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Investigating the Emotional Theory of Mind in Iranian Married Women: A Descriptive Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

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Keywords

Theory of Mind, Emotion, Women, Phenomenology, Qualitative Study

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Investigating the Emotional Theory of Mind in Iranian Married Women: A Descriptive Phenomenological Study

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In marital relationships, the type of perception of the spouse's behavior affects how the social information and behavior of the other couple is processed, leading to psychological consequences. Thus, a higher perception of each other's mental state is followed by sincerity and more satisfaction with the relations. The present study was performed by using a descriptive phenomenological qualitative approach with the aim of investigating emotional theory of mind in 19 married Iranian women who were selected by purposive sampling in 2017. In order to coding data, MAXQDA 2018 software and the Colaizzi's method were used for coding and analyzing the data, respectively. Finally, about three concepts including the emotion type, emotion expression and emotion regulation were extracted from the interviews. Results showed in emotion type, women remarked positive emotions of satisfaction and gratitude and negative emotions of sorrow and sadness only about themselves. Although emotion expression was possible through three ways but in women's view point, men did not react to positive emotion non-verbally. In the third category, coping with negative emotions in the form of going into retreat was raised merely about men and emotion discharge and forgetfulness merely about women. The findings of the present study, a qualitative examination of emotions of the two genders from the viewpoint of women, is to a great extent in line with previous self-report and quantitative studies; they can be applied for Iran and other countries with similar culture and structure. Keywords: Theory of Mind, Emotion, Women, Phenomenology, Qualitative Study

Introduction

The social communication of individuals is regulated through expressions and recognition of social emotions that enables individuals to act more effectively and adequately meet their needs (Simão, Justo, & Martins, 2008). The theory of mind, mind reading, mentalizing or social intelligence is regarded as the ability to interpret self and other individuals' behavior based on unobservable mental states in the process of social cognition (Górska, 2015), which include imperfect ability to understand one's mental state, understanding the mental states of others, one's attitude towards mental states of others, and others' attitudes towards his mental state too (Bosco, Gabbatore, Tirassa, & Testa, 2016).

The two key dimensions of the theory of mind which are extracted from the review of literature are the distinction between the cold and hot social cognition which refers to the interpretation and reasoning of social information or cognitions and perceptual recognition of social clues or understanding emotions, respectively (Mitchell & Phillips, 2015). During the past three decades, the number of studies regarding the emotions has increased, leading to the developments concerning the issue of gender. Nowadays, gender is evaluated in the framework of interpersonal relationships rather than as an intrapersonal characteristic (McCormick, MacArthur, Shields, & Diccio, 2016).

The results of previous studies indicated few biological gender differences among boys and girls at the beginning of birth, while the harmony between role and gender with respect to

expressing emotions appears in future years due to the social pressures. In this regard, the differences are weak but significant among the adults. For example, women show more emotion expression, especially the positive emotions, while they normally internalize negative emotions such as sadness (Chaplin, 2015).

From the perspective of growth psychology, women have learned to show their emotions more easily (Simon & Nath, 2004). For instance, they express their gratitude (Kashdan, Mishra, Breen, & Froh, 2009), surprise (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013), or satisfaction more than men and benefit more from them. However, pride is more visible in men and is experienced more intensely (Brebner, 2003). Although the recent study shows that there is no gender difference in this kind of emotion (Else-Quest, Higgins, Allison, & Morton, 2012).

Women are considered to be more emotional than men stereotypically (Else-Quest, Higgins, Allison, & Morton, 2012). Emotional self-reports indicate the different amount of daily positive and negative emotions in men and women, because of being in different social situations. Men report mostly positive emotions such as calm and excitement while women report more negative emotions such as anxiety, worry and sadness (Bottesi, Martignon, Cerea, & Ghisi, 2018; Simon & Nath, 2004). The sadness in women is consistent with the level of cultural beliefs about the relationship between gender and depression. Although the two genders do not differ in anger levels, it is more intense and longer in European and American women although this difference does not exist in general (Fischer, Rodriguez Mosquera, Van Vianen, & Manstead, 2004; Simon & Nath, 2004).

The process of social emotional information varies according to relations and gender roles (Simão, Justo, & Martins, 2008) and the higher ability of recognizing emotions in women is due to their greater empathy or emotional self-awareness trait (Ibanez et al., 2013; Wright, Riedel, Sechrest, Lane, & Smith, 2018). Although emotions are better recognized through facial expressions than the audio clues, women differentiate emotions more accurately by sound, especially the tone (Lambrecht, Kreifelts, & Wildgruber, 2014).

Aggression is regarded as one method for displaying negative emotions which is both initiated by the individual and responds to this emotion (Watkins, DiLillo, Hoffman, & Templin, 2015). In addition, it is demonstrated equally among men and women. However, talking and crying that are mostly observed in women, are other ways for emotion discharge and thus mood improvement, and are determined by biological factors rather than social roles, but they also depend on the emotional content of the stimulus which should be considered when judging talkativeness (Arnone, Pompili, Tavares, & Gasbarri, 2011; Fischer, Rodriguez Mosquera, Van Vianen, & Manstead, 2004).

Positive emotions can expand the level of individuals' coping strategies, enhance their stress coping abilities, and accordingly change the mood (Gloria, & Steinhardt, 2016). Having someone who understands our emotions also helps us to become more aware of them, solve the problems better, and have a more satisfying life. This ability is called "empathy," which play a positive effect on the relationship between couples (Cramer & Jowett, 2010).

Considering that emotional differences among males and females have attracted little attention and in marital relationships, the type of perception of the spouse's behavior affects how the social information and behavior of the other couple is processed and leading to psychological consequences (Manne et al., 2014). Thus, a higher perception of each other's mental state is followed by sincerity, more satisfaction with the relations, and more exposure when discussing problems (Thomas & Fletcher, 2003). Therefore, recognizing factors affecting couples relationships can help to increase their satisfaction with their marital life.

Considering that most of the available studies focused on emotions in the form of quantitative studies or relying on self-report methods, without considering the description of emotions based on the theory of mind in the form of qualitative research, the present study

investigated how emotions are emanated among Iranian married women, irrespective of their true nature.

Methodology

Study Design

The present study was performed by using a descriptive phenomenological qualitative approach, which focuses on the in-depth study of specific instances of a phenomenon and the researcher is in a close relationship with the phenomena under study and tries to know himself in the process of experiencing these phenomena (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step process was used in the present study: 1. In the first step of this process, the descriptions presented by each participant are read to gain a sense of the participant. 2. The statements, which are directly related to the phenomenon under study, are extracted in the next step. 3. In addition, the meaning of the significant statements should be carefully formulated. 4. Next, these steps are repeated for all the participants in order to identify the relationship between the meanings and to find the main categories. 5. The results are integrated and a comprehensive description regarding the topic of the study is presented in the fifth step. 6. Then, the description is presented as a cognitive statement. Finally, the participants are asked to state their opinion regarding the results in order to validate the results.

Participants

Using purposive sampling, researchers selected 19 married women from different cities of Iran who were living in a married dormitory of Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman in 2017.

Data Collection

The present study aimed to evaluate the married women's experiences about their own and spouse's emotions. The researcher responsible for conducting the study was a PhD student in psychology, interested in theory of mind, especially the emotions. In order to conduct the study, first she coordinated with the university security guard and two members of the ethics committee in the psychology department, one specialized in family counseling and another in personality differences, then attended each couple's home twice in different days and times, introduced herself (name, field of study and education) and provided the couples with an explanation of the aim and the necessity of participating in the research as "they will be asked some questions regarding emotions in a mutual conversation and researchers hope that this study will help to improve the couples' relations and reduce the divorce rate." The women agreed to take part in the conversation, attended the dormitory's counseling room at the specific time, which had been already arranged and was interviewed individually for about half an hour on average. Therefore, the research inclusion criteria included being female, married, having a minimum education level of high school diploma and the tendency to cooperate.

The counseling room was a quiet place with reasonable light and temperature and the interviewee and interviewer sat on the floor or chair in front of each other depending on the interviewee's preference. Then, after expressing gratitude to interviewees for attending the research, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to the participants more extensively,

"Here, there are some questions about emotions. First, these questions are asked about your own emotions and then, you should answer the same questions about your spouse's emotions. In addition, try to say most of the examples of your marital life." After asking

questions regarding demographic characteristics, the interviewer asked the main questions in accordance with the education level of the interviewee through using words in her understanding and was recorded with her prior permission.

Theory of mind is regarded as a complex concept and has several dimensions, among which two play a significant role in intrapersonal relationships due to the different processes and cognitions and the difficulty of changing perception between the two dimensions. These two dimensions refer to the first- and third-person indicating the ability to attribute mental states to oneself and others, respectively (Bosco et al., 2009). The present study used the open-ended questions in the semi-structured interview suggested by Bosco et al. (2016) which evaluated positive and negative emotions in the sub scales of I-me and other-me, assessing the first- and third-person, respectively. Each participant was free in expressing her perceptions, and the interviewer could demand more explanations in the form of examples in real life in order to better understand the participant's theory of mind.

And the words of "other" or "others" were substituted by "your spouse." The interview began with the question "Have you ever experienced emotions which make you feel good?" "What?" "In which circumstance?" "Can you give an example?" (if no) "why?" and terminated with the question like "In your opinion, can your spouse change his mood when he wants to?" "How?" "On what occasions?" "Can you give an example? (If the answer is negative) Why not, in your opinion?" Some interviewees considered the question apparently easy to answer but needed more time to answer. In order to increase the validity of the data, the researchers tried to be informed of their mental presuppositions and not to involve them in the data collection process as far as possible. Some of the questions were asked repeatedly during the interview, or the answers were re-expressed by the researcher's words to evaluate the validity.

Two interviews were conducted in each dormitory visit and were typed in paragraphs with distinct topics and different colors by the interviewees in order to examine the process of interviews and extract possible codes and categories. The interviews continued until the data reached saturation, when most replies were repeated, and 19 interviews were conducted over three months. At the end of each interview, a number of points were recorded in the form of field note about the verbal and nonverbal behavior of the interviewee and the interview conditions and were later used in data analysis.

Validity

The indicators of credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability were considered. First, Researchers were interested in the subject of research. The study was conducted collectively under the supervision of the aforementioned professors. The demographic information of the participants was collected and the tool with appropriate validity and reliability was used. In addition, the interviews were recorded by mobile and participants' behavior was taken into consideration. Further, the data were collected and analyzed simultaneously. It is worth noting that the adequacy of the sample size for reaching saturation and the ability to generalize the results in couple therapy were considered.

Data Analysis

MAXQDA 2018 software and the Colaizzi's method were used for coding and analyzing the data, respectively. The data were analyzed based on attribute coding, sub coding, simultaneous, initial and holistic coding during the first stage and based on axial and theoretical coding in the second stage, respectively. Further, the number of codes were dropped from the first to second stage. Finally, about thirty codes, six categories, and three concepts were extracted from the interviews.

Findings

Nineteen women with an age range of 20-34 ($M=23.57$) and who had been married between four and fourteen years participated in the present study. In terms of education, based on frequency, 10 persons had MA, 6 persons had BA, 2 persons had high school diploma and associate degree and 1 person had PhD. Thirteen participants had at least one child. Most of them were from Kerman, and Shiraz, and three were from Tehran, Mazandaran, and Ahwaz.

Tables 1 and 2 represent three concepts including the emotion type, emotion expression and emotion regulation were revealed during the data analysis process, along with categories, and main and sub codes for women and men. The meanings of each concept, along with quotations from participants, are presented as follows:

Table 1: Concepts, categories, main codes, and sub codes related to emotions among women

Narratives	Sub-categories	Categories	Concepts
"Of course, losing a loved one is so sad, and the worse was that I lost both my grandfather and grandmother when I was a student here ... I was sad both because they are dead, and because I could not attend their funeral, it really made me very sad."	Satisfaction, Gratitude, Joy, Happiness, Pride	Positive emotion	Emotion type
	Sorrow, Worry, Sadness, Anger	Negative emotion	
"I may show a severe reaction to the problem first, then I huff and don't say anything, then he will apologize and everything will be ok."	Behavioral		Emotion expression
	Verbal	Positive reaction	
	Non-verbal (Body language)		
	Behavioral	Negative reaction	
"When he feels bad, I'm more affected than him when I feel bad. He tries to feel better, talk to laugh, make joke, ask me the reason, then do something."	Substitution		Emotion regulation
	Emotion discharge	Active	
	Forgetfulness	Self	
	Spouse	Others	
	Friends	Inactive	
	Passing of time	Situation	

Table 2: Concepts, categories, main codes, and sub codes related to emotions among men

Narratives	Sub-categories	Categories	Concepts
"It was a great joy and honor for me and my spouse when both of us were accepted in MA program in the same university and the same discipline ... maybe the birth of our child had a good feeling, too."	Joy, Happiness, Pride	Positive emotion	Emotion type
	Worry, Sadness, Anger	Negative emotion	
"I ask him about that problem, he explains it	Behavioral	Positive reaction	Emotion expression

to me and says what happened. For instance, if it's something bad I sympathize, and if it's something good, I'll be happy, I'll be more interested and ask him to explain more."	Verbal			
	Behavioral			
	Verbal	Negative reaction		
	Non-verbal (Body language)			
"When I feel bad, I entertain myself, make myself busy doing something... for example watching movie... or I send an SMS to my friends, call them, and forget the problem."	Substitution		Active	
	Going into retreat	Self		
	Spouse	Others		
	Friends		Inactive	Emotion regulation
	Passing of time	Situation		

Emotion Type

This category consists of positive and negative emotions. Positive emotions are satisfaction, gratitude, joy, happiness, pride and negative emotions are sorrow, worry, sadness, anger. The positive emotion mostly mentioned by participants as good emotion is happiness and joy (excitement), and gratitude to God and spouse, satisfaction and pride are other extracted codes about women while, the emotions of gratitude and satisfaction were not extracted for men. Sadness is the worst emotion that is proposed by women about both genders, when confronting bad events. Anger and worry were reported for both men and women, and sorrow was reported for just women. The participant 5 expressed her good emotions regarding the events in her life:

It was a great joy and honor for me and my spouse when both of us were accepted in MA program in the same university and the same discipline ... maybe the birth of our child had a good feeling, too.

Considering the Colaizzi's phenomenological method, we extracted the statements describing the emotion type including joy, honor, and good feeling. Then based on the other participants' statements, common meanings were identified for the statements such as good emotion in the form of joy and were categorized as positive emotions based on the emotion type.

Emotion Expression

Based on emotion type, expression of emotion was in the form of positive and negative reactions, each of which is divided into behavioral, verbal and non-verbal categories. In fact, women hold that they and their spouses have often tried to express positive and negative emotions through the word and share them to each other. Logical explanation and empathy, crying in women, and aggression in men were also the cases raised by women, along with the descriptions of negative reactions. However, the words of many of the participants indicated that the couples understand each other's feelings first through non-verbal aspects such as expression and tone, but they were mentioned less than the verbal aspects. The participant 3 explained about her behavior after arguing with her spouse:

I may show a severe reaction to the problem first, then I huff and don't say anything, then he will apologize and everything will be ok.

First, we indicated the statements regarding severe reaction, huff, don't say anything, which are related to the emotional theory of mind, in quotation marks. These statements were considered as aggression with respect to the other quotations. Accordingly, behavioral and non-verbal sub categories were presented which were classified under the negative reaction category related to expressing emotion.

Emotion Regulation

The emotion regulation took place in *both* active and inactive methods. In the active method, the individual her/himself tried to change her/his mood through substituting the emotion, thought, behavior, emotion discharge, going into retreat or forgetfulness, while she/he sought help from others such as friends or spouse, or changing the situation such as passage of the time helped her/him to improve in the second method. Based on women's quotes, men used the strategies for regulating emotion similar to those of women; however, they mostly chose loneliness instead of emotion discharge. Although women believed that their husbands had little ability to change their moods, men had a great effect on changing women's emotional state and were less affected by women negative emotions. The participant 11 discussed the methods she used for changing her emotional states:

When I feel bad, I entertain myself, make myself busy doing something... for example watching movie... or I send an SMS to my friends, call them, and forget the problem.

After reviewing the statements briefly and gaining a general idea, some were highlighted such as make myself busy, watching movie, send an SMS, call, and forget the problem and were sub categorized as substitution and forgetfulness. In the next step identifying the relationship between different quotations regarding this subject, the category of employing a method by the person for having a more active role in changing the mood called "emotion regulation" was suggested after reviewing the literature.

Discussion

The present study *provided* some information regarding married women's experiences about their and their husbands' emotions in Iranian culture and context. The findings revealed that emotions can be studied based on emotion type, emotion expression, and emotion regulation.

Women generally express *more* negative and positive emotions about themselves. Positive emotions of joy, happiness and pride, and negative emotions of sadness, worry and anger were extracted about men while women expressed the emotions of gratitude, pride, satisfaction and sorrow, while retelling events related to themselves. These findings are in line with women's ability to recognize the subtle facial emotions, especially negative emotions, more accurately and quickly, and showing a higher reaction to the stimulants leading to these emotions (Bottesi, Martignon, Cerea, & Ghisi, 2018; Fischer, Rodriguez Mosquera, Van Vianen, & Manstead, 2004; Hampson, van Anders, & Mullin, 2006; Hoffmann, Kessler, Eppel, Rukavina, & Traue, 2010; Simon & Nath, 2004).

Thought suppression and more negative orientations toward problems are involved in reporting more worries among women (Bottesi, Martignon, Cerea, & Ghisi, 2018). In addition,

some women expressed that they have suppressed their emotions due to concern about changing others' thought and attitude about themselves leading to their intellectual conflict, negative mood and a reduction in the quality of interaction with their spouses.

Thanking God and others were among the emotions emerged as "good feeling" in women when a pleasant occasion showed up, but none of the women mentioned it about their husbands. Less appreciation among men can be attributed to their critical evaluation of gratitude and considering less benefit (Kashdan, Mishra, Breen, & Froh, 2009), while hearing the expression of gratitude predicts changes towards satisfaction with the relationships (Algoe, S. B., Fredrickson, & Gable, 2013).

Although gender styles indicate more pride experience by men (Brebner, 2003; Else-Quest, Higgins, Allison, & Morton, 2012), the pride emotion was mentioned for both genders after analyzing the interviews in the present study. A meta-analysis about emotions show that the existence of gender differences regarding the pride emotion is unfounded (Else-Quest, Higgins, Allison, & Morton, 2012), and is supported by the findings of the present study as well.

Women's excitement was related to surprise gift, result effort and having a child which was not mentioned about men. joy (excitement and being surprised) is one of the positive emotions which is mostly displayed by girls, and there is more evidence with ageing, interaction with strange individual, and a sense of social pressure to hide negative emotions through looking cool (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013).

Regarding the emotion of satisfaction, the gender differences indicate women's higher scores in most of the international studies (Brebner, 2003), which consistent with the results in the present study.

Women expressed positive emotions in themselves and their husbands in the form of behavior like an increased interaction with the spouse, affability, giving or taking gifts, spending more time for cooking and decorating the food, and going out and watching movies. However, negative emotions were expressed in the form of crying, aggression like irritability, blame and reduced interaction.

The findings indicated that both men and women may react aggressively to each other's negative mood and emotional discharge in conflicting situations (Watkins, DiLillo, Hoffman, & Templin, 2015) and it is a behavior that is extracted about both genders from the interviews.

Crying is regarded as one method for expressing and regulating negative emotions which was mostly reported for women, and only one woman mentioned it as the normal reaction of her husband to emotion of anger which the relevance of crying to the type of emotion, severity, depression and female gender role support it (Fischer, Rodriguez Mosquera, Van Vianen, & Manstead, 2004; Santiago-Menendez & Campbell, 2013). The severity of anger and depression indicates crying among women and men, respectively. However, like women, men tend to cry in sadness, but they cry less, which can be argued that the possibility of its expression is limited by individuals' cultural expectations and socialization (Santiago-Menendez & Campbell, 2013).

Faced with both types of emotion, its expression in the form of talking with the spouse, friend, mother, or older sister was used by both genders and widely by women while praying was only expressed by a woman. This finding is in line with the result that women manage negative emotion, especially anger, through verbal ways and gaining social support like talking to others and praying (Arnone, Pompili, Tavares, & Gasbarri, 2011; Simon & Nath, 2004). Reviewing the tables of concepts and codes show that men and women did not merely empathize with their spouses, they reacted negatively so women guided or talked to them reasonably too.

In addition, women reported their paying more attention to non-verbal symptoms of emotion expression such as facial expression especially eyes, and tone of speaking, and

attributed the husband's neglect of these symptoms to his mental conflict and gender. However, in women's opinions, few men attended to their wives' facial expression and tone of speaking. In this regard, some studies considered men's look at individuals' mouths and women's attention to their eyes as inherent and social phenomena for recognizing emotions (Lambrecht, Kreifelts, & Wildgruber, 2014; Sullivan, Campbell, Hutton, & Ruffman, 2017).

Women stated that most men remain silent in sadness and attributed it to their needs for being alone, and they did not talk to their husbands if they wanted to. Although sharing emotions with others is regarded as one of the ways to regulate emotions, sharing anger leads to immediate beneficial effects such as decreased intensity of mental and delayed emotions, while sharing sadness resulting in delayed limited positive effects such as an increased willingness to try to solve the problem (Brans, Van Mechelen, Rimé, & Verduyn, 2014). Therefore, men's going into retreat in anger can be related to the delayed limited positive effect from sharing anger for them.

Replacing positive emotions with negative ones was another method mostly used by women, which was also mentioned about a few men. Based on the literature review, flexible individuals use positive emotions to pass through negative emotions and accordingly can better adapt to inevitable daily stress (Gloria & Steinhardt, 2016; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). A number of women emphasized that they try to forget not to think about the issue triggering the negative emotion which indicated their use of suppression strategy and one case of hated emotion can be mentioned as the consequence. Further, the studies revealed different consequences of using this strategy by the two genders as women suppress their anger, report more anger, fury, sadness, and hatred, and swear more while these features are reported by men by using an alternative strategy (Hosie, Milne, & McArthur, 2005).

Although a review of literature revealed that compared to women, men use more behavioral strategies such as using drugs to change their mood and overcome negative emotions (Simon & Nath, 2004). However, it was not referred to as a regulating strategy in spite of the explicit statement of a participant about her husband's addiction. Further, in those cases that men talked to their wives to change their emotional states, women usually started to talk and many of them stated that their husbands have little ability to change mood and improve significantly after talking to them, due to more empathy in women (Ibanez et al., 2013), which helps women to provide more social support. In addition, it seems that when women provide support, recipients experience more increase in positive emotion and decrease in negative emotion (Williamson & O'Hara, 2017), and the level of perceived empathy is positively related to satisfaction with relations, which consequently reduces conflict (Cramer & Jowett, 2010). Based on the results of the interview, another factor which passively helps to change the mood is related to the passage of time which plays a significant role in turning the negative emotion into a positive one and vice versa in both genders.

Finally, the analysis of the narrations reflects the common aspects of the perception of emotions among women. In emotion type, women remarked positive emotions of satisfaction and gratitude and negative emotions of sorrow and sadness only about themselves. Although emotion expression was possible through three ways but in the women's views, men did not react to positive emotion non-verbally. In the third category, coping with negative emotions in the form of going into retreat was raised merely about men and emotion discharge and forgetfulness merely about women. In addition, as there may be differences in women's emotional theory of mind about men with those of men, the findings are largely in line with the research literature, which are based on the viewpoints of both genders and quantitative self-reports. Given that couples' perspective taking is an issue which can play a role in their relations as a determining factor, it should be considered in family pathology and treatment.

The current study was limited by examining emotional theory of mind from the perspective of one gender, conducting the interview in one session and disregarding an

opportunity to build trust towards the interviewer. In addition, there were some problems such as drug consumption taboo, impossibility to return interview text to participants due to their reluctance and negative experiences like having an argument with the spouse because of the type of answers to questions, their involvement with their jobs, and finally a lengthy process of sample saturation. Finally, a majority of the participants were selected from Kerman and Shiraz provinces.

The results of this study, due to their native nature and the use of a qualitative approach can be used comprehensively generalized to other parts of Iran and other countries with similar culture and structure. However, most studies in this area were conducted by using a quantitative approach, report only the results, without explaining the phenomena from individuals' viewpoints. Thus, the present study could fill the gap in this area by using a qualitative approach.

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