

Facing Enacted Norms of Higher Education

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Abstract

This study of student experiences, from the domain of science and technology, identified a majority of reported negative experiences to be related to underlying norms of the educational context. Significant differences in where and how this norm enactment took place were found between female and male respondents. Important normative aspects, such as masculinity and social engagement, were identified. Processes of norm enactment and implications for strategic pedagogical development, particularly regarding inclusive higher education, are discussed.

Introduction

Increasing diversity of enrolling students makes it more important than ever to understand cultural dimensions of higher education. Interplay between students and the cultural contexts they meet during their education is of critical importance for student retention and academic success (see for example Tinto, 2010). This interplay is greatly affected by the norms and values being enacted by other participants in the context. This study, from the domain of science and education at a Swedish research university, exemplifies how enacted norms contribute to student experiences of higher education. Implications for strategic pedagogical development, particularly regarding inclusive higher education are discussed.

Method

All students enrolled on science and technology programmes at the studied university in May 2012, approximately 3500, were invited to answer a web-based questionnaire about their educational experiences. There were 588 female and 1009 male respondents, reflecting the gender distribution of the whole population. The responses were anonymized.

One aspect explored in the questionnaire was negative study experiences. Students were asked whether they had experienced negative treatment from others during their education. Negative experiences were reported by 12% of the female respondents and 5,5% of the male respondents.

The students reporting negative experiences were asked to provide further information in a free-text question. A qualitative analysis of these responses, inspired by Grounded Theory (Robson, 2011), was conducted. Iterative separation, coding and sorting of answers identified a number of significant structures concerning the major themes of the negative experiences, the different arenas where educational culture is enacted and the underlying norms of the educational culture of the studied environment. Checking with both fellow researchers and students during the process controlled the validity and reliability of coding and classification. Two focus group interviews, with four and five students respectively from the studied population, were held after the conclusion of the analysis to discuss, validate and expand on the findings.

Findings

The majority of reported negative experiences were identified as relating to underlying norms of the educational context. Significant differences in where and how this norm enactment took place were found between female and male respondents. Important normative aspects were identified from the free-text answers. These findings are elaborated upon in greater detail in this section and are illustrated with excerpts from student responses, translated from Swedish.

Major themes of negative experiences

The analysis of the reported negative experiences yielded four major themes. The most common theme was negative norm enactment, where students perceive mistreatment due to a mismatch between aspects of their social identity and the norms of the educational context. This theme was present in 55% of the free-text answers. This theme clearly reflects the educational culture being enacted by teachers and students. It was therefore chosen for further study in this project.

I have felt that my questions have lower priority time and time again, and believe that this can be due to me not being seen as "belonging", neither by other students nor by instructors. This is probably because I don't have the same interest or similar manners.

The other three major themes were complaints about teacher and campus quality (19%), different status of educational programmes (16%), and complaints about regulations and policies (10%).

Different arenas of norm enactment

Three different arenas were found for negative norm enactment through analysis of the answers. The main difference between these was found to be the different actors doing the enacting.

The most common arena consists of situations where academic teachers were the primary actors, such as lectures and lessons. Negative norm-related experiences in this arena were reported by about 4% of both female and male respondents.

Some teachers favour students who are actively engaged in the lectures. Other students are looked at with contempt and almost rudely treated.

The second arena consists of educational situations where teachers and students jointly enact normative aspects of their educational culture. Norm enactment in this arena was reported by about 4% of the female respondents, but by less than 1% of the male.

I sometimes experience that I as a woman am not taken as seriously as my male co-students, but I presume that is more about attitudes of individual students and teachers.

The third arena consists of formal and informal situations where students interact with each other. Norm enactment in this arena was reported by about 4% of the female respondents, but by less than 1% of the male.

I have been called some things because they don't know how to relate to different people. So I don't get on very well with other students.

Normative aspects of the studied educational culture

The analysis of responses concerning negative norm enactment yielded different aspects of the normative culture. The three most common aspects were related to masculinity, social engagement, and being "Swedish".

The most common aspect concerned masculinity and was present in 54% of the statements about norm enactment. These responses reflect a masculine norm for programme students of science and technology, where female students are seen as less knowledgeable and in greater need of help than their male peers. Reports about negative experiences connected to this norm come most frequently from female students. The incidents reported by female students are evenly distributed between the three different arenas presented in the previous section.

Sometimes I'm treated differently because I'm a girl, by teachers and other students. It is mainly about expectations. They do not expect that one should be as good in mathematics and technology and therefore one has to make twice the effort to disprove them. And then one does more work but gets less appreciation.

The teacher didn't believe me when I said that the server was down. The teacher responded as if I just wasn't technical enough to understand what I should be doing. When a male student said the same thing two minutes later the teacher believed him.

Some male students also report negative experiences related to the masculine norm. These answers tell a similar story, but with a different perspective. These students perceive that male students are negatively treated as female students receive more attention and extra support.

As there are few girls on the programme, the few who are there are very much pampered and one can sometimes think that this is negative for the boys in some cases.

The second most common normative aspect, present in 14% of the statements, concerned a norm about social engagement, where programme students who do not actively engage with fellow students are seen as caring less about their education and therefore less worthwhile to cooperate with. Reports about negative experiences connected to this norm were equally frequent among both male and female students.

If you don't engage in social activities you end up totally outside. That is lousy. Teachers take for granted that all students have "friends to discuss with." No consideration for those who don't.

If you end up outside the gang you have to study a lot harder. There are a lot of prejudices and "you have to cope on your own", instead of everyone helping each other.

The third common normative aspect expressed in the responses concerned being "Swedish". This was present in 11% of the statements and relates to an expectation that students lacking a "Swedish" background are less knowledgeable and more inclined to break rules. Reports about negative experiences connected to this norm were equally frequent among both male and female students.

I [dress according to my culture] and sometimes meet the notion that I maybe don't know as much as the others. But that will not stop me.

A teacher pointed out that I and another student probably would cheat and copy another group. Both my course mate and me are immigrants. The other group that he thought we would copy from were Swedes. The comical thing is that it actually was the other way around.

Other normative aspects expressed in the responses where youth, heterosexuality and an upper-middle-class background. These were only present in few (3% or less) of the answers. Some students (16%) expressed that they experienced themselves as being negatively treated because they were different, but did not detail in which way.

Discussion

The findings of this study illustrate the importance of underlying norms in the enactment of educational culture and correlate well to both current theoretical models and previous research. The majority of the negative educational experiences reported by the students investigated in this project were related to norm enactment. This indicates that greater awareness of such norms and how they are enacted and perceived as well as interventions aimed at transforming the educational culture could greatly contribute to more positive educational experiences.

Most of the negative experiences reported related to norm enactment can be characterized in terms of students feeling that they were not seen as individuals, but as "labels" such as "female", "immigrant", "asocial" or "old". Actors in the educational context, such as teachers and other students, then treated them according to notions about such stereotypes that were experienced in a negative way. This analysis was confirmed in the focus group interviews.

I have just one thing to say: A person should be treated as a human, and not just based upon some background factor, knowledge, personality or such.

The differences in male and female students experiences within the three different arenas of norm enactment raises questions regarding power relationships in the educational context, such as who establishes, maintains and enforces different norms? Male and female students report negative experiences to a similar extent in the arena controlled by the teacher. However, female students report negative experiences in the other two arenas about four times as frequently as the males. This clearly indicates the role of other students in upholding and enforcing some of the norms.

Masculine norms in science and engineering education are a well-established research area and the findings of this study relate well to such research (e.g. Thomas, 1990; Evetts, 1996; Danielsson, 2009; Steele, 2010). It is interesting to note that all male and some female respondents connected their negative experiences related to this norm to teachers "helping" female students to a larger extent. Male students experienced this as negative as they perceive that female students become more "pampered", whereas female students experienced this as negative as they dislike being treated as less knowledgeable. The issue of "help" to female students has been explored previously (Powell, Dainty & Bagilhole, 2011). The findings of this study, including the reflections from female students in the follow-up focus groups

interviews, support the claim by Powell, Dainty & Bagilhole that such "help" often is motivated by good intentions and misplaced beliefs about female students need for assistance.

Practical implications

Different norms and stereotypes have a significant influence on how we think about our practice and how we enact different ideas. Presupposed ideas about students affect both how they are seen and met as well as how they see themselves and act in the educational context. This study clearly implies that development initiatives aimed at raising awareness and transforming practice regarding such issues should be aimed at both teachers and students. This is, at least in the studied context, especially relevant concerning gender issues.

Another implication concerns how teachers help and interact with students. Help can be interpreted in different ways and, as seen in this study, sometimes cause negative experiences. It is important that support is seen to be available for all students and not only certain categories of students. Different types of support play an important role in helping students cope with different parts of the academic environment. Educational developers constantly strive to provide and improve this support, both directly and indirectly. This study strongly stresses the importance of initiatives that are primarily aimed at helping *all* students, thereby strengthening an inclusive educational environment.

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