

“I Feel Myself in a Cage of Bird”: Berber Female Students’ Self-Identification in the Algerian Society - A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Algeria is flavoured by a diversity of ethnicities and languages. The country is dominated by two ethnic groups: Arabs and Berbers. My concern falls upon identity negotiation within the latter group and exploring how women within the Berber community represent themselves and how the society perceives them. To answer this question, I explored the autobiographical stories of three Algerian female students who study English as a foreign language at Bejaia University, and who grew up amongst Berbers. They took part in a forum theatre course I ran at their University to explore EFL learner identity. Adopting an idiographic case-by-case phenomenological analysis to the written stories of these three students brought my attention into the self-image they gave to themselves to articulate their identity. This study also looked at the factor of power relations in their experiences drawing on Bourdieu’s perspective. The findings of this phenomenological analysis revealed the impact of culture and ethnic norms on these students’ s freedom, desires, and transitions in education. This impact was at some stage distinctive. I discuss in this further in this paper.

Keywords: Berber ethnic group, Women, self-identification, power relations.

Introduction



Algeria is known for its cultural and ethnic diversities. The country is dominated by Arabs and Berbers. I will focus more on the latter group as the participants in this study are Berbers. First, I intend to provide a summary on Berbers to supply context to this research. The Berbers or ‘Imazighen’, - which signifies free men- are the native inhabitants of North Africa. Their mother tongue is known as ‘Berber’ or ‘Tamazight’ (El Aissati, 2005). However, this ethnic group is also divided into several sub-groups with different dialects. Among them, are the main ones existing in the Algerian context: the Kabyles, the Chaouias, the Mzabs and the Tuaregs (Chaker, 2003). Bejaia, where this study was conducted, is a kabyle city and its citizens speak the Kabyle dialect rather than Arabic. This latter, which became the official language in the country, was introduced with the Islamic invasions. Most Berbers adopted Islam and Arabic language, but they still conserve their mother tongue (Benrabah, 1999).

The different traditions and social rules featuring Algeria mark the life of both men and women living there. On the subject of women in the Berber group, they were traditionally constrained by the Berber culture and social norms set by the society in general or their families in particular. However, because of the different changes that occurred in the country such as the right for education, work, and taking part in political parties and public talks, most women in Algeria and in the Berber community could impose their voices and existence in the society. However, there are still some Berber women who feel themselves marginalized and not free to be 'who they want'. This is because of these norms that still stand against them. I was interested to explore how women in the Berber community identify themselves and what identity they draw for themselves as women in their society. I am also keen to know whether they could be who they desired to be and if they could realise their agentic-self thanks to the power and positionings they can forge through education. Therefore, I conducted a forum theatre project at Bejaia University to explore EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students' multiple identities. This project covered the points mentioned above on women as they emerged in my data. I am not focusing on the whole project in this paper, but on the emergent thoughts and experiences of three participants, who took part in the theatre course. This allowed me to analyse their self-identification and positional identity negotiation and power relations (Bourdieu, 1991) as presented in their autobiographical stories.

Theoretical Framework

I drew this section from the constructivist and culturalist understandings of identity that are found in Holland *et al* (1998) approach to define this concept. Holland *et al* (1998) argued that individuals are social and cultural creatures who forge their identities thanks to the cultural and social resources that are available to them. These identities are not stable but dynamic and a pivot for change. Holland *et al* (1998) viewed that the different objectifications that individuals perform in their social life (for example being student, black woman, mother, servant in a restaurant) are cores of ones' proactive identities (Holland *et al*, 1998, p.4). They defined identity as "a concept that figuratively combines the intimate or personal world with the collective space of cultural forms and social relations" (Holland *et al*, 1998, p. 5). They also noted that self-identification in the world is structurally defined because it can be marked by gender, race, ethnicity or other different non-vanishing elements of a society. However, they also consider that some of the identities a person possesses in his/her social world can be improvised as individuals have their figurative worlds where these identities can be identical with imagined ones (see Norton, 2001 on imagined identity). Bourdieu (1977a -cited in Holland *et al*, 1998) argued that this improvisation of identity is a fundamental element to human agency. Bourdieu (1991) viewed individuals as 'agents' and he pointed out that humans' social life is bounded with what he calls 'power relations' that control and surround identity. Therefore, the way people give meaning to their experiences and identify themselves is all connected to the social context where they live and the different social positions and rules they take (Holland *et al*, 1998). Here I would refer to Shanta's story (see Holland *et al*, 1998). Shanta involved herself in an activity that she is not allowed to perform because she is a female. As Holland *et al* (1998) mentioned "Shanta, was berated because she ventured into an activity to which she had no right. Shanta was in the field where her older brother was plowing. As he steered the oxen past her, she reached out playfully and touched the plow. Immediately her brother began to hit and rebuke her." (Holland *et al*, 1998, p. 126). Shanta did not understand this cultural norm, but she could learn something dramatic that because she is a female she cannot do what her brother can do. Holland *et al* (1998) referred to this story as performing 'positional identity' which, according to them, has to do "with the day-to-day and on-the-ground relations of power deference and entitlement, social affiliation and distance-with social-interactional, social-relational structures of the lived world" (p.127). Thus, a positional identity is constrained with how the person perceives his/her role/position in the social world like the tasks and places he/she has access to and those he/she is restricted from. Positionings, positional identities connect to social activities, social norms and interaction. Positional identities might also be controlled by 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1991). This is one of the elements that make up power relations. Habitus is defined as a set of actions that agents (individuals) acquire since their childhood, which become part of their life and identity (Bourdieu, 1991).

Procedures and analysis

This study focused on the written stories of three students who took part in a theatre course at Bejaia University, where they study English as a foreign language. I followed an interpretive phenomenological paradigm to collect data from these three cases. Interpretivism has been used in several pedagogical research projects that looked at students' self-identity in the classroom (Jackson, 2001). It generally looks at how individuals give meaning to their experiences (see Smith & Osborn, 2003). Also Frost noted that "IPA acknowledges that the understanding of an event or an object is always mediated by the context of cultural and socio- historical meanings" (Frost, 2011 p:48).

After collecting the autobiographical stories from the three cases, I adopted the idiographic case-by-case method of analysis that belongs to the interpretive phenomenological approach. As Smith and Osborn noted

“this form of analysis is interactive and involves a close interaction between reader and text. As a researcher one is drawing on one’s interpretative resources to make sense of what the person is saying, but at the same time one is constantly checking one’s own sense making against what the person actually said.” (Smith & Osborn, 2004 p. 72)

Smith and Osborn (2004) argue that this method of analysis is usually applicable on a few number of participants, such as three, with beginner researchers. It requires from the researcher to delve into the meaning behind what the participants say. Applying this method, I went through different stages in the analysis. Firstly, I dealt with the autobiographical stories of each of the three participants separately. I started by the one written by ‘Lina’. I kept my notes on the margin and then I took all of those notes (codes) and I clustered them under primary themes depending on their common meaning. Secondly, I used these emergent themes to inform the rest of the analysis with the two other participants (Kahina and Manel). When I came up with themes from each case, I then compared and contrasted those themes to come up with the final list of themes that form the results of this study. The two major resulted themes are presented in the findings section below.

Findings and discussion

Contextual (Family/social) influence on female students’ decision-making/career plans

The findings of this research showed how the participants gave meaning to their identities. They reflected on the social/cultural norms set by their families to provide an image of their positional identification. Lina, the main participant I took as an illustration in this section, revealed her feeling of being restricted from doing some activities she planned for or achieving dreams she desired due to her parents who impose their rules over her decisions. The excerpt below from one of Lina’s autobiographical stories showed her family’s influence on herself as a woman:

Story.4 (Lina’s autobiographical essay)

I am a girl of 25 years old, I live with strict family, a lot of things are forbidden, I am not really free to be as I want but if I have chance to change something, I will be a free person, continuing my studies abroad, have my own way of living things.

Lina feels that her family stand as an obstacle against her career dreams such as traveling abroad to carry on her studies. That freedom she wanted to achieve is not present in her life possibly because she is a woman. She revealed that she cannot choose to be who she wants because of her family’s rules that control her life decisions and actions. She also mentioned in the same autobiographical essay that:

...Everything is decided by my parents a lot of things are not really acceptable in my family. So there are some dreams that I cannot achieve

Lina could not empower herself against the norms set by her parents and bring her self-positioning. She might feel paralyzed and not capable of promoting change as these norms constrained and limited her social positioning and power relations. Therefore, her positional identity is that of the social role she performs as influenced by her parents’ control and social rules available in her culture. This is what Holland *et al* (1998) emphasised above.

Likewise, Kahina mentioned in her autobiographical story how she suffered because of her brother -she labelled ‘the angry’- who prevented her from having any social relation with male students at school and from doing shopping without his permission. The excerpt below illustrated this point:

Story.7 (My angry brother)

...I have passed all my years at middle school and high school with this problem. He forbid me to speak with male friends, he forbid me to go for shopping...

According to my knowledge on the Algerian context, mainly on the Berber community as I am amongst them, I would argue that some conservative families might set such restricted rules on women. Their gender identity that the society shaped restricts them from doing some tasks that men can do. Kahina’s experience with her brother reveals how powerless she feels in her community for not being able to articulate her own identity, but she might have become as the society perceived

her 'a woman that should obey her family'. These identities, Lina and Kahina possessed might be imposed on them because of the culture (Holland *et al.*, 1998) and not developed by themselves or their imagined/desirable identities.

However, a contrasting case appeared in the data. Manel demonstrated a divergent experience of a woman who developed her positional and gender identity thanks to the freedom and support she got from her family. Manel did not face any issues regarding her ethnic belonging. She mentioned in her story:

Story.13 (*My dream, is Me*)

my personality is shaped from my family, in a family where all is permitted, be yourself, be the one you want...we like have a family meetings when all the members speak about their experiences, their dreams and their feelings, I liked the way we share our thoughts and the way we try to understand each other, I like when I am home and I start the speech and each one listen to me then they give me the chance to express myself.

Manel's family meetings might have granted her with a self-authority, positioning and allowed her to develop her agentic self and might have resulted in her the feeling that she could develop her identity compared to the previous participants who have less chances of shaping who they want to be due to the norms they obey.

Feeling powerless as a female in the Kabyle society

My deep exploration of Lina's autobiographical samples let me discover the way this participant gave meaning to herself in her society. The self-identification image I deduced from her story was that of a woman who views herself as being powerless and incapable of becoming the 'who' she shaped in her imagination. Lina compared herself to a caged bird because of the society's rules and cultural beliefs that limited her dreams, identities and transitions in education such as traveling abroad to carry on her studies. The excerpt below unravels this point:

Story.4 (*Lina's autobiographical essay*)

being a Kabyle female in Algeria like being in cage of birds, everything is decided by my parents, a lot of things are not really acceptable in my family. So there are some dreams that I cannot achieve because of my ethnicity.

Her gender and ethnic belonging might be an obstacle against her dreams and who she desires to be. She also added that she is against her ethnic norms and beliefs as mentioned in the excerpt below:

I am not against my family or my race but I am quite nervous of their closeness, a lot of things are forbidden in my family and in Berber society, that I cannot understand, why they give more importance to the boys and not girls or they should put them equal why boys can travel to study and express themselves and their points of views freely but not girls. Girls has the right to travel and see the world, to say what she is feeling and choose their way of life...

Lina experienced a sort of restriction in her social position as a woman. She might have felt that her identity and her role as a woman in her society might be culturally constrained. This is parallel to the story of Shanta I discussed above (see Holland *et al.*, 1998). Lina might have the desire to be a man in her society or have equal rights with men to be able to achieve that agency and power she misses in her real position as a woman.

Conclusion and Further Recommendations

This study explored the experiences of three female students who belong to the Berber society. It revealed the influence of social and cultural norms on women's self-identification and positions in their society, where some are still feeling themselves powerless and marginalized. The findings showed that these participants' identity negotiation is influenced by the social and cultural context. Based on the findings of this study, I would recommend future studies on the place of women in the Algerian society, mainly in the Berber settings, and explore their voices, identities and gender perceptions by themselves and by others. I also recommend a comparative study where both males' and females' positions with be explored.

As this study was part of my PhD research, I did not have enough time to go deeply in studying more cases and collect enough data that might lead to the emergence of new and complex issues regarding women's status in this context.

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