a defensive attitude towards their instructor. They feel they should always be right. Their capacity to hear criticism is low. They always protest and expect all the rules to be adjusted according to their conditions. For example, apprenticeship courses are expected to be coordinated with their shifts so that they can have short time jobs. "(Participant No. 10, Professor of the Nursing and Midwifery faculty)

Deviation

Due to the underdeveloped nature of the students' behaviors and practices and the fact that the formation of their social and professional personality during their academic years as students in university environment, the existence of all types of unethical issues and their prevalence and the presence of inappropriate patterns in the educational community can deviate and mislead students. The classes derived from this theme in the data gathered from the interviews with the professors, were clearly named as anti-values and misleading patterns.

Promotion of Anti-values

Some students think that freedom means that anyone can enter any environment as he likes, and that any kind of clothing is appropriate for any kind of environment. These people do not really care about their position as a student and they do not adhere to professional values.

"The appearance of many students is not really appropriate. They attend the hospital with thick makeup and visit the patient or go the bathroom with the white dress. The appearance does not matter; at least they should observe the health problems. "(Participant No. 15, Professor of Paramedicine faculty)

Incorrect Patterns

Most of the professors are good patterns for students, and students often replicate their professors' behaviors. As a person who is devoted to learning, the student is always looking for someone to put her in the lead. Unfortunately, the students very rarely take the professors as their patterns, and they are increasingly turning to inappropriate patterns. This is one of the serious problems in students' moral education. Inadvertent training and inappropriate behaviors will promote anti-values among students.

"Unfortunately, in some sections we have inappropriate patterns who do wrong things. For example, the vital signs of the patient are controlled without care. Or they do not follow the principles of blood culture. Students learn these and they repeat these things. "(Participant No. 9, Professor of Nursing and Midwifery faculty)

Management Challenges

The proper management of ethics in educational settings is very important and this should be done by the professors and the authorities, so that the student can identify the anti-ethical issues well and know their consequences. Creating an honest climate and observing justice and fairness in dealing with students and solving their problems can be effective in the proper management of ethics. Such problems as inattention to needs, lack of empathy and discrimination are among the challenges in managing student ethics from the point of view of professors.

Inattention to Needs

Tackling student ethical needs and providing basic resources for information and knowledge about ethics and spirituality can be an effective step for educating students about ethical issues.

"Take a look at the libraries. Ethical and epistemological texts do not fit the needs of students. Students are looking for answers to the challenges they face. But the library is not rich. Professors in the field of ethics and medical judgments are also not always available to answer the student's question and challenges" (Participant No. 4 Professor of the faculty of Medicine)

Lack of Empathy

Giving importance to students and their problems and issues, and the proper and adequate time allocated by the professors to students, can create a sense of importance for the student, and the student feels that others love and understand him. Empathy is strengthened, and students can more easily express their own problems, particularly on ethical issues, and solve the challenges.

"Some professors think that their job is only giving lectures. The student does not dare to inform them of his issues. Even many times, he has to lie. The professor must give the student some time to explain easily and without anxiety about the problem that has come about. "(Participant No. 19, Professor of the faculty of Public Health)

Discrimination

The strictness of some schools causes students to feel discriminated. This is especially true in relation to medical and non-medical students in most universities. This sense of discrimination raises student dissatisfaction and creates ethical challenges for them.

"Students are trained according to scientific and educational principles, and when he comes to the clinic he sees that other students are treated differently and do not take ethical principles. Or the cover of the other students sees another way that he is not allowed to put it in such a way. They challenge the student. "(Participant No. 8, Professor of Nursing and Midwifery faculty)

DISCUSSION

Given the phenomenological approach of this study, i.e. direct examination of the individual's ethical consciousness data (17), the authors seek to clarify ethical examples in the field of student education and their verbal and behavioral feedback. On the other hand, since we are faced with two human-linked learning groups, the behavioral changes of one affect the other too. To state the matter differently, we must cite the professor's and students' behavioral confrontation. Having this introduction, the results of the dialogue with the faculty members are evaluated without taking their demographic characteristics into account and it is hoped that after the pathology of the ethical issues and functions, the proposed items in the results will be used in the training work.

As it is mentioned in the findings section, from the total interviews, three main themes and nine categories were obtained. In the first theme, value changes, by expressing four classes is of the highest moral harm to the students. That is to say that in recent years we are confronted with a reverse and negative turn in the field of education, which has led to a change in values and transformation of them into anti-values such as indifference, lack of conscience, deception and being demanding. Among these, the worst and ugliest phenomenon is neglect and indifference to ethical and social relationships with university professors (21), which requires careful examination in order to identify and tackle the weaknesses of the educational system or the behavioral review of professors or factors outside the university.

On the other hand, since the university is considered to be part of society, we need to find a solution for ethical indifference at the general level, and declare it an alarm and an important warning in this regard. As mentioned in the report, attaching an excessive importance to university degrees is a key factor involved in ignoring ethical values.

It needs to be reminded that the students of the University of Medical Sciences in all fields deal with hospitals and health centers. As a result, they are directly in touch with the client. Ethics is an important part of care providing (22), and since the most important behavior in professional ethics is having work conscience and accountability, if this ethical element is not taught to students during the course of study and is not institutionalized in them as a behavioral norm, then the future of the society will be exposed to the danger of moral decline, and a desirable society cannot be achieved with people with a lack of responsible and diligent conscience (23).

On the other hand, the phenomenon of student cheating in the presentation of research, lessons, and even exams as an inappropriate behavior resulting from the excessive importance attached to university degrees has reduced the ethics of the university and finally, it can be said that all three phenomena of indifference, lack of conscience and deception will cause the student to be demanding (24). Since education is a twofold process, the lack of humility in the student towards the teacher causes the educational process undergo a transformation and reduce the motivation of the faculty (25).

However, in the second section, i.e. deviation, there are two elements of promoting anti-values and inappropriate patterns, each of which can lead to the destruction of the individual and social personality of the student, and disrupt his educational process. The worst situation of a society is when ethical values are forgotten and dominated by anti-values and a kind of moral inversion takes form. On the other hand, since a man cannot survive without a pattern, when he takes away from the values and patterns, he surrenders to the inappropriate patterns (26).

In the third section, we are faced with serious educational management problems, which mean that there is no relation between student acceptance and the needs of the country, and there is no consistency in the definition of academic disciplines with human resources. On the other hand, the existence of unemployed and non-motivated graduates adds to this problem. The same frustration causes alienation and cause moral values to face crisis. Unfortunately, universities also do not have the means to cope with this crisis, and some discriminatory practices, in the absence of sympathy and co-operation, exacerbate the moral crisis (27).

Paying attention to all three aspects of ethics and modifying the factors affecting the development of these subjects in students can lead to ethical development in educational settings and increase the motivation of individuals to orient themselves to the right. One of the limitations we encountered in this study was the probable involvement of participants of this research in daily activities and time constraints for interviewing. In order to overcome this limitation, the researchers tried to use the free in order to coordinate with the professors to conduct interviews.

CONCLUSION

Given the serious challenges in educational environment of students, it seems to the researchers that in the first stage, the relevant institutions should be established by setting up specialist working groups and inviting the professors of the philosophy of ethics and Islamic teachings and sociology and psychology to establish an effective regulation so as to avoid this trend.

On the other hand, it should be asserted that the resolution of this crisis is not one-sided, and the professors, given their role as a pattern, need to review their teaching behavior. Then holding workshops on this issue will be fruitful. However, it is necessary to set up pre-university classes and camps in order to format students' ethical and social identity.

In the third stage, revising the educational structure of universities and paying close attention to students' demands for motivation and sense of empathy and non-discrimination can restore their identities and encourage students to continue their education. By modifying the managerial structure, we can seemingly reduce these crises and prevent anti-ethical actions in the universities.

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DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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