

# Lived Experiences of Dropout University Students: A Qualitative Content Analysis

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Students face different challenges during their studies, among which dropping out of universities is one of the most complex of these challenges. The psychological status of students after leaving their university has received less attention in the field of educational psychology studies. The purpose of this study was to analyze the lived experiences of this group of students after leaving university.

**Method:** In the present qualitative study, 15 students with a dropout experience were recruited throughout a purposive sampling. The experiences of participants were categorized into different groups based on the content of the interviews in thematic analysis. To gather the data, depth interviews was employed by using online video call, and the data was analyzed through a content analysis method.

**Results:** The conventional content analysis revealed a main theme: helplessness. Accordingly, data analysis led to the formation of two categories: 1-unbelonging with three subcategories: (rejection by people in one's life, loneliness, lack of dignity among peers) and; 2-negative emotions with four subcategories: (shame and guilt, depression and sadness, inferiority feeling, hopelessness towards future).

**Conclusion:** It seems that the students in Iran with a dropout situation face unpleasant psychological experiences. The results could clarify emotional dimensions of facing with stressful situation in academic context. One practical implication of the present study is the necessity of constructing psychological interventions for dropout student in the Iranian society in order to facilitate proper interventions to support these individuals and improve their psychological health.

**Keywords:** Dropout Student, Unbelonging, Negative Emotion, Helplessness, Qualitative Content Analysis

## Introduction

Today, higher education is one of the personal and social demands of most people around the world. There are hundreds of thousands of individuals who compete to get into universities every year in Iran. Becoming a university student is an important stage in every individual's life and brings about new conditions, challenges, and emotions [1]. Among the different challenges experienced by university students during academic years, dropping out for a variety of reasons is a stressful phenomenon [2] that leaves students unable to continue or complete their course of study.

A significant percentage of university students are on the verge of being expelled every year because of academic underachievement and its consequent educational problems. The percentage has been reported to be 10.2 (11.2 percent among boys and 8.4 percent among girls) in 2019 for the member countries of the European Union [3]. There is no precise number for the rate of university dropouts in Iran. However, according to the limited remarks of university presidents and the lowest estimate, about 1500 students dropout of the Iranian state universities every year [4].

Three main factors affecting this phenomenon have been pointed out in a systematic review. The first

factor is the higher education system that includes macro-level educational structure and the curriculum. The second factor is the universities or institutions of higher education and indicates the form and quality of education. The last factor is the personal, behavioral, and demographic characteristics of students that include their families, pre-university abilities, and their behaviors during university years [5]. Furthermore, the role of personal, familial and social factors has been considered in local studies [6]. These studies showed that family recommendation or social pressure, and ignoring personal interests, have affected on choosing the academic major [7].

On the other hand, studies on the consequences of dropping out have shown that it is experienced as a stressful crisis whether it is as a result of personal decision or violation of regulations [8]. Chronic excessive stress has destructive effects and dropout students perceive a spectrum of distress. Stressful events lead to two categories of overall consequences, they can either cause negative reactions or in some cases positive reactions [9]. Most studies on stressful educational events have focused on the negative consequences of these experiences and the ways to help the individuals who suffer from them [10]. Moreover, a study by Franklin et al. [11] has shown a decrease in self-regulatory executive functions in university students under stress. As it is evident from literature review, emphasizing the assumption of serious damage to mental health, previous studies have examined and quantitatively measured the condition of dropout university students. Accordingly, different treatment approaches have been used to help the affected individuals. However, confronting the stressful event of dropping out is influenced by the context as confronting damaging events depends on time and place. Thus, the perception and personal experience of university students is realized in their sociocultural context [12]. In this regard, studying the lived experiences of dropout university students could provide useful information on their cognitive and emotional processing.

Although previous studies have explored the causes, factors, and consequences of dropping out in detail, there has not been sufficient research on the quality of this event. All studies on dropout in Iran are based on quantitative methods. Considering the importance of university education in the Iranian society and the low rate of social mobility in this country, a deep and comprehensive study of the effects of this phenomenon on dropout students seems to be necessary. Therefore, this study focused on the post-dropout lived experiences of university students in the form of a qualitative study. In other words, given that quantitative studies lack the flexibility and depth for a meticulous understanding and explaining of the views and experiences of individuals and do not attend to the context and spatiotemporal condition of the damaging event of dropping out, carrying out a qualitative research seemed necessary. Therefore, this study examines the experiences of dropout university students in the cultural context of Iran in order to shed light on the psychological dimensions of their

experiences with the post-event challenges and to recognize the psychological process of confronting crisis in dropout university students comprehensively.

## Method

This qualitative study aimed for a content analysis. The experiences of participants were categorized into different groups based on the content of the interviews in thematic analysis. After announcing a call for interviews in social network, those who expressed interest were checked and if they met the inclusion criteria they were considered as participants. The data was generated through deep interviews using online video calls in 2019-2020 in different areas after the spread of Covid-19; it continued to data saturation. The interviews were held by arranging appointments suitable for the participants. The interviews began with general questions such as "Would you please tell me about what happened after you dropped out of university?" and continued with probing questions as "Can you give an example about this...?" or "What did you think and how did you feel about this situation?" to encourage the participants to describe their experiences accurately and to achieve deeper information. The duration of the interviews was 40-105 minutes based on different conditions and dispositions of the participants. The consent of all of the participants was obtained in order to record the interviews and then turn the voice into text immediately. The text of each interview was studied several times and at the same time it was coded and analyzed by the Graneheim and Lundman method.

The sampling method was purposive with maximum variance of sampling. Sampling continued until data saturation. Finally, 15 dropout university students participated in this study. The demographic characteristics of the participants are explained in Table 1.

The inclusion criteria for this study were having the experience of dropping out from state universities of Iran (at least a year had passed). Also, the individuals included in this study were to be interested in participating in the study and sharing their experiences.

The data was analyzed according to the qualitative content analysis method by the Graneheim and Lundman method [13]. The coding of the text of the interviews and analysis of the obtained codes were continuously carried out in the course of data generation. The data was extracted from the comments of the participants and was narrowed down in the analysis to construct the sub concepts. The participants' descriptions in the interviews were coded both in the way they were presented and implicitly. The data was categorized into distinct parts with open coding. Accordingly, conceptualization was completed in the course of data analysis. When a particular subject was determined in the codes, then codes were categorized together in its axis and a comprehensive name was chosen for them. The data was connected and axial coding was carried out. Table 2 shows the process of the formation of a sub concept.

Four criteria of evaluating data integrity were used in this

study based on Lincoln and Guba's evaluative criteria [14] in order to improve the trustworthiness of the results. In this regard, the researcher gained the participants' trust and attempted to understand their experiences through prolonged engagement and by contacting and communicating with them. Maximum variety of majors, gender, and age increased the validity of the data. Furthermore, in order to evaluate the credibility and dependability of the research findings, the two methods of member check and the peer reviewer were used. Following the completion of the individual data analysis, the findings were checked with the participants, and the data were analyzed separately by two researchers including the first author and the third author (as a

research supervisor), and the first-level open coding was performed for the contents.

The present study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Shiraz University of Medical Sciences with the ID code: IR.SUMS.REC.1399.1164. At the beginning of the interview, participants were informed about their right to leave the study at any time. Participants gave informed consent and were told that the study was about their experiences with dropout. At the end of the interview, the participants were debriefed and were given the opportunity to ask questions about the study. During the interviews, the participants were enthusiastic to give their information and all had their complete cooperation with the study team.

**Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants**

No.	Sex	Age	Marital status	Drop-out Education
1	F	28	Married	Physics
2	F	25	Married	Municipal Engineering
3	M	30	Married	Metallurgy
4	M	31	Single	Graphic
5	M	25	Single	Physics
6	M	26	Single	English literature & Language
7	M	29	Single	Computer Science
8	M	28	Married	Atomic Physics
9	M	25	Single	Civil Engineering
10	M	40	Single	Chemistry Engineering
11	M	27	Single	Mathematics
12	M	30	Married	Applied Architecture
13	F	24	Single	Biology
14	M	41	Married	Electrical Engineering
15	M	29	Married	Geology

**Table 2. Initial Coding and Categories**

Examples of initial codes	Code	Subcategory	Category
Nobody knew I didn't get my bachelor's degree. They all thought I had finished my studies. Even now, my husband thinks I have a B.S. degree in physics... I was involved with this issue for two years. I didn't even want to think that others would find out. I didn't want to go anywhere lest others would know (No.1).	Fear of shame among relatives	Shame and guilt	Negative emotion
Dropping out is very scary. When I dropped out, I went bald, I had severe hair loss. I grew thin. It was awful. It was so difficult and terrifying for me... I was isolated (No.5).	Isolation, stress and its physical implications	Sadness and depression	
My parents were always saying that I was disgracing them. "What's so hard about getting a bachelor's degree?", "Are you stupid?", "Look at everyone around you, all of them are studying, what are you going to do? You can't make money by sports. You can't live by that" (No.9).	Bitter reproach and taunting remarks from parents	Inferiority feeling	
My parents almost didn't say anything but I knew how disappointed they were in me. They didn't like to see me in this way. To them, I was a complete loser. I think they were pitying me and it made me believe that I was going to be a nobody (No.10).	Losing job opportunities because of not holding a degree	Hopelessness toward future	

## Results

According to the results of the present study, by using qualitative conventional content analysis methodology, two categories were identified: 1-unbelonging with three subcategories:( rejection by people in one's life, loneliness, lack of dignity among peers) and; 2-negative

emotions with four subcategories: (shame and guilt, depression and sadness, inferiority feeling, hopelessness towards future). Finally, helplessness was extracted as the main theme of this research. The main theme, concepts and these sub-concepts indicate the psychological situation of dropout university students (Table 3).

**Table 3. The Subcategories and Categories that Emerged from Data Analysis**

Basic Theme	Category	Subcategory
Helplessness and Concealment	Unbelonging	rejection by people in one's life
		loneliness
		lack of credibility among peers
	Negative emotions	shame and guilt
		sadness and depression
		inferiority feeling
		hopelessness towards future

**Unbelonging:** The concept of unbelonging conveys the thinking and view of dropout students. Dropout university students no longer feel that they belong to a particular group to show their commitment and loyalty. Detachment and destruction of a part of social self-concept leaves the need of these individuals for belonging unfulfilled. Dropout university students lose their social identity in the form of which they can define and present themselves to others. This concept is determined by "rejection by people in one's life", "loneliness", and "lack of dignity among peers".

**Rejection by People in one's Life:** Dropout university students are treated coldly and unkindly by others. The families and those around them punish them in a way for the event by neglecting them. Ignorance and indifference are the most important aspects perceived by these students. In this regard, a male dropout university student shared his feeling:

"Studying was very important for my family. They were so upset and ashamed of my decision that they didn't tell anyone, not even my sister and brothers. My mom didn't want anyone to know about it. She didn't want me to go to parties. . She wanted them to think that I was studying in Tehran. Back then, I felt like she sometimes wished I never existed" (No.13).

**Loneliness:** One of the concerns of dropout students is feeling lonely. They feel lonely to a great extent and others rarely ask them how they are doing. The experience of isolation and loneliness is seen in many of these students. In some cases, loneliness was the personal choice for these individuals to get away from the pressure they were feeling from others. An expelled female student observed this notion in this way:

"... My dad said 'the choice is yours' and remained silent. It was terrifying. My mom set my baggage in front of the door and said that "either I had to leave or she was leaving". My sisters tried to support me, but they didn't understand me. They couldn't understand my problem... we argued so much every day that I would hide under my desk and I didn't want anyone to see me" (No.1).

**Lack of Dignity among Peers:** Most dropout students feel dropping behind compared with their peers. This results from the lack of respect and dignity in the society towards a youth in the university age range. A male

dropout student shared his feeling in this regard as follows:

"My mom kept saying I had to get my bachelor's degree. 'Don't do this to yourself. Look at your friends, look at your cousins, they're almost graduating now. You have to study to be like them'. My mom kept saying this almost every day. And she was right, they were going to study for their master's and I had dropped out. My mom didn't know I had no choice" (No.9).

**Negative Emotions:** This concept indicates the variety and kind of emotions that dropout students undergo. A part of this pressure comes from the individual's family and the society and the other part of it springs from the individual. Negative emotions in these individuals result from a lot of pressure from their own view and others' behavior including "shame and guilt", incidence of "depression and sadness", "hopelessness towards future", and "inferiority".

**Shame and Guilt:** Shame and guilt are among shared emotions in dropout university students. Most of these individuals put distressing labels on themselves and their behavior. Some of them are brought up in families in which academic education is a value and academic failure is considered irrecoverable; such beliefs burden these individuals with a feeling of shame. Some of the participants in this study also blamed themselves for dropping out and had burdensome feeling of shame. One of the dropout students described it in this way:

"I wanted to drop out. But we had a relative working in the registrar's office at the university. In order to avoid them asking my parents about me and why I dropped out, I continued to the sixth semester taking courses with overall dignity of 6 or 7. I didn't even attend those classes. I would leave in the morning and return afternoon so that my family would think I was at university. I would go out in the morning and didn't go to the university. I would go sit in a park and read a newspaper. I couldn't go to them and tell them I was doing so poorly in my studies; I was ashamed of them" (No.12).

**Depression and Sadness:** Most dropout university students experienced depression, some needed psychological treatment and some went through this period with lower intensity. Chronic sadness, lack of interest in doing previously pleasurable activities,

hopelessness towards future, significant functional decline have been shared experiences of students who dropped out of or got expelled from university. In this regard, a male dropout student commented on his experience of visiting a psychiatrist:

"I was depressed for a short period of time. I went to a doctor and he prescribed some pills for me. I took sertraline, citalopram, and similar things. Before that, I was so stressed and under pressure, I had to get some medicine. I had gone through horrible days" (No.7).

**Hopelessness towards Future:** The picture of a lost future because of not holding a degree creates hopelessness among dropout students. As they and their families see progress, success, and good career dependent only on earning academic degrees, they treat dropping out or expulsion as a disaster which will destroy their future career. In this regard, a male dropout student remarked as follows:

"I could get to a public university in the major I wanted. This was the second stressful event I experienced. I thought I had to go to my military service. This would be a disaster; I would be the lowest ranking soldier. Then I told myself it was okay I would go and get my life together when I returned. But I thought to myself that I wouldn't have the motivation and energy for this after my military service. At that moment, I feel that nothing will ever work for me" (No.5).

**Inferiority:** Almost all dropout university students had experienced some degree of inferiority. This is an emotion that is experienced in confronting unpleasant situations of being mocked by others. These individuals experienced verbal and non-verbal humiliation in different forms. For example, one of the dropout students commented on the experience in this way:

"I didn't dare ask because I knew they would treat me badly, reminding me that I couldn't finish my studies and dropped out, whenever I talked about starting a job. I wasn't feeling good... My dad blamed me for my brother's lack of interest in studying. He said it was because of me that he wasn't studying. He thought that since my two older brothers had studied and I ended up like this, he could humiliate me for anything my little brother did" (No.2).

## Discussion

This study aimed for a deep exploration of the thoughts and emotions of dropout students after they had left their university. The results showed that dropping out of universities brought about helplessness. This central theme was abstracted from data analysis and two main concepts were extracted: unbelonging, which included rejection, loneliness, and lack of credibility among peers, and negative emotions, which included shame and guilt, depression and sadness, hopelessness towards future, and inferiority.

Dropout university students are rejected and neglected by those in their lives in different forms. According to the rejection sensitivity model [15], individuals with a high rejection sensitivity expect high degrees of stress and easily accept deliberate rejection from others. Rejection is

a serious threat to one's sense of belonging [16]. Studies in this field have focused on minority groups that receive limited social support [17, 18, and 19]. This is similar to our study in that dropout students recounted their experiences as acceptance and feeling of shame and guilt. These individuals felt they deserved being rejected because of their weakened competence beliefs [20]. In addition to high correlation with damaged self-esteem, rejection is also related to the formation of a sense of inferiority [21]. Lack of dignity among peers was the conceptualized experience of the participants in this study which ultimately led to low self-esteem. Distance from peers and being rejected by individuals in one's life leads one to loneliness. A longitudinal study by Zhou et al. stated low self-esteem as the predictor factor of sadness and showed that rejection sensitivity could facilitate this relation. On the other hand, in addition to intensifying social avoidance, rejection affects feeling of loneliness [23]. In this respect, feeling of inferiority is the emotional intermediary between rejection and loneliness [24]. Accompanied by feeling of inferiority [25] and sadness [26], feeling of loneliness was the dominant experience of dropout university students. The tendency to be a member of a group has its roots in the nature of humankind [27]. Belonging is the foundation of identity formation in individuals. Dropout university students see their psychological and social capital gone [28] and suffer from unbelonging with the lack of commitment and loyalty to a social status which they can make a part of their identity [29].

The total cognition created in dropout students elicits negative emotions [30]. The occurrence of negative emotions in these individuals results from the interaction of emotion and cognition. Sadness, as the main and inclusive emotion in these individuals, could be discussed from different points of view. Weiner's attribution theory [31] explains that dropout students consider the cause of this event as inner, stable, and uncontrollable and thus become sad and show some symptoms of depression. According to Lewinsohn's model [32], these students experience sadness as they cannot receive social reinforcement; rejection by others and lack of dignity intensifies this inability. From the view of Young's maladaptive schemas [33], the activity of two schemas of rejection and blame are effective on the occurrence of symptoms of depression. This was congruent with the perception of rejection and occurrence of senses of shame, guilt, and inferiority as other concepts abstracted from the experiences of participants in this study. Emotions of shame and guilt also result from inner causes according to Weiner's theory. Nonetheless, according to previous studies, shame is associated with stable and uncontrollable attribution and guilt is associated with unstable and controllable attribution [34]. Dropout university students feel ashamed of what they see as the consequence of their behavior in the course of their study and thus feel guilty and blame themselves. Mixing the related causes with the experience of feeling shame and guilt indicates the inability of these individuals to distinguish between these emotions. In congruence with

previous studies [35] which showed that shame and guilt prevent help seeking and intensify avoidance behaviors, behaviors of these individuals, such as distancing from groups and justifying others' lack of communication with them, are both the consequence of these emotions and intensify the occurrence of them. Furthermore, in accordance with the psychological experiences of participants and based on Bandura's model, Baldwin et al. [36] showed a negative relation between the emotion of shame and self-efficacy. As abovementioned, sense of inferiority is the emotional intermediary between rejection and loneliness. All of the consequences of this emotion including, loss of self-esteem, isolation, concealment, and helplessness were observed in the experiences of the participants of this study. According to Adler, the first reaction to sense of inferiority is aggression which is either directed to others or to oneself. In combination with other emotions, the behavior of dropout university students directed aggression to themselves. Sadness, shame, and sense of inferiority finally set the scene for hopelessness. Hope in Snyder's view [37] is the process of setting a goal, creating solutions, and preserving motivation to actualize it. The results showed that dropout university students lost the main factor in this process, that is a goal, and suffer from hopelessness. On the other hand, studies [38] revealed that hopelessness has a close relationship with sadness and stressful situations and the consequence of sadness and hopelessness together lead the individual to experience helplessness.

The results showed that the experience of dropping out leads to loss of sense of belonging of the individuals to their social identity and several negative emotions. These consequences leave these individuals helpless in confronting the event of dropping out and lead them to concealment. Ultimately, helplessness as the main theme of this study, was proved to be the central mindset and general reaction of dropout university students in order to reduce the amount of experiencing negative emotions and protect the damaged self-concept against destruction of identity.

## Conclusion

This study was a deep and inclusive examination of lived experiences of dropout university students and thus the results could provide experts a better understanding of the thoughts and emotions of these individuals in confronting the phenomenon of dropping out. The concepts of helplessness and their sub-concepts clarifies the cognitive and emotional dimensions of the psychological situation of dropout university students for the planners and decision-makers in the field of higher education in order to facilitate proper interventions to support these individuals and improve their psychological health.

A limitation which can be mentioned about this study is that the students of engineering and basic sciences were the only samples in this research. Future studies can compare the different ways which these students, and medical sciences students use when facing dropout.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

## Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the ethics committee of the Shiraz University of Medical Sciences and received the moral code from this university (R.SUMS.REC.1399.1164). Also, an informed written consent was obtained from all those participating in this study.

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