

Cross-Cultural Differences in Teachers' Interpersonal Behaviors and Their Impact on Students' Learning Experiences in Higher Education: A Study of Pashtun Culture

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ABSTRACT

The study describes the impact of cross-cultural differences on interpersonal behaviors of teachers and how these behaviors influence the learning experience of students in a Higher Educational Institution (HEI) in the Pashtun community. Teachers' behaviors like empathy, clarity, immediacy, and care are known to be important in promoting student engagement and academic achievement. These acts, however, are explained by cultural values that are deeply rooted. The Pashtun culture is based on adab (respect), honor, hierarchy, and collectivism, which influence the perceptions of students. These values tend to be opposite to the Western pedagogical standards, which are more informal and direct. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed in gathering data by using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with Pashtun students. A thematic analysis showed that the issues of the importance of formal respect in teacher-student interactions, cultural sensitivities in public praise, gender and modesty, and the impact of cultural alignment on students' motivation and participation are important. In the research, there is a realization of the necessity of culturally responsive pedagogical practices that observe the Pashtun cultural norms to promote the engagement of students in the classroom. The research results add to the literature of intercultural communication and educational psychology by suggesting that culturally-sensitive pedagogy should be applied in building inclusive and effective learning among the underserved communities of the collectivist culture.

Keywords: Collectivist Culture.; Culturally Responsive Teaching; Pashtun Culture; Student Engagement; Teacher Interpersonal Behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

The teacher-student relationship is one of the foundations of student success, academic interest, and personal well-being in the changing environment of higher education (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Wentzel,

2010). These relationships are principally determined by teacher interpersonal behaviors such as clarity, empathy, immediacy, confirmation, and care that influence classroom climate and have a direct impact on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement of students (Derakhshan, 2021; Myers & Goodboy, 2016). Although these behaviors have been presented as being universally advantageous, they are, in reality, highly culture-based (Gudykunst, 2004; Hofstede & Minkov, 2010). This offers an urgent challenge to question how such interpersonal behaviors are viewed, understood, and acted upon in non-Western cultural contexts, particularly in collectivist cultures such as the Pashtun community in South Asia.

The study discusses the perception of the Pashtun men of the education of girls, and Pashtunwali (tribal code), which involves notions like honor (Nang), dignity, gender roles, as well as the impact of respect and reputation of family (izzat) on the choice of education (Jamal, 2016). It is especially applicable in the demonstration of the extent to which cultural values are ingrained in teaching, not just attitudes towards education access, but also attitudes towards authority and proper behavior in educational environments. Such values based on hierarchy, collectivism, and social roles have the potential to shape the way students perceive the actions of teachers, particularly in societies where the cultural norms govern the high expectations of society regarding respect, discipline, and interpersonal behavior.

To give an example, teacher immediacy or informality that is inclined to be encouraged by Western pedagogies may be opposite to Pashtun norms that demand formality, authority, and respect for older people and teachers. Similarly, it is possible to identify such behaviors as praise in the midst of the crowd, direct feedback, or even humor that will be viewed in different ways by the students who have been conditioned to believe in modesty, restraint, and indirectness. Empirical studies conducted indicate that although teacher immediacy and humor can be useful in enhancing classroom engagement and academic motivation (Hussain, Batool, & Naz, 2024), they can also be difficult for some students when they contradict cultural norms regarding teacher authority and social distance. Similarly, feedback that is too open or critical in front of the audience might worsen shyness and diminish the participation of students who seek deferential and indirect communication (Iqbal, Kakar, Naaz, & Fatima, 2024; Ahmad, Siddique, & Arshad, 2020). Good intentions in such circumstances may push out students unwillingly due to culturally insensitive practices, discourage communication, or challenge the perceived authority of the instructor.

Although the literature on the perception and response of Pashtun students to teacher interpersonal behaviors is currently underrepresented, the existing diversity and dynamism of higher education institutions and the trend toward culturally responsive teaching should be considered as a factor in the growing diversity of higher education in the United States and internationally. The current literature on the interaction between teachers and students is predominantly based on Western, individualistic contexts, and it does not reflect the cultural particulars of the collectivist, high-context societies like the Pashtun one (Hofstede, 2010; Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). With the explosion of higher education to new parts of the world in transnational programmers and digital platforms, these culturally ingrained expectations need to be comprehended to create inclusive, productive learning experiences.

Further, with the digitalization of learning environments through online, hybrid, and AI-mediated learning, there is complexity added to these interactions. Nonverbal immediacy signals such as eye contact or gestures may be reduced or removed entirely in these contexts, as well as how teacher warmth, clarity, and presence can be expressed both through cultural and technological borders (Garrison & Archer, 2010; Kozlowski & Bell, 2020). These are especially relevant to such students representing traditional or oral

societies like the Pashtun, the face-to-face communication, tone, and body language of which have significant communication value.

This study is intended to explore how the Pashtun students interpret the interpersonal behavior of their teachers, how individual and cultural interaction can lead to either more or less participation in learning, and what pedagogical approaches can be those that can potentially be most effective in the setting. In particular, it will answer the following questions: Establish the effect of the cultural values of the Pashtun on the perception of the student of the interpersonal behavior of the teachers. Get the effects of the culturally compatible and culturally incompatible behaviors of the teacher on student learning behavior and interaction in the classroom. Find out the instructional strategies that can facilitate the learning process within the Pashtun cultural norms setting.

The research can assist the researchers in getting to know more about the culture-responsive teaching since experience of intercultural communication, educational psychology, and Pashtun cultural studies may allow one to see the problem in a new light. It reminds us of the necessity to exercise an emotionally sensitive, contextual pedagogy that is of paramount sensitivity to the diversity of cultural scripts that students come with into the classroom. Overall, the research will not only contribute to the current body of knowledge in the industry of culture and communication in education, but it will also have certain implications for teachers and institutions who can offer high-quality services to student groups that are currently underrepresented in the literature on education research.

Objective of the Study

1. To measure the influence of Pashtun cultural values on the perceptions of teacher interpersonal behaviors among the students.
2. To investigate how the culturally consistent or inconsistent teacher behaviors affect the learning engagement of Pashtun students.
3. To find out strategies of teaching that can facilitate effective learning in the environment of the Pashtun culture.

Research questions

1. What are the cultural values of the Pashtun, and how do they affect the way students perceive interpersonal behaviors of classroom teachers?
2. How do teachers' interpersonal behaviors, which are culturally compatible or incompatible, influence the learning engagement of Pashtun students?
3. What are the most effective teaching strategies that can be used to facilitate learning in the Pashtun cultural context?

METHODOLOGY

This study has utilized the qualitative phenomenological research design to examine how empathy, immediacy, clarity, confirmation, and care are perceived and experienced by students in the Pashtun culture of higher education learning as teacher interpersonal behavior. The fundamental objective was to come up with profound culturally based insights on the effects of such behaviors on student engagement, motivation, and student participation, especially in face-to-face learning contexts. It was deemed most suitable to use a qualitative approach in this enquiry, as it can be used to explore subjective interpretations

and lived experiences that quantitative techniques tend to overlook, particularly in culturally sensitive environments.

The research was based on a phenomenological approach that aims at comprehending the lived experiences of people and the meanings they associate with those experiences. This would be the best way to study how Pashtun students perceive and emotionally react to teacher actions, when the latter are consistent with their cultural norms and when not. Phenomenology assisted in discovering the existing scripts and interpersonal processes of culture that influence the educational experiences of students, especially in the aspects of respect, authority, communication style, and emotional expression.

The sample was determined purposely based on the University of Swat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, where the Pashtun ethnic group is mostly located. Both undergraduate students and students in a diverse range of academic disciplines were included in the sample to allow a diverse range of perspectives. The qualifications required of the participants were that they should be Pashtun, they must be enrolled in a higher education program currently, and they must have experience in traditional classroom environments. The number of 10 students who participated in the study was balanced in terms of gender, academic levels, and fields of study.

The data were gathered by semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The interviews allowed the participants to give personal accounts of their experiences with their teachers in detail, including sharing narratives and perceptions of behaviors of teachers, which included feedback, praise, discipline, and communication style. The semi-structured format was flexible, though it directed the discussion toward central themes on the issues of teacher interpersonal behavior. The interviews took place in Pashto, Urdu, or English, according to the preference of the participant, so that the participants felt comfortable and natural. Besides individual interviews, focus group discussions were conducted to elicit common cultural interpretations and group-level reflections so that viewpoints could be compared, and cultural norms that might not be elicited in individual interviews surfaced.

All interviews and FGDs had been audio-recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed to be analyzed. The thematic analysis technique was applied to the data, i.e., the six phases of the framework suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) were used. This was carried out through familiarization with the data, coding, identification, and review of themes, and finally, interpretation of the same themes within the context of the cultural and theoretical framework of the study. Key focus was put on the discovery of patterns of cultural congruence or incongruence, emotional reaction to teacher conduct, and variation in experience in a traditional and digital classroom setting.

Among the primary issues of this analysis were ethical issues. The ethics committee of the institutional research approved them and informed all the participants to consent. The privacy and dignity of the participants were observed because of the anonymity, secrecy, and retention of the information, which was kept in a secure place. The cultural sensitivity was practiced at every level of interaction after it was understood that the interaction between the teacher and the students in the Pashtun society was sensitive and even hierarchical. This trust was achieved especially by means of the local languages and culture, correct procedures of interviewing, where the participants themselves could be competent to talk openly and honestly about what they have gone through.

It was also the best study design because it was a qualitative and phenomenological study; it is the most suitable in uncovering the experience and perception of the Pashtun students of the teacher's interpersonal behaviors. This approach not only provided a culturally respectful study but also provided profound

insights into how students in their respective sociocultural backgrounds perceive the behaviors of the teacher. These percepts belong to the perception of worthiness to the development of culturally responsive pedagogy, not to the face-to-face education scenario, but to the larger discourse of cross-cultural exposure in the medium of higher learning. The sample size was the purposive one, but of the students of the University of Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The study choice was very narrow in the sense that it comprised Pashtun students who had been seeking a study in this institution to develop a narrow study of how the elements of traditional culture bear on the overall attitude of teacher behavior in the face-to-face classroom situation. Even this interest gave space to another study, which was about the norms of the local culture- that is, the ones that were foreign to the Pashtun nation in Swat.

Data collected through semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion were analyzed based on the thematic analysis framework that has been proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interpretations of transcripts of the interviews were critically analyzed to identify key codes related to interpersonal practices of the teachers, and the cultural meaning of the practices. These codes were further divided into themes based on whether they are congruent or incongruent to the Pashtun values, and the impact that they have on the engagement of students. The analysis was based on theories of intercultural communication and educational psychology with specific attention to such basic cultural values of the Pashtun culture as respect, hierarchy, and collectivism.

They discovered that the conduct of teachers who fulfilled the cultural requirements was significantly more likely to encourage student motivation and participation. Conversely, actions that were interpreted as culturally inappropriate inhibited involvement and interfered with the teacher-student relationship. The reflexivity and triangulation were used in the research process to guarantee the credibility, cultural sensitivity, and reliability of the findings. Altogether, the paper presents useful information concerning the effective face-to-face teaching techniques that are not only pedagogically sound, but also culturally responsive in the given situation of the University of Swat.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Theme 1: Respect and Formality in Teacher-Student Interaction.

Students emphasized the significance of respect and professional boundaries that were based on the cultural notion of adab. Informal attitudes such as over-joking and referring to students by their first names were considered to be uncomfortable and disrespectful. As one example, Hamza pointed out that a teacher was being too friendly.

1. *A: "A teacher was overly joking and was pretending to be a friend-it was awkward."*
2. *B: "Teachers should respect and be well-bounded and formal to us."*
3. *C: "Instructors ought to adhere to adab, formal tone, and not to make unnecessary eye contact or jokes, particularly among female students."*

Theme 2: Cultural Sensitivity in and Around Praise and Public Recognition

It was common to embarrass students, particularly those who were female and shy, through public praise. Individual, low-key praise was used to keep students comfortable and motivated. Ayesha also reported that she withdrew due to direct public praise.

1. *A: "Praise before an audience is embarrassing, particularly in my*

case."

2. *B: "Sometimes it is all right to praise the student publicly, but only when he or she feels comfortable."*
3. *C: "Once, a new teacher praised the boys directly in front of the teacher. I got extremely humiliated, and I did not talk in the classroom afterwards."*

Theme 3: Gender and Modesty Considerations

Female students highlighted the importance of respecting gender norms and modesty, especially in mixed-gender settings and online classes. Many expressed discomforts with being asked to turn on cameras or speak publicly in mixed groups, recommending options like private feedback or female-only discussion spaces.

1. *A: "Many teachers don't consider our gender norms in online settings. They ask us to turn on cameras, which we avoid."*
2. *B: "Give options—like private feedback or discussion forums—for girls to participate comfortably."*
3. *C: "Some male teachers don't realize girls may not be comfortable turning on cameras or speaking freely in mixed groups."*

Theme 4: The Effects of Teacher Behaviors toward Student Engagement.

Students became motivated and interested when teachers acted in ways that supported the cultural values of the Pakistani people: respect, formality, and modesty. Incongruent behaviors led to discomfort and low participation. Asad claimed that cultural fit brings more respect and engagement.

1. *A: "When we teachers do as we have always done, such as taking care not to violate space and tone, we are more relaxed and more participatory."*
2. *B: "It is very important to have cultural fit. When a teacher respects us, we respect him or her more and interact better."*
3. *C: "As long as the teacher treats us well and does not talk in a harsh tone, we become more motivated."*

Theme 5: Recommendations in Culturally Responsive Teaching.

According to the students, teachers should acquire knowledge of Pashtun culture, professionalism should be preserved with warmth, and flexible participation opportunities should be offered, especially in the digital environment. Bilal emphasized the idea of teacher training to learn the peculiarities of cultural communication.

1. *A: "Educators ought to be educated on our culture, and they should not act in ways that we deem disrespectful."*
2. *B: "Due respect, peace of environment, and time to be quiet students is a learning matter."*
3. *C: "The teachers must be trained as to how culture will affect communication, even on the internet."*

DISCUSSION

In this study, the revelation of the significance of cultural backdrop in the manner the Pashtun learners perceive the interpersonal actions of their educators is illuminating, and the consequence is a determinant factor in the degree of their learning encounters in college education. Similar to current literature on teacher-student relationships (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Wentzel, 2010), our findings indicate that interpersonal relationships such as respect, empathy, and clarity are important in influencing student motivation and engagement. However, the adab (respect), hierarchy, and modesty expectations of the Pashtun people are quite different than those of the Western culture, and that is, the culturally responsive pedagogy process becomes a necessity (Hofstede, 2010; Gutekunst, 2004).

Such a preference in formal and respectful teacher-student relationships is evidenced by recent studies in collectivist societies, where hierarchical relationships still dominate in the communication relationships (Where does culture belong at school? China's hierarchical teaching style is changing (Xu et al., 2023). Just as in the Asian and Middle East, where it can be seen in research (e.g., Chen & Mallinckrodt, 2002; Fadda, 2016), Pashtun students saw informality and over-joking as challenges to teacher authority and discomfort. This follows the cultural aspect of power distance (Hofstede, 2010), where the respect that is accorded to teachers and elders prevents informal interpersonal relationships in a learning institution.

The compliment within the general environment was also usually embarrassing, particularly among female and shy students, in line with studies that show that saving face and not wanting attention are central values to collectivist and high-context societies (Lee et al., 2018). This tendency is also proven by recent research. As an illustration, Sullins et al. (2024) have discovered that high shame-proneness students actively evade being noticed by others, as they are fearful of being looked down upon, and this interferes with participation and self-control. Correspondingly, Kim and Turner (2024) demonstrated that Korean doctoral students in the U.S. had what they call shame triggers that were associated with cultural differences and social comparisons that forced them to reject the social recognition offered by society. Fang et al. (2024) also found among Chinese students that academic emotions like pride and shame are closely related to public performance, and praise can even increase anxiety instead of motivation. These results indicate that explicit positive reinforcement strategies typical of Western classrooms may not always be effective and, in fact, may tend to discourage participation in collectivist cultural situations.

The issue of gender and modesty also puts the cultural norms and educational practices into relation. The unease of female students in using cameras and speaking in front of a mixed gender audience justifies previous research on gender interactions in conservative societies (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Najmabadi, 2014). The possibility to provide alternative forms of participation can be associated with the inclusive pedagogical models that are considerate of the cultural values and ensure the equitable learning chances (Banks, 2021).

The research is also part of the increasing literature on the topic of teacher immediacy and interpersonal communication in diverse cultural interactions (Derakhshan, 2021). Although immediacy behaviors in most cases breed intimacy and interaction, their suitability is influenced by cultural scripts (Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, 2006). Formality and warmth of teachers should be balanced in Pashtun classrooms to uphold respect and authority, which supports the necessity of culturally flexible methods of communication.

Further, the introduction of digital and hybrid learning environments creates further dilemmas, especially since a culture that values nonverbal communication is being contested (Garrison et al., 2010; Kozlowski

and Bell, 2020). The decreased application of traditional immediacy behaviors online provokes the urgency of requirements to apply culturally sensitive digital pedagogy that can address the needs of students in terms of their preferences in the context of communication and cultural norms (Bolliger and Halupa, 2018).

In general, the current paper expounds the concepts of intercultural communication and educational psychology since it demonstrates the strength of instilled cultural values in the interpretation of teacher interpersonal behaviors and their effectiveness in pedagogy. It emphasizes the role of teacher training programs involving cultural competence and sensitivity to various learning styles, which, in particular, are required in the regions with a strongly collectivist culture and a strictly structured social order (Gay, 2018; Banks, 2016).

SUGGESTION

Although this research is very informative, it is narrow and restricted to a single university and the Pashtun ethnic group and, therefore, is not generalizable. Further studies are required to investigate teacher-student relationships in multiple collectivist cultures and to reveal the implementation of digital pedagogies in a more heterogeneous environment. Quantitative research might be useful to supplement these results by quantifying the effect of culturally aligned teacher behaviors on academic achievement. Also, a longitudinal study may examine the changes in cultural expectations as more people become exposed to globalized education practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the findings of this research on the perception of Pashtun students on teacher conduct and involvement, there are specific suggestions to become a better culturally responsive teacher in collectivist societies.

1. Cultural competency training must be offered to teachers by the institutions to learn the local values like respect, gender norms, and communication styles to be able to establish respectful relationships with the teachers.
2. Professionalism and friendliness should be balanced since the teachers must speak respectfully and must not use overly informal behavior, such as excessive joking and the use of first names, because this will weaken authority and provide a first-name environment, which can be uncomfortable.
3. Compliments and criticisms need to be offered in a discreet and non-public manner, particularly with shy and female students, as otherwise it may lead to embarrassment and negative motivation that violates the culture.
4. Curriculum must also have culturally responsive pedagogies that understand social values and hierarchical communication styles to boost student engagement and relevance.

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