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# Generational transformation in academic life in Iran

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## Abstract

This is a qualitative study of the generational transformations of academics in the last fifty years and their causes and consequences. The research methodology was based on grounded theory. The samples were selected purposively from professors of three comprehensive universities in Iran. The data were saturated with 52 exploratory interviews and analyzed using the ATLAS.ti software. Findings showed that morality and compliance with academic norms are moving toward corporatism and promotion. It was concluded that despite similarities among the three generations, the academic lifestyle of academics has changed, and elitist universities are moving towards populist and research-oriented entrepreneurial universities.

**Keywords:** Generational, transformations, life, scientific, theory.

## Transformación generacional en la vida académica en Irán

### Resumen

Este es un estudio cualitativo de las transformaciones generacionales de los académicos en los últimos cincuenta años y sus causas y consecuencias. La metodología de investigación se basó en la teoría fundamentada. Las muestras fueron seleccionadas a propósito de profesores de tres universidades integrales en Irán. Los datos se saturaron con 52 entrevistas exploratorias y se analizaron con el software ATLAS.ti. Los hallazgos mostraron que la moralidad y el cumplimiento de las normas académicas se están moviendo hacia el corporativismo y la promoción. Se llegó a la conclusión de que, a

pesar de las similitudes entre las tres generaciones, el estilo de vida académico de los académicos ha cambiado, y las universidades elitistas se están moviendo hacia universidades populistas y orientadas a la investigación.

**Palabras clave:** generacional, transformaciones, vida, científico, teoría.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, academic life in Iran has undergone changes, calling into question the educational and research performance of universities. Some evidence indicates changes in academic values, norms, and responsibilities. There is a wide range of issues including scientific quantity and quality, cultural responsibilities and social capital, which are critical to Iranian society and need to be studied. Our knowledge and culture are shaped by and in space. Spatiality is one of the features of existence and our sense and perception. University space is a perceptual, cognitive, communicative, normative, and social concept that is based on the way of living, practices, and experiences of the internal and external stakeholders of that university. Lefebvre (1991) expanded the tradition of explaining affairs through space, and distinguished three layers for spatiality of social life: the first space arises from our ordinary interaction and senses; the second space is represented through different discourses; and the third space, which is informal, arises from everyday life activities.

Academic experience shows that official structures have cast a shadow on informal spaces. According to Habermas (1987), our formal systems tend to colonize the life world. Considering Lefebvre's (1991) threefold division, the second space weakens the third space by adding a formal density. This is obvious in the official administration of universities, which results from the centralized system of higher education governing them. The formal spaces neither can have effective management nor do they let the third space, which is the lived experience of the academics themselves, enrich their everyday lives with knowledge. The third space is full of self-expression and creativity; it is mostly social and occurs in spontaneous volunteering activities. It is a space of informal interactive relationships. It seems that many of the current issues in Iranian universities and the various scientific malfunctions stem from the weakening of the third space, which hurts the positive image and the social capital of the university.

The current study is mainly focused on this issue and investigates it from the perspective of academic generations. It aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main generational transformations of academics in the last fifty years?
2. What factors and backgrounds have caused the generational transformation of academics?

3. What are the major strategies that the academic generations have adopted during these transformations?
  
4. What effects and consequences have these transformations and strategies had?

## **2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND**

Few studies have used qualitative methods to investigate the university ecosystem in Iran considering generational transformation. Farasatkah (2016) conducted a study entitled the role of professional ethics in the quality of universities and higher education using the qualitative research method and purposive and snowball sampling. Data were theoretically saturated through exploratory and semi-structured interviews with 42 stakeholders of higher education. Data were analyzed using the grounded theory, and the main category of the study was obtained as higher education game. It was concluded that one of the main issues is non-development of the evaluation culture and the controversial status of professional ethics in Iran's scientific and academic settings.

The continuous improvement of the quality of science and universities requires the endogenous development of the evaluation culture, which in turn requires self-evaluation and self-regulation

morale and behavior, as well as an internal commitment to quality among the stakeholders in higher education. The ethical system reflects the internal academic-professional norms and the moral commitment of the professionals and their specialized institutions. It is based on professional self-understanding and going beyond a financial perspective on the scientific business.

Mohammadi (2014) conducted a qualitative study entitled cultural transformation in three generations of academics. Her research data were collected through a semi-structured interview with 34 professors of social science who were sampled purposively from six public universities in Iran. The data were extracted and organized using ATLAS.ti software. The final analysis of the research was presented in the form of a theoretical model, namely cultural transformation in knowledge production and transfer. She concluded that the influence of materialism culture and its spread among academics has increased over generations, and materialistic motivations have marginalized academic ones.

In qualitative research, conceptual and theoretical frameworks are used in order to add sensitivity to the research and question extraction processes. Theoretical sensitivity is defined as "Giving meaning to the data and separating the relevant elements from the irrelevant ones so that one can present a basic theory that is conceptually rich and of good coherence" (Corbin, 2008: 22). One of the essential topics in social change and transformation is

the difference and conflict between old and young groups over cultures and norms. These cultures and norms are the products of different periods and dissimilar conditions, and when facing new situations, they become inadequate and, in some cases, incompatible.

When environmental and social changes occur, the cultural heritage of previous generations inevitably changes with them. The younger generations of the community are the main element in the change process. A quick and profound social change can lead to a severe disruption of this process, and turn the natural difference of cultures into generational differences in attitudes, values and behavioral patterns, which have consequential conflicts. The issues of the change of values and generation gap were put forward in western societies after the rapid growth in the industrialization after World War II, particularly in the 1960s (Baker, 2000).

Here, generation means socio-temporal grouping. It is not limited to age and life in a particular ten-year period. In contrast, social changes affect generational segregation. Generation is more subjective and socially constructed than objective. Revolutions, wars, and social, economic, cultural and technological developments shape different generations and provide a mental framework, social space, and common lifestyle. According to Mannheim (2001), different attitudes, lifestyles and social, ideal and identity spaces exist in each generation (Brooks, 2006).

Generational interactions occur not in a vacuum, but space. Lefebvre (1991) discussed the phenomenology of space and discussed it with anthropological regard. Harvey (2004) distinguished two aspects of space: dominated spaces and appropriated spaces (Harvey, 2004).

The first is structural and formal, while the latter has an implicit character in the context of life. In addition to the dominant official spaces in universities, certain appropriated spaces appear through the informal life of faculty members and students; spaces that Harvey (2004) calls spaces of hope. They emerge from the different methods some faculty members use for classroom management or arise from creative communication between faculty members and students, or valuable dissertations and conferences. With the emergence of scientific subcultures in academic groups and campuses, these spaces of hope are developed and expanded. Thanks to these spaces, new scientific circles are formed, and a new level of intellectual interactions, academic characteristics, and unique styles of education and research can develop (Strauss & Corbin, 2011).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This research seeks to understand cultural transformation

among faculty members. It is consistent with the qualitative method because it deals with the value system and beliefs (Mohammadi, 2014). The grounded theory was used to enter the collective experience of the faculty members of Iranian universities (Farasatkah, 2016). The study population consists of the faculty members of humanities, basic science, and engineering and art departments in three universities, namely Tarbiat Modares, Tehran and Shahid Beheshti. Generational segregation was based on age, history of academic membership and social processes. The ATLAS.ti software tool was used for data reduction, combining the codes and the theoretical model. For a better comparison between the generations, each generation's interviews were entered into a separate software environment. The grounded theory uses three coding stages for data analysis: open, axial, and selective (Dey, 1993; Corbin, 2008).

The data were conceptualized in the open coding stage. In the axial coding stage, the similar codes were collected under the Code Family Manager, and a communication network was created among the concepts. Ultimately, the Super Family was created, and the main categories were determined to direct the researcher to the theoretical model.

#### **4. FINDINGS**

The personal and occupational characteristics of the faculty members and the number of their research works were extracted and set up by generation (Table 1).

Table 1: Interviewees characteristics

Generation Characteristics		First Generation		Second Generation	Third Generation
Gender	Male	42	16	15	11
	Female	10	4	5	1
Place of obtaining the degree	Iran	19	6	4	9
	Abroad	33	14	16	3
Field of study	Humanities	17	10	3	4
	Basic Science	14	4	6	4
	Technical- Engineering	16	4	9	3
	Art	5	2	2	1
Research works	Articles	5325	1926	2341	1058
	Books	447	237	142	68
	Research projects	799	281	369	150
	Dissertation supervision	3794	1560	1427	807

The findings and main concepts of the research (i.e., common academic cultures in the three generations), were extracted and categorized (Table 2).

Table 2: Main common categories of the three generations

Row	Selected Categories	Sub-categories
1	Causal conditions	Socio-economic conditions
2		Political conditions
3		Government policy
4		ICT and technological developments
5	Environmental conditions	Type of university
6		The administrative system of the university
7	basic conditions	Field of study
8		Gender
9		Scientific works
10		Place of study
11	Strategies and tactics	Attitude
12		Ethics and scientific Morale
13		Scientific socialization
14		Scientific work style
15		Scientific interactions
16		Economic dimensions of science
17		Science and profit
18	Outcomes	Deterioration of scientific norms
19		Lowered quality and focus on quantity
20		Poor scientific socialization
21		Credentialism and focus on getting good marks
23		Decreased motivation and frustration
24		Decreased campus residence
25		Reduced social capital and divisions in the scientific community
26		Lesser focus on corporatism and promotion

The categories represent the attitudes and behaviors of the

faculty members. The results for each generation is discussed separately. At the end of each section, the theoretical model of the discussed generation is depicted. The first generation; the conditions governing this generation included the public economy, Cultural Revolution, and war. The university policies were focused on developing elites. Universities were limited and managed using traditional and centralized methods. Faculty members in this group were accustomed to educational and elitist universities. Education was considered to be more important than research. There was a warm and emotional relationship between professors and students. The professor-student boundary was preserved and respected. Most of the professors were role models for their students and tried to socialize them academically through ethical behaviors such as discipline, honesty, and patience (Eilzaki & Jalalian, 2016).

They were active in classroom management and responded to students through face-to-face interactions at universities. Full-time residence in the university was a habit, and their scientific life overshadowed their personal life. They complied with academic norms and scientific principles. In their behaviors and speeches, they adhered to academic standards. They complained that students are passive and were concerned about credentialism. They complained about corporatism, strict regulations, and focus on article writing. They preferred science over promotion and wealth and believed in academic autonomy. They argued that the financial problems and the incompatibility between salaries of the faculty

members and their living expenses would lead to a focus on quantity in educational and research performance of universities (Fig. 1).

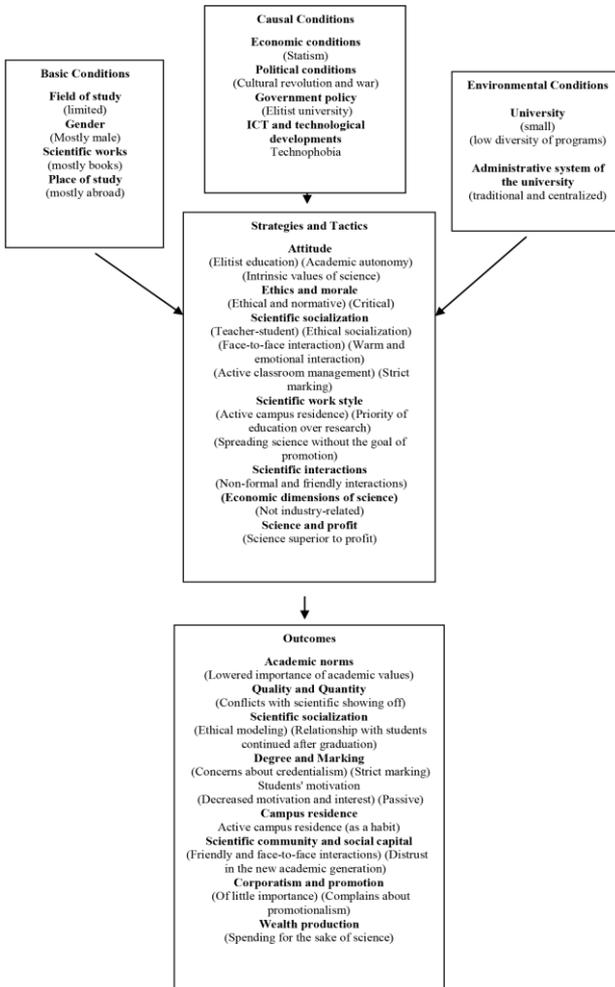


Fig. 1: Grounded theory for the first generation

The second generation; Post-war privatization began with this generation. Technological developments began, and universities started to expand, become populist and grow more bureaucratic. The universities' new focus on research led some faculty members to move toward applied and even big projects. Relations with the industry began, and science moved toward application and commercialization to create wealth. In this generation, the monetary values of science were preferred to scientific values and ethics. Money and financial issues became important. Faculty members reduced their university attendance. Corporatism and promotion became important to faculty members. They showed interest in doing executive work and often had executive responsibilities inside and outside universities, some even prioritizing such responsibilities to academic ones.

However, some of them regarded academic matters as separate from the political ones and believed in academic autonomy and freedom. Interest in acquiring executive positions and adopting industry-related projects reduced the faculty members' presence in the university. They had a poor relationship with students, often limited to curriculum issues. Students' respect for their professors decreased, while their expectations augmented. Instead of evaluating student performance strictly, Professors were oriented to lenient marking. Credentialism became a significant phenomenon. This generation believed that access to information technology has diminished students' motivations and that the internet and technology have led to their indolence (Fig. 2).

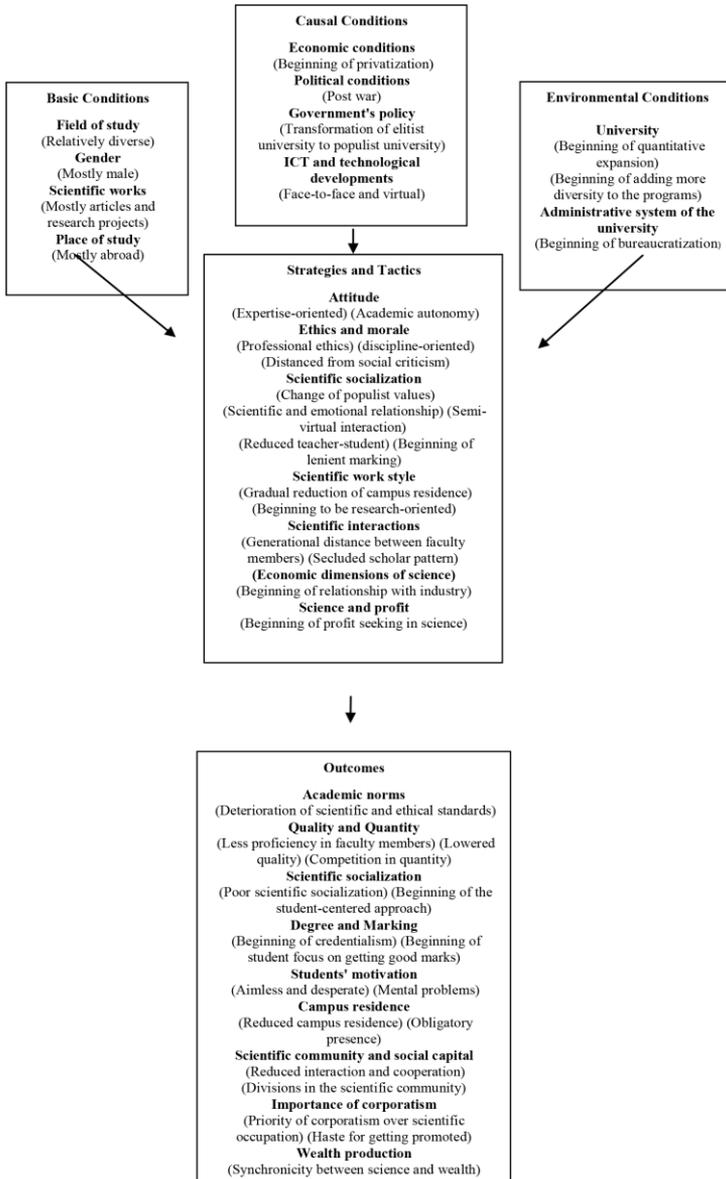


Fig. 2: Grounded theory for the second generation

## **5. CONCLUSION**

The following results were obtained in the process of generational transformations of faculty members and comparison of their lifestyle in common categories with regard to social, economic and cultural conditions: Socio-economically, there has always been a demand for becoming a faculty member due to its social prestige; but the supply of educated workforce, unemployment and inflation have exacerbated this demand. All three generations agree on the importance and impact of economic and financial issues in scientific occupation, but educational motivation has diminished over generations, and low performance has become popular. The third generation is looking for out-of-university projects due to financial problems. Politically, the impact of the Cultural Revolution on scientific occupation and the passion for religious dominating over universities have diminished the scientific authority that universities had before, and has led to political interference in universities.

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