Social Identity Construction: Experiences of Teenage Students with Physical Disabilities in Pakistan Society for the Rehabilitation of Disabled Social Identity Construction

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Abstract

    Social identity is considered a dynamic and life-changing process. Individuals with physical disabilities learn and adapt to their environment. Their experiences help them cope with disability and in the development of their social identity. This research has been pursued with qualitative research design, and its underpinning lies in epistemological constructivism, where individuals give specific meaning to their experiences to understand social reality. Two theories have been used in the theoretical framework of this research: social identity theory and the looking-glass-self theory. This research strived to understand the phenomenon of social identity and how it affected individuals with physical disabilities in their lives.20 participants between the ages of 12 to 18 years were interviewed. The rationale for selecting this specific group was to understand the concept of self at the initial stages as it would grow as they grow up. This study was conducted at the Pakistan Society for the Rehabilitation of the Disabled (PSRD) in Lahore. The data was collected through in-depth interviews which were recorded and transcribed to gain insights. Three themes emerged from the interviews: experiences and views regarding one's social identity, the role and influence of educational institutions and the environment of said institutions, and the role and influence of vocational skills in identity construction. The results of this research showed that the role of educational institutions, the environment of institutions, and the vocational training of the individuals played a substantial role in shaping their social identity. Respondents described how their self-actualization experiences, educational institutions, and vocational training[1] helped them to construct identity.
Keywords: Social Identity Construction, Physical Disabilities, Social Experiences, Educational Institutions, Vocational skills training, Special Schools

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1. Introduction

The word 'disability' encompasses various dimensions of physical, mental, and emotional illness, limitations, and challenges. Individuals may suffer from permanent or temporary disabilities (World Health Organization, 2020). The term "disabled" describes Individuals who experience long-term functional loss, whether through congenital conditions or as a result of specific events in their lives (Afzal, 1992). According to Robichaud (2021), Physical inability refers to various conditions that may cause physiological, functional, or mobility impairments, which can be temporary or permanent, mild or severe, and may or may not involve pain. Physical impairments change the living style of an individual. It may affect their physical capacities, features and mobility. The reasons for such impairment are, acquired; a person gets this type of disability due to accidents, injuries and serious issues or a congenital; the person is born with a physical disability (Aruma,2019).

Disabled people comprise about 0.4% of Pakistan's population (Daily Times Census 2017: Pakistan has a million people with disabilities., 2017). According to the 2017 census total number of the disabled population is approximately 913,667: (males 565,501, females 344,582 & transgender 3,584) (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Government of Pakistan, 2017). There are a few studies which relate the phenomenon of social identity to individuals with physical disabilities. The researchers assumed that the process of social identity construction is different in individuals with disabilities. When an individual has a disability, the process of identity construction becomes much more complex. There are several reasons; abnormality in bodily features, different relationships with siblings, unique experiences of daily tasks, stigmatization and discriminative behavior, adaptation to their disabilities with growing age, tendency of awareness of self-image and understanding their capabilities.

Social identity is shaped by society. It refers to the different social categories that individuals belong to. Individuals demand membership in a group to fit in. Identities such as gender, race, and ethnicity provide a basis for self-identity by giving personal meanings to these social categories (Deaux, 1993). Forming an individual's identity is rooted in shared social experiences, structures, and starting points (Watson, 2002). The construction of identity is the process of managing social-psychological procedures that establish and maintain a sense of individuality (Berzonsky, 2011). In an individual, it changes over time. According to (Tajfel 1978) the social concept is formed of collections of self-images; and interactions in society. By using self-images and making perceptions about one's self, individuals become part of social groups and consider themselves part of a group based on; values, experiences, status, socioeconomic factors, association and we-feeling. However, it is generally assumed that identity is heavily influenced by people living in a society and is affected by patterns of interactions. Additionally, gender, social class, age, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and ability influence the development of identity (Forber et al., 2017).

1.1. Research Questions

1. How do individuals with physical disabilities interpret social identity through their experiences and views?

2. What is the role of education, educational institutes and vocational skills contributing to the social identity of individuals with physical disabilities?

1.2. Significance of this Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the process of social identity formation in individuals with physical disabilities, as well as how this influences their social identity and the role of personal beliefs and experiences, education, and vocational skills. The study explores how individuals with physical disabilities construct self-identity, focusing on teenage self-definition and societal recognition of their abilities. How their self-identity emerges and shapes as a result of their daily interactions. This study focuses on how teenagers perceive themselves as an actor in their own life although society sees them as physically disabled.

2. Literature Review

Social identity development is a process that is formed through individuals' experiences. Individuals must learn new patterns of behavior and identity at every stage of life. Organizing, planning, and achieving career ambitions and developing and asserting their capacities and dimensions of the task. (Cohen-Scali, 2003). Disability identity is formed through self-experienced events, observations, and one's self-understanding (Adler et al., 2022). An individual makes self-perception through events and stories, based on reality and imagination (Bobat et al., 2020). Individuals with disabilities who live in society refer to a different status known as "Master Status". "From the moment a child is born, he/she emerges into a world where he/she receives messages that to be disabled is to be less than, a world where disability may be tolerated but in the final instance, is inherently negative"(Campbell 2009). Oliver (1995) found out that individuals with disabilities as recognized through the following elements:

i. Acknowledge of impairment: Identifying an individual has a disability or disablement."

ii. The experience of societal limitations: We understand that certain tasks may be challenging for individuals whom society does not consider "normal."

iii. Self-Actualization as a person with a disability: As per Oliver (1995), in the last stage, it is common for us to distinguish certain people from others, often referring to them as individuals with disabilities. Physical disabilities are characterized by impairments in the body that become a permanent part of the person's identity. Over time, individuals with disabilities may come to perceive their condition as "normal." This self-perception negates disabilities as defining characteristics, and their self-image is shaped by their aspirations rather than societal stereotypes or stigmas. (Watson, 2002).

2.1. The Role of Social Identity Construction in Individuals with Physical Disabilities

Individuals with physical disabilities emerge from the realization that they have a bodily limitation, which has become a part of their existence and social identity. They regard it as "normal" gradually. Cooley (1964) suggested that the self could not develop without experience. Social Identity is constructed through our experiences, feelings, and the behavior of others. These self-created images of themselves reject infirmities as identifiers because perception is centered on their goals rather than concept or stigmas imposed by others (Watson,2002). Two factors were considered to play significant roles in contributing to a change and alteration in individuals during adolescence:

(a) Development of thinking skills,

(b) Changes in social and emotional aspects (Strachan & Jones, 1982).

People with physical disabilities often identify with a community of others with similar conditions, shifting their focus from being individuals to being part of a community (Smeekes & Verkuyten 2013). Individuals with disabilities refer to themselves by "we" instead of "I" or "me", to show their perceived collectiveness over their singular identity (Lembke & Wilson, 1998). Society developed as it gave equal treatment and opportunity to individuals with disabilities (Whitney, 2006).

2.2. Conceptual Framework
2.3. Theory of Social Identity

In 1978, Henri Tajfel proposed this theory. This theory explains the process of social identity formation. This theory has become significant in describing the social identity of individuals and group behavior. Initially, the focus of this theory was on exploring group dynamics and identifying the factors that lead to either collaboration or dissension among individuals belonging to different social strata (Tajfel et al., 1979). Gradually, the concept of identity is perceived as a result of social interactions. In this particular study, the objective was to investigate how young adults with physical disabilities construct their identities. Participants were identified based on the following criteria:

(a) Consciousness of group feeling

(b) Cognizance of group parameter

(c) Develop a sense of belongingness with a social group (Hinkle et al., 1989).

Group feelings are developed in three phases. The first phase is identifying commonness with a social group. The second phase involves social roles and an understanding of social responsibilities. Lastly, in the third phase, members feel group feelings. In this whole process, individuals get the in-group feelings and recognize themselves as member of a social group.

Concerning individuals with disabilities, three main factors influence their sense of belonging to a group. The first factor is called "cognitive centrality," which refers to the group feeling based on similarities they have. The second factor is the "in-group effect," which describes positive feelings that an individual with a physical disability experiences when they connect with their group. The third and final factor is "group ties," which involves the sense of belonging and connection that the member feels with the group, including a shared identity and experiences with other members.

2.4. Theory of Looking Glass

Charles Horton Cooley, a renowned sociologist, gave the theory of looking glass. This theory helps us to understand the identity formation process in individuals. According to this theory, through social interaction, individuals can come to understand themselves more accurately. The theory suggests that people create ideas about themselves by interacting with others. C.H. Cooley referred to this phenomenon of recognition of self as "looking-glass self."

Jones (2015) comprehends the process of looking self in individuals by following steps:

1. Individuals perceive themselves in a social situation and try to impact others.
2. The person envisions how others perceive their physical appearance.
3. When a person perceives judgments, they form opinions and react emotionally towards them.
4. Individuals perceive how they are treated and imagine how others judge them based on their physical disabilities. This category-based thinking creates norms that people compare themselves to, leading to raising questions about whether they correspond to them. (Vanheule & Verhaeghe, 2009).

The formation of social identity is a subjective phenomenon. The human beings give meaning to their social reality (Neuman, 2007). To understand the social meanings attached to social identity, qualitative research is used. This research has been conducted to notice patterns in the process of the construction of identity takes place. Simply put, these individuals with physical disabilities interact with other members who are similar and different from them. Through their experiences, they have developed their identity and tried to give meaning to their social reality. Individuals with disabilities look world with a unique perspective and use this perspective to build their image and then perceive themselves accordingly. The interpretive approach can be used to get insight. Constructivism with a philosophical foundation was selected to conduct this study. This was done to create knowledge from collected data through in-depth interviews.

3. Research Methodology

The researchers opted qualitative research method to conduct this research. In this research, the researchers wanted to understand the phenomena of identity construction in individuals with physical disabilities.

3.1. Data Collection Method – In-Depth Interviews

The researchers opted for purposive sampling to select participants for interviews based on specific criteria:

1. Students aged 12-18
2. Enrolled in an Educational Institution
3. Getting training in vocational skills
4. Have a Physical Disability

The researchers opted purposive sampling technique, to make sure that students who were getting vocational training had been selected for sampling. According to the researchers, the process of identity construction is different in individuals who do not get formal education and training at the same time.

To conduct this study, the researchers opted for semi-structured interviews as the main data collection tool. In-depth interviews were chosen to gain insights into the participants' emerging social identity. There were five reasons for using in-depth interviews: to understand the participant's perspective, insights, interpretation of social events, and experiences, and how they relate to the given meaning of their social reality. (Mason, 2002).

All interviews were conducted in an institution for the student's convenience. All interviews were conducted in Urdu to ensure ease of understanding and encourage open responses from individuals with physical disabilities. The timings of interviews ranged

from 45-60 minutes. The participants gave their consent to record the interviews. The researchers took notes during each interview to highlight key points. When conducting interviews about social processes, change, organization, and meaning, the goal is to gain a thorough understanding of a specific natural setting. (Mason, 2002). During the study, the researchers utilized an interview guide that included (1) Demographic information to form the basis of their questioning. (i) name (ii) gender (iii) number of siblings (iv) occupation of parents, and (2) questions regarding their (i) formation of social self (ii) relationship with siblings and parents (iii) support and role of peer group (iv) relationship with studies and effect of education schooling (v) vocational skills. All participants were given open-ended questions to answer based on their experiences and perspectives.

3.2. Research Site

The research was conducted at the Pakistan Society for Rehabilitation of the Disabled, which is a school that provides education, vocational skills, and rehabilitation services to physically disabled individuals. The study aims to provide an insight into the lives of these students, to form a comprehensive understanding of their social identity by identifying the role of education and vocational skills in their social self-construction process. Teenage students with disabilities get schooling and vocational training in school timing according to their timetable. There are many available courses, and students select the courses of their interest. First, they take training, then they start practicing it in the same class.

4. Analysis & Discussion

In the phase of data analysis, the researchers translated the interviews from Urdu to the English language. Then transcribed the interviews and coded the parts of the data. The researchers identified the themes and arranged the information into them to get a full insight picture of the data. During the study, three themes emerged as follows:

1. The experiences and views of individuals with physical disabilities.
2. The Role of education and schooling on social identity.
3. The importance of vocational skills in constructing social identity.

4.1. Theme 1: Individuals with Physical Disabilities' Experiences and Reflections on Social Identity

In this section of theme 1, the researchers explore the development of an individual with disabilities' social self through their experiences and perceptions of them. The participants were asked to share their thoughts on how they perceive themselves based on the behavior of others. They were asked to reflect on what qualities and characteristics make them unique and how their experiences contribute to the construction of their social identity. Social identity is significantly influenced by personal experiences and perspectives. The experiences and perspectives we have to shape our personality, behavior, attitude toward others, and how we perceive ourselves. Salman said, "*I consider myself different from others as all people have different mentality but, in my case, I have different physical appearances from them as well as I have a different way of thinking.*"

In inclusive educational institutions the behavior of other students with individuals with disabilities is problematic (Nowicki and Sandieon 2002). Students with disabilities report experiencing negative attitudes, including inappropriate comments

and behavior from both adults and peers, as the most challenging aspect of their school experience (Hogan et al., 2000). Zain stated, "*Two years ago, I felt myself as out of the ordinary. Many kids mock and make fun of my condition. They disliked interacting with me, but they invited other friends to demonstrate my disability and gave me weird names.*"

The participants explained how their life experiences helped them gain a clearer self-image and perception from childhood to the present. Taimur highlighted "*Why should not I be a normal person? I'm completely good and normal like everyone else; I have come to understand that what defines me ought to include my name and occupation.*"

Baddeley & Singer (2007) The idea that the identity of individuals evolves and transforms over time was presented in the research. Similarly, the participants expressed their desire for independence and personal growth in the future, which included exploring new ways to experience their bodies, improving their perception of physical attributes, and abilities, and increasing their confidence to engage in new physical activities. Zara participant said, "*I have had many ups and downs in my life. I do my best to adapt to all changes. A person's views, environment, and interactional patterns can change over time as a result of their experiences, which affects their social sense of self.*" After reflecting on their experiences, most participants reported feeling more evolved and experiencing a change in their thinking. Taimur stated, "*I was quite young when I moved to Lahore from Kasur. I had to adjust to my setting, and I learned that I am not different; hundreds of children are similar to me.*"

The majority of the participants also expressed that their experiences played a significant role in helping them better understand themselves. Mahnoor highlights that, "*I do my daily routine tasks by myself and everyone should do their daily routine tasks by themselves. We (the people with disability) ought not to rely on anyone and do not underestimate ourselves.*" Another participant Hammad said, "*I challenge myself to complete all of my daily tasks independently, to become aware of my limitations. If I encounter any obstacles, I brainstorm alternative solutions and attempt them until I achieve my desired outcome.*"

4.2. Theme 2: The Role and Influence of Education and Schooling on Social Identity Construction

The educational institution plays an essential role in the process of socialization. Through socialization, individuals learn societal norms, values, and culture. Education imparts knowledge along with skills to physically disabled students of this research's research site.

In this theme, the participants were questioned regarding education's role in their identity. The participants were asked to share insights into how schooling and educational institute helps them to learn about their physical disabilities and how they develop consciousness to handle them. Participants were asked about the functions of education, the internal environment of the school, and the behavior of their teachers. How vocational training helps them along with studies. Where they want to see themselves in the near future, lastly, they were asked if they felt comfortable and secure in their educational institution.

Participants were asked about the role of education in understanding their disability and potential. According to Marium, "*I went to an inclusive school. I felt that I was*

pampered there. When I get to enrolled in a special school. I was not treated with care and attention differently; it helped me get out of my sanctuary. I do not feel special and different and I handle my disability efficiently now". The participants explained the significance of education. One of the participants said, "*According to my observation, as I am an individual with a physical disability, I assume that without knowledge and skills such as graphic designing, paper bag making & candle making. I would not be able to be financially independent.*"

Maham claimed "*My parents supported me to get an education, initially, I was not ready to come to school. I was afraid but when I saw other children who looked like me. They understood me and helped me. I learned skills besides studies. This is a "golden opportunity" for me*".

The role and positive attitude of teachers create a great impact on students. When the students have disabilities, the responsibility of the teacher increases to a great extent. Teachers should understand their social, and emotional needs. It has been observed that students will perform better in a positive environment. If the teacher encourages them, they try to take more participation in class activities. The researchers asked participants about the environment of the classroom and the behavior of the teacher. Most of the students comprehend we have a positive, welcoming, and encouraging environment in the classroom. Hoorma said, "*My teacher tries to encourage me even when I answer something wrong. I stayed quiet for a while but now I try my level best to participate in classroom activity*". Javeria remarked, "*My teachers and school staff are very cooperative. But there are some teachers who discourage us, by using insulting and negative phrases to students. I conclude my experience in school is quite good*".

Most participants agreed to have a welcoming and constructive environment, but some of the participants did not agree with other students. Some participants highlighted their family's financial problems. It is very difficult for their parents to bear the expenses of their studies. One of the participants said "*My family could not manage his studies expenses and he highlighted this problem to their teacher and principal. They waived my expenses and told me that my only concern should be my studies, not expenses. I would not forget those words*". Participants highlighted how their teachers helped them. Saira comprehends that "*Our teachers take the extra mile to help us. They not only guide us in studies but teach us ways to handle our disability*".

Some participants responded that they love coming to school every day because they do activities here. They have learned skills take participate in extracurricular activities. They took part in debates, drama, games, and workshops conducted in school. Zainab said, "*I feel more energetic and productive while performing extracurricular activities.*"

4.3. Theme 3: The Impact of Vocational Skills in Social Identity Construction

In this theme, the participants were inquired about the influence of vocational training and the impact of this training on the construction of career aspirations and social identity.

The research conducted by Yanchak, Lease, & Strauser (2005) inquired about the relationship between career aspirations and vocational training questions and whether there is any relation between career aspirations and vocational identity and how it impacts their disability. This research has shown that individuals learn and take career aspirations from vocational identity it is not affected by their disability. Entrepreneur

competence and career aspiration development in students with physical disabilities could be done through vocational training (Sulistiani R.D.R. & Ishartiwi 2019). Danish claimed "*My school teachers compel me to take classes of vocational training. At first, I thought I could not do this but my teachers encouraged me that I would do this. Eventually, I overcame my fear.*" Participants comprehend they feel relaxed and productive about getting vocational training besides studies. Ahmad stated, "*Since I have started learning skills. I think I will start my startup one day.*" This vocational training provides career aspirations to the students, they are passionate about their careers as Zain added, "*I am getting training, I am learning about computers, and I will become a software engineer.*" In this institution, participants are taking training in candle making, paper bags, stitching, and computer courses. Hamza stated, "*I like many things about school but the most favorite part is to learn new every day. It makes me feel satisfied*". When asked why they think vocational training will play a key factor in her career aspirations, Haleema responded positively, "*I see my teachers helping us to get knowledge and skills at the same time. These two things help me to relax. With every passing day, I think I can also be a teacher who would impart knowledge as well as skills to their students.*"

5. Conclusion

The researchers collected data from participants, and it showed their identity had emerged through their experiences. They highlighted their struggles. These struggles helped them to manage their disabilities more effectively. They understand themselves by shaping their social identity. Participants exhibited that education had a profound influence on their lives. Their lives are certainly different without the support of their family and education. In school, they realize that they are not alone and unique. They try to interact with other students and learn to handle themselves. Many participants responded that they learned to do their daily tasks without any help. Vocational training has opened many endeavors like career aspirations, new fields, and exposure to opportunities. They use this vocational training to relax and calm. They would depict their emotions through their art and skills.

6. Recommendations

6.1. Make Vocational Training Compulsory

The research participants were enrolled in schools named as special schools. In this school, only knowledge is given to students. There is a need to make vocational training compulsory for them. The purpose of these is to create cognitive thinking in them. This training keeps them busy, makes them productive, and helps them to secure jobs based on their skills as well.

6.2. Compulsory Counseling Sessions

The participants need counseling sessions for their well-being. Most of the problems will be sorted if they have someone who listens to their problem. By this, we can determine the problem and take vital steps on time. We will create a safe environment by providing them with professional emotional assistance.

6.3. Career Counseling Centers

Most of the students did not know what career they could take in the future. They have limited options of subject selection which limited their exposure and profession

selection. Thus, schools should hire career counselors. Educational institutions could establish an office for training on career counseling. This would be beneficial for the students as they could study according to their interests, and then select the career fields they want to join.

6.4. Normalizing the Behavior of Students with Physical Disabilities

According to popular consensus, it is assumed that individuals with disabilities are limited to certain activities. In our society, they should be considered and treated as normal human beings. We can create a society in which they do not feel marginalized and feel contentment being a part of society. We should create awareness through seminars, speeches, policies, educational institutions, and media. (Nowicki and Sandieon 2002) suggested that in inclusive educational institutions, students with physical disabilities are not treated equally by other students.

6.5. Discourage the Culture of Bullying in educational Institutions and Neighborhoods

Students with physical disabilities face negative, stigmatized statements regarding their disabilities. Few participants stated they were afraid to interact with others. People have given us weird names, worsening our school and social life (Hogan et al., 2000). Society has made difficult patterns for them which leads to loneliness and alienation from others if they are not bullied or stigmatized (Hogan et al., 2000).

7. Limitation

The researchers collected the data from only one institution in Lahore in which students received a formal education and vocational skills simultaneously. Because of limited time and resources, the researchers could not collect data from other schools. The phenomenon of identity construction is different in girls and boys; therefore, the researchers could not study the data in a gender-desegregated way. However, in the future, identity construction will be studied gender-wise. The findings of this research would not be the same for every teenage individual with physical disabilities, as identity construction is a subjective phenomenon, and many factors influence it. Every individual with physical disabilities may go through different phases of social identity construction. There is another possibility individuals with disabilities could not develop their identity in this specific age group.

Ethical Consideration

The authors declare that this submission follows the policies of AJSS as outlined in the Guide for Authors and in the Ethical Statement. Full consent was obtained from the participants before the study and all procedures were carried out by approved ethical standards.

Informed Consent

A fully informed, considered, and freely given decision about whether or not to participate in the study, as data is collected by teenagers informed consent was taken by their guardian or parent. Without the exercise of any pressure or coercion was taken from the respondents.

Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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