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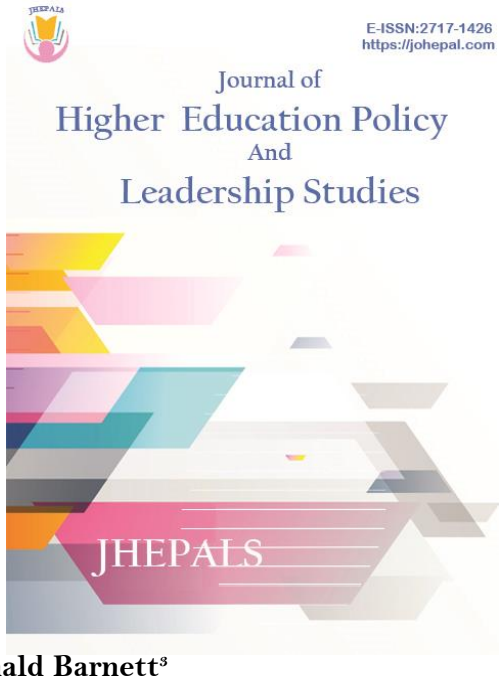

Ritualism as a Form of Academic Malfunctioning: Iranian Higher Education as a Case Study

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Abstract

Today, the Iranian higher education (IHE) exhibits a paradox. Despite the rapid growth of the higher education system and pervasion of the university institution in Iran, and notwithstanding the increasing number of higher education institutions/students/graduates, and research projects, and the improved position of Iranian universities in international ranking systems, there are concerns about the inefficiency of the university system. It seems that the university in Iran has deviated from its institutional functions and has become afflicted with anomie and malfunctioning and, as Merton (1938) puts it, presents a kind of ritualism. Accordingly, this paper reports on a qualitative study of ritualism in Iranian higher education. The central finding is that ritualism is significantly present in IHE, and especially in research. This ritualism is manifested in 3 domains of causes, indicators and consequences. The findings indicate that indicators of ritualism in IHE: such as quantitativism, certificationism, scientific fashion, and symbolism have resulted in false branding, academic corruption, and system inefficiency. These phenomena have taken root in the universities, albeit influenced by the external environment. Overall, a certain group of factors is suggested as leading to academic ritualism: lack of academic independence, commercialization, international norms (language and ranking systems), and institutional norms (reward systems, hierarchy based on non-academic discourse, and symbolic violence). Such a pattern amounts to a serious malfunctioning of the higher education system.

Keywords: Ritualism (Causes, Indicators, Consequences); Academic Malfunctioning; Higher Education; Iran; Thematic Analysis

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Introduction

This study focuses on the phenomenon of ritualism in the Iranian higher education system (IHES). Before addressing the issue specifically in the IHES, the issue that arises is what does ritualism means and whether or not ritualism can be discussed at the level of the higher education (HE).

Ritualism is one of the consequences that Merton (1938) proposed in his theory of anomie for anomic conditions in society. The concept of anomie was first proposed by Emile Durkheim in the field of sociology (Khodadadi & Shabanirad, 2015). It is often taken to be synonymous with "rulelessness" or "normlessness" (Kivisto, 2011, p. 112). For Durkheim, anomie stands for a product of a rapid change in society. This is while Merton believes that anomie occurs in a relatively stable state in society. However, unlike Durkheim, Merton deals with goals and means of achieving goals rather than emphasizing the change"(Heydari et al., 2012 as cited in Sefid Chian, Mazloomi, & Salehi Sadaghyani, 2018). According to Merton and Merton (1968), these goals are frameworks of ideal references that are not only "worth striving for", but also "regulate and control the acceptable modes of reaching out for these goals" (186-187). Regarding the type of relationship these elements (goals and means) can have with each other, Merton proposes two polars and an intermediate state. At one pole, the emphasis is put on goals. This emphasis is independent and disproportionate to the degree of emphasis placed on institutional means. It is the situation which paves the way for innovation and creativity. On the other pole, the activities, for instance, tools and means, turn into goals per se and the original goals are forgotten. Under such circumstances, it is common to practice ritualistic obedience and loyalty to these activities. The intermediate state involves a condition that establishes an equilibrium between cultural goals and institutional means (Merton, 1938).

Thus far, many experts have used anomie in different combinations, including "economic anomie, social anomie, political anomie, sexual anomie, and scientific anomie" (kowsari, 2007, pp. 49-50). Organizations are miniaturized communities and many of the rules, behaviors, and illnesses of society are similarly applicable to organizations. Also norm functions as a common keyword between anomie and organizational culture. On these accounts, one may go further to regard organizational anomie as another type of anomie (Sefid Chian et al., 2017). Hudson (1999) states that anomic organizations "are those that fail to meet a minimum set of common workplace norms" (as cited in De Lara & Rodríguez, 2007, p. 844). Cohen (1993) hypothesizes that anomie occurs when the organization's management inordinately places strong emphasis on goal attainment without directing a corresponding emphasis on following legitimate procedures. In short, as Merton highlights, anomie is characteristic of a social system, but not a state of mind within the system. This shows that we can discuss organizational anomie and its consequences, including ritualism, at the level of HE.

Thus said, according to Merton (1938), ritualists strongly abide by and embrace the means of achieving goals, but, at the same time, fail to pursue the same goals. They involve themselves with the means of achieving goals to the extent that they forget the purpose for which the means were originally drafted. As such, the original goals and missions lose their significance and fade away. Therefore, n this paper, ritualism involves a kind of the depletion of content through which forms and structures are taken to be far more important than

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meaning and content. In other words, forms, words and structures dominate the content. Hence, in this study, we define ritualism as involving all behaviors, practices, and procedures of the university institution and university actors that have led the higher education system to deviate from its main function and rendered them ineffective in fulfilling their missions. Nevertheless, this raises the question as what specific goals and functions (vision and mission) are central to universities that any deviations from which stand for ritualism? To put it differently, what characteristics and specific function are regarded necessary for the university as an institution to generate knowledge? Should the university be a modern and independent institution where knowledge is the light and a source of comfort and satisfaction – a public institution that seeks to provide the ground for the "comfort and satisfaction" of all in the context of a "sustainable" ecology? Or should the university be reduced to an institution similar to any other private enterprise that serves power, capitalism, dominant ideology, industry, and the market – an institution where knowledge is an instrument for tool- and profit-making? An institution that insists on the notion of instrumentation is liable to protect the interests of the powerful due to its profiteering nature and union/group supremacy.

The twenty-first century crises suggest that practicing the instrumental, profiteering, and economy-stricken view towards the dominant current in HE does not seem to be a wise move. Nor would it be applicable for the university institution to continue with its long-standing tradition of representing a particular class or company within the church framework or the interests and will of the king, and, thus, to follow the interests of the governing financial sector irrespective of certain concerns about functional consequences (Javdani, 2020a). Rather, the university should be a locus for knowledge creation ("research"), mainly because its understanding of knowledge (through "teaching and learning") (Barnett & Bengtsen, 2017, p. 1), and the application of knowledge would be beneficial for the well-being of all (services).

The idea of the university is intricately bound up with the idea of knowledge. " Historically, too, knowledge was bound up with the element of truth" (Barnett & Bengtsen, 2017, p. 2). A lack of deep contemplation on the concept of finding the truth, as the main goal of academic institutions, seems to have made the university to function, from the very beginning and with more or less the same terms, according to the will of the forces that control it (Javdani, 2020b). Therefore, answering Macfarlane's (2006, p. 1) questions can be enlightening: Can a university call itself a university unless faculties are carrying out research? Is it necessary to be an active researcher in order to be a good teacher? How can teaching not be research-led?

In addition to these two academic functions, there emerges the third specific function: "services" or "social services". Through this function university is argued to be accountable to society. The idea of accountability appears to be somewhat vague. The university must be accountable, but not to the demands and pressures imposed by power. The university has to afford free critique of all institutions, from the government itself and the centers of power to other institutions of society so as to create knowledge that will bring comfort and satisfaction to people.

It appears that in the contemporary era, research and education, as the two main functions of the university, have been reduced to bureaucratic affairs owing to the

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quantitative approach taken up in the universities. As far as the third function is concerned, social commitment and responsibility appears to be growing feeble, even in academic institutions due to the dominance of neoliberalism. In other words, universities have transformed students to customers, educators to marketers or distributors and universities to enterprises. This is whilst universities are supposed to respond to social and environmental crises as innovative institutions whose goals are centred on social well-being and satisfaction of all people. In such circumstances, the concept of service is reduced to involve business relations between business entities and their customers. This has grown to the extent that the evaluations of service are carried out in terms of quantity and productivity. The social rejection of the enterprise university by many academics and societies, particularly in leading industrialized countries, on the one hand, and the advancement to social enterprise, covering a wide range of academic and non-academic forms of literature on the other, can provide a part of a response to the current dire situation which has led to social irresponsibility within and between different societies (Javdani, 2020b). In his book *The Academic Citizen: The Virtue of Service in University Life*, Macfarlane (2006) writes:

> In common with the disengagement thesis more generally within society, academic citizenship appears to be in a similar state of crisis and retreat. The evidence suggests that the collegiality of faculty life has been replaced by a less communal and more isolated existence. Institutional communities are strained by the growth in the size of universities, discipline-based communities are ever more fractured and specialized and academic relations with students have become increasingly impersonal in the wake of massification. (p. 26)

In summary, all universities across the world, as social systems, can be afflicted with anomy and ritualism and thereby deviate from their institutional goals. However, we shall be particularly concerned with studying the ritualism in the higher education in Iran.

Ritualism in Iranian Higher Education System (IHES)

Reviewing the history of knowledge-creation institutions in Mesopotamia and the Middle East, it can be argued that modernity in Iran (Iran as part of the realm of Islam and not the present-day Iran) was formed with Academy of Gondishapur, during the 3rd and 4th A.D., and Nezamiyeh, as community driven knowledge-creation institutions, during the 10th and 11th centuries. Academy of Gondishapur was a centre and a shelter for freethinking (for medicals and researchers of various races and religions, in particular, the Christians, for instance) and freethinkers (in order to save the teachers of schools after their closure by the Rome Emperor in the year 489 A.D. and house seven neo-Platonians in the aftermath of astringency of the Emperor of their country in 529 A.D.). Certain studies such as *"L'Enseignemet dans les Universites Musulmans"* refer to Nezamiyeh as university. Cardinal features of Nezamiyeh include the institutional independence from other governmental institutions, free education, variable curriculum, freethinking (Javdani, 2020a), and dependency on endowments (Mohammadnia, 2007). However, due to destructive onslaughts, this movement was led astray from modernity thought to narrativism, a trap which has not apparently managed to escape yet (Javdani, 2020b). After Academy of

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Gondishapur and the Nezamiyeh institutions, subsequent governments founded many educational centers and institutions. Nonetheless, the approach bordered more on modernization (Renovation) than modernity (new thinking, intellectualism). It is an approach that changed not only the goals and functions of these knowledge-creating institutions but also the titles from the House of Science and the House of Wisdom to the House of Techniques. In contemporary Iran, the establishment of the University of Tehran in 1934, the first place to be called university, followed the approach of modernization and imitation from the West. In other words, what is known as the modern university in contemporary Iran was not an institution arising from the Iranian society. Rather, "what happened in Iran was more a project of state modernization (renovation) than the process of modernity (new thinking, intellectualism)" (Khalili, Khorsandi Taskoh, Arasteh, & Ghiasi Nodooshan, 2017, p. 44).

This modernization approach to the establishment of the university in the Iranian society as well as "the emergence of the university within the government from the onset provided the ground for a kind of alienation from both the institution of knowledge and social construction" (Khalili et al., 2017, p. 48). Moreover, the expansion of higher education institutions in Iran, especially in the first decade of the 21st century was influenced by the reduction of the university to an administrative organization and a state institution, the domination of neoliberal thought, and the view of the university institution as an enterprise especially in the first decade of the 21st century. The expansion was so great that according to reports " Iran has 2,859 university branches which is allegedly 5 times more than the number of the universities in the developed countries" (Barani, 2019, p. 261). However, despite the rapid growth of the higher education system and the inclusion of the university institution in the Iranian society and despite witnessing the abundance of news concerning the considerable number of higher education institutions; the substantial number of students, university graduates, and research projects; and the improved ranks of Iranian universities in international ranking systems, there are concerns about the inefficiency of the university system in Iranian society.

In fact, evidence suggests that the dominance of neoliberal thought as well as the modernization approach has made universities in Iran to deviate from their institutional functions. This very deviation, primarily, manifests itself in the motivation to increase the number of articles or gain organizational reputation and rewards that determine the lines of research. Besides, the mere desire to acquire knowledge for the sake of knowledge has given way to the pursuit of rewards (Zakersalehi, 2017). It seems that the IHES is in a state of anomie and malfunctioning and, as Merton (1938) puts it, suffers from a kind of ritualism. The institutions and centers of HE in Iran are immersed in achieving the goals to the extent that they have neglected their real goals and missions which are intellectual enlightenment, finding the ground and solving the problems and problems of the society. Iranian universities often offer formal education. Research is predominantly a reproduction of conventional forms of knowledge. To put the same thing differently, it can be noticed that classes are held on campus, dissertations are compiled, and articles are produced and published, but the Iranian universities are unable to provoke new thought and meaning, discovery, innovation, critique, and social and cultural enlightenment as per their free academic nature (Mehdi & Shafiei, 2017).

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The current literature indicates that the phenomenon of ritualism in the IHES has not been scientifically studied. Therefore, given the existing research gap, this study builds on a qualitative approach to identify the dimensions of ritualism in the IHES. Owing to its exploratory nature, the study contributes to the literature by developing a model that contributes to formulizing the manifestations of ritualism in the Iranian higher education. It will provide future researchers with valid and reliable methods and tools for extending the current literature. Besides, by uncovering the dimensions of ritualism as one of the deviation and malfunctioning of the IHES, it may contribute to those in charge making appropriate decisions to improve the IHES.

Research Methodology

In this qualitative research, we collected the data in two stages: 1) unstructured interviews with experts and 2) lectures presented by and interviews made with experts in the media. In the first stage, the study is built on the purposive (snowball) sampling to conduct the unstructured interviews with 17 experts and faculty members working in universities and research institutes affiliated with the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT). The interviews were conducted from Oct. 09, 2019, to Dec. 30, 2019, until theoretical saturation was obtained. The interviews continued between 25 and 75 minutes. Each interview included an introduction of the researchers and the aims of the research, an explanation of Merton's (1938) theory and the concept of ritualism, and a general two-part question: *given the definition of ritualism in Merton's theory, do you believe that Iranian universities suffer from a kind of ritualism? If so, in what areas do you think universities have developed ritualism?* Because the interviewees were selected purposively from among Iranian higher education experts and critics, everyone except one, whose interview stopped, had a positive response to the first part. However, there were multifarious views on the extent and areas of ritualism. Participants were assured that their identity and information will remain confidential. We got the permission of the interviewees to record the interview sessions. Subsequently, we carefully transcribed the recorded sessions for analysis. The interviews were made in Persian.

Data analysis was performed along with data collection such that each interview was transcribed and analyzed before the next interview to be conducted. Thematic analysis was employed for data analysis. It is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns in qualitative data. This method goes beyond counting explicit words, and phrases, and renders scattered and varied data as rich and detailed data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes are "recurrent and distinctive features of participations accounts, characterizing particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question" (King, Horrocks, & Brooks, 2019, p. 200). In other words, "A theme is a pattern found in the information that, at minimum, describes and organizes the possible observations and, at maximum, interprets aspects of the phenomenon " (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 4).

Owing to the variety of methods used in content analysis and the diversity of experts' views, there are different headings and classifications for themes. In this study, thematic analysis follow Attride-Stirling's (2001) three levels of basic themes (codes and key points in the text), organizing themes (categories obtained from the combination and summarization

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of basic themes), and global themes (high-level themes containing the principles governing the text as a whole). Thus, contents of the interviews were transcribed, carefully read, and judged several times by the researcher. This helped to identify the initial themes or impressions (including some connotations, questions, concepts, etc.) that could be used in the later stages. The themes that represented parts of the text were then identified and recorded. Afterwards, the basic and organizing themes were listed and clustered. In so doing, when the basic themes were identified, then, the researcher combined similar or overlapping themes to form organizing ones. A table also was developed to summarize the basic and organizing themes of each interview. Finally, all tables were juxtaposed to integrate items or themes. Through immersion in data, continuous comparison along with and identification of similarities and differences, the basic and organizing themes were grouped into three global themes related to the indicators, consequences, and causes of ritualism in the Iranian higher education system. To ensure the credibility of research data, the method of repeated study, data comparison and summarization, and classification of information without making changes in the data were used. Table 1 presents the participants' demographic characteristics. Moreover, for anonymity purposes, the participants' names were replaced by a specific code.

Table 1
Workplace and number of interviewees

Row	Workplace	Number	Dedicated code
1	faculty member (University of Isfahan)	3	interviewee (Code #1) interviewee (Code #2) interviewee (Code #3)
2	faculty member (Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education)	4	interviewee (Code #4) interviewee (Code #5) interviewee (Code #6) interviewee (Code #7)
3	faculty member (Institute for Cultural and Social Studies)	4	interviewee (Code #8) interviewee (Code #9) interviewee (Code #10) interviewee (Code #11)
4	faculty member (Ferdowsi University of Mashhad)	2	interviewee (Code #12) interviewee (Code #13)
5	faculty member (Allameh Tabataba'i University)	1	interviewee (Code #14)
6	faculty member of (University of Tehran)	2	Interviewee (Code #15) interviewee (Code #16)
7	faculty member (Shahid Beheshti University)	1	Interviewee (Code #17)

*Fran among the participants, 35% were higher education specialists, 29% were in sociologists, 18% were education specialists, 12% were management specialists and 6% were law specialists.

To enrich the research findings, in the second stage, we purposively selected and analyzed 12 lectures, interviews and criticism of experts of IHES in the media from 25 Jan. 2020 to 27 April 2020. All but three of the lectures were audio or video files, which were carefully transcribed for analysis. These lecturers were recommended by the experts participating in the interview section as the key experts of the phenomenon under study. Nevertheless, they either could not be interviewed or referred the researchers to their lecture file. However, the analysis of the lectures of the experts had two advantages. First,

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it confirmed the theoretical saturation in the interview stage, because after the transcripts of the lectures were analyzed, only 6 basic themes were added to the themes extracted in the interview stage. Second, it also added to the credibility of the research data from the interview section. Table 2 provides information on the lectures examined in the second stage of the study. Although the experts in the second phase of the research were well-known figures, as in the case of interviews, a specific code was assigned to each.

Table 2
Lectures and interviews of experts

Row	Lecturer /Year/ Topic/ Lecture place / media	Dedicated code
1	Dr. Mehdi Mohaghegh / 2018/ Discussion on the process of Islamic degeneration and the situation of higher education in the country/ Shokaran TV program	Code #18
2	Dr. Mehdi Golshani / 2019/Critique of the current situation of the country's universities/ Shokaran TV program	Code #19
3	Dr. Mehdi Golshani / 2017/Why are values weakened in our scientific environment? /Sharif University of Technology	Code #20
4	Dr. Mozaffar Cheshmeh Sohrabi/2017/ The migration of science from the university/ http://tabnakbato.ir/fa/news	Code #21
5	Dr. Ali Khorsandi Taskoh / 2019/A critical introduction on academic mass/ Higher Education Organizing Conference	Code #22
6	Dr. Ali Khorsandi Taskoh / 2019/The idea of the Science Institute about the independence of the university in Iran/ Humanities Video Magazine	Code #23
7	Dr. Abbas Kazemi /2019/The concept of indeterminacy and university/ Conference on Cultural and Social Studies of Higher Education	Code #24
8	Mr. Davood Hosseini Hashemzadeh /2019/Introducing and criticizing the book of university corruption written by Davood Hosseini Hashemzadeh/ Meeting of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance	Code #25
9	Dr. Hassan Mohaddesi /2013/ University as a market/ The first critique of government policy entitled "Social Criticism of Higher Education Programs", Iranian Sociological Association	Code #26
10	Dr. Saeed Safaei Movahed /2019/Analysis of Academic Corruption in Higher Education/ University of Tehran	Code #27
11	Dr. Sepehr Ghazi Nouri Naeini /2019/ The gap between The institution of science and the institution of politics/ Humanities Video Magazine	Code #28
12	Dr. Hossein Masoumi Hamedani /2018/ Review of scientific-research articles/ Specialized meeting of the role of the press in advancing Iran's knowledge - Central Library of the University of Tehran	Code #29

Findings

As Figure 1 shows, our findings concerning ritualism in the IHES - as perceived by the interviewees and experts - were categorized into three global themes: A) indicators of ritualism, B) consequences of ritualism, and C) causes of ritualism.

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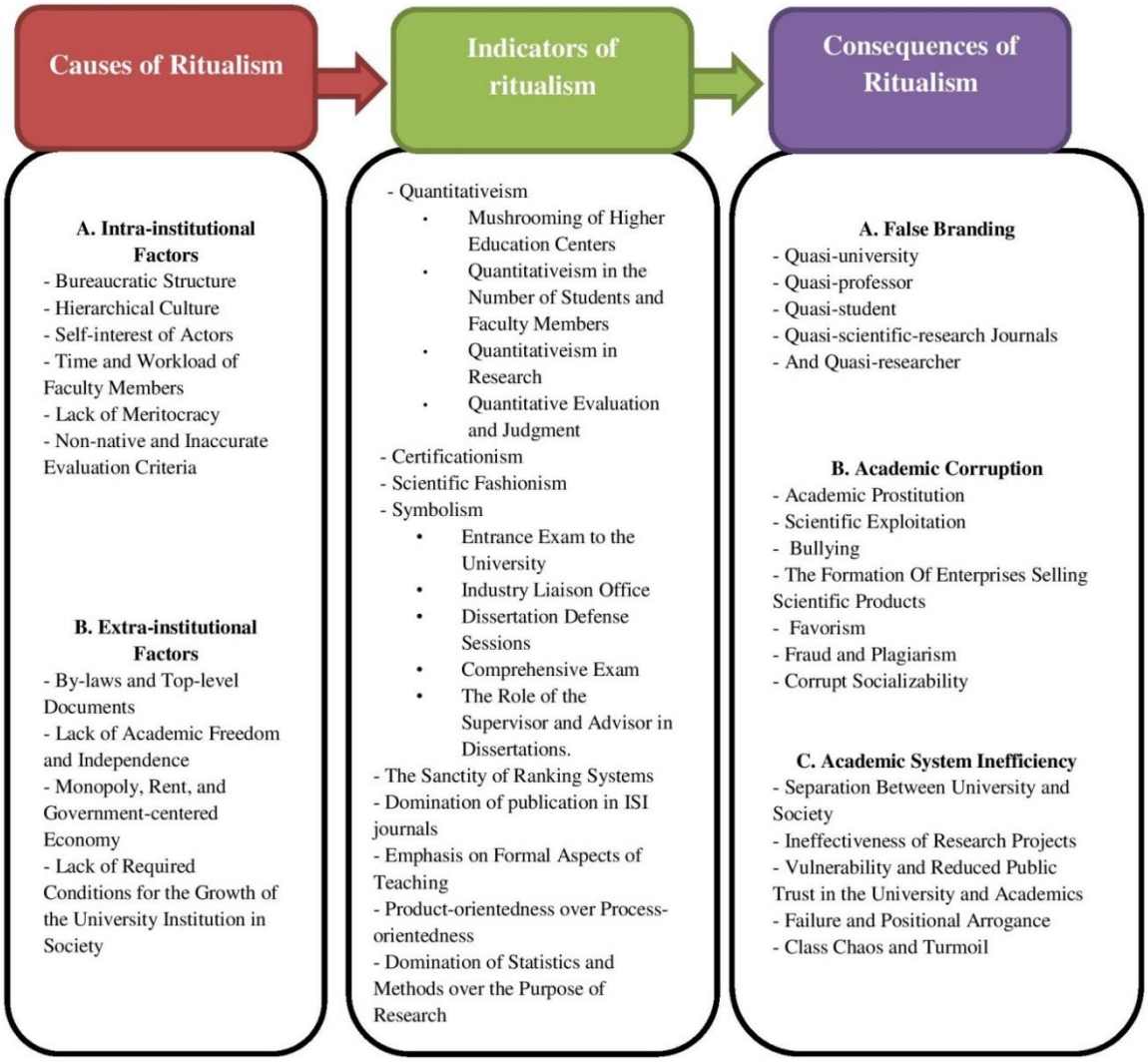

Figure 1. Causes, Indicators and Consequences of Ritualism in IHES

Causes of Ritualism

As Figure 1 shows, the global theme of the causes of ritualism in the IHES was categorized in two organizing themes: intra-institutional and extra-institutional factors.

Intra-institutional Factors

The following shows a summary of the views of participants and experts associated with the Intra-institutional causes of ritualism in IHES:

> "The prevailing bureaucratic structure forces us to adhere to the mere observance of the law (symbols, means of achieving goals) in order to maintain its survive. That is, in fact, what prevails in our education and academic research." (Code #1)
>
> "Some Iranian faculty members take on many responsibilities due to profitability. Sometimes you see that in addition to the large volume of teaching and the responsibility of supervising and advising graduate and post-graduate students, they have several managerial and consulting positions. Certainly, these

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> things cannot be performed by one person within 24 hours, so he does the rituals." (Code #7)
>
> "The excessive contraction and compaction of the time and volume of work of the faculty have led professors to adhere to the form, especially in research."(Code #4)
>
> "Unfortunately, relationships have played a stronger role than competences in selecting individuals and forming committees, and this has been one of the reasons for the failure of some programs." (Code #20)
>
> "The ranking system of Iranian universities is based on a system that is planned outside of Iran, and we have confused working internationally with applying these indicators." (Code #21)

According to these ideas, it can be argued that a part of the deviation and malfunctioning in the Iranian academic institutions take their roots form the dominant bureaucratic culture and structure. This had given rise to the domination of formal and bureaucratic regulations on the reviewing processes of the content of knowledge, and, finally, the extension of formalism. Sometimes, the prevalence and dominance of non-local criteria in the evaluations of scientific activities in line with irrational expectations from academicians in education and research fields result in abiding by the extant forms or malfunctioning. Besides, in certain occasions, political choices rather than competence causes the employment of faculty members to the higher education that lack the favourable qualifications (Motalebifar, Arasteh, Navehebrahim, & Abdollahi, 2017); and the required scientific and knowledge to enhance the expectations as faculty members.

Extra-institutional Factors

Universities and higher education institutions have "a particular need for autonomy so that they can make their own decisions about academic affairs and steer their own future to grow their strengths" (Altbach, 2009 as cited in Sabzalieva, 2017, p. 8). However, according to the participants, "The problem we have in Iran is that the university rules have been violated for years. ... In such a situation where the university has its rules administered by others and the rules change as political figures change, you cannot perform well" (Code #10). According to these views, there are at least two by-laws in the IHES that contribute to rituals: the one is the by-law for the promotion of faculty members and the other is the by-law for the defense of graduates' thesis.

> "A faculty who seeks to be promoted, to have a higher salary, and to continue working in the university needs to publish more articles and have more classes and dissertations." (Code #5)
>
> "According to the dissertation defense regulations, a doctoral student must have two papers published or at least accepted before s/he can defend." (Code #7).

Given the etiquette of these regulations, scientific work becomes a kind of obligatory behavior and elimination of responsibilities within the defined frameworks (Ariannejad, 2017). Some participants also observed that a large part of Iran's economy is state-owned, monopolistic, and dependent on the sale of oil and "it does not need innovative and creative

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knowledge, nor research, nor development" (Code #5). In addition, modern institutions such as universities are only copies of these in the modern countries. They are not constructed mainly to meet the needs of the Iranian society.

> "We saw that there was such an institution (university) in developed countries, so we thought we would better have this institution. However, we did not have or did not create the environment in which this institution needs to grow and function properly in society." (Code #6)

Therefore, it can be noted that the external environment of universities, besides the internal structure and environment, plays a salient role in giving shape to the academic procedures and behaviours of academicians. It means that the academicians have to abide by the regulations and environmental requirements to maintain their interests.

Indicators of Ritualism

The results showed that the global theme of ritualism indicators entail nine basic themes, namely quantitativism, certificationism, scientific fashionism, symbolism, the sanctity of ranking systems, domination of publication in ISI journals, emphasis on formal aspects of teaching, product-orientedness over process-orientedness, and domination of statistics and methods over the purpose of research.

Quantitativism

Undoubtedly, it is justifiable to take quantity along with quality, provided that quantity and the quantitative development of activities would not construct the sole purpose. Most of the participants and experts, however, stated that in the IHES, we have become engaged with a series of numbers and figures that are not a criterion of quality by essence, but they have now become a quality criterion for us. To put it more precisely, the experts participated in the study referred to the mushrooming of higher education centers, quantitativeism in the number of students and faculty members, quantitativism in research, and quantitative evaluation, and judgment:

> "In the higher education sector, we are experiencing some kind of inflation in the number of higher education institutions, the number of students, and the number of professors." (Code #17)
>
> "We, the faculties, are obliged to have some articles and research in our resume at the end of the year to prevent stagnation. It is, in one way or another, the research duty of the professor. It does not matter if they have any applicability, and they usually don't." (Code #10)
>
> "The efficacy of an individual is measured solely by the type of degree s/he has, his/her academic rank, and the number of articles s/he has published" (Code #20). and "When we want to say whether a person is specialized and literate in a specific field, we look at the number of researches s/he has." (Code #4)

Evidence suggests that in the IHES, deep concepts such as 'science', 'university', 'education', 'student', 'professor', 'research', etc. are reduced to 'inefficient quantities' (Ehsani & Najafi, 2020). The quantitative growth of the Iranian scientific production is substantially above the world's average (Sadeh, Mirramezani, Mesgaran, Feizpour, & Azadi,

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2019); and the quantity-quality balance indicator in IHES is at an alarming condition on the global scale (Khosravi, 2019).

Certificationism

> "Certificationism and score-orientedness are generally evident in Iranian universities." (Code #8)
>
> "to obtain a degree for the sake of a degree has become an unspoken but global goal … however, all processes in Iranian universities are being formalized and ritualized. There are educational processes at university, yet they are devoid of content in practice." (Code #26)

A predominant tendency toward obtaining university degrees as well as giving excessive credence to degrees on the one hand and politicization of degrees and their defining role in gaining political and administrative positions on the other have positioned universities, as a degree producing institutions, in a particular stance within the power structure in the Iranian society. This means that getting degrees are integrated with power relations and calculations. As a matter of fact, our perception of the mission of universities is afflicted with instrumental insights towards universities (Khalili et al., 2017).

Scientific Fashion in the Name of Updatedness

According to the experts, updatedness is a concept that appears as a good slogan, facet, and phenomenon. But, this concept is at the same time partly ritualized. In this regard, the interviewees stated that

> "You come to create a term; the term becomes fashionable; I hold a specific course on the term; one is proud that s/he has an article in this field. Yet, no one is asking what the term means at all. Is it applicable in our organizations and society at all? This trend is around for a year or two, and then another trend or fashion will replace it." (Code #1)
>
> "When a certain field comes to be the fashion, an onslaught begins toward it, and even many elites fall prey to it without directing sufficient attention. Thus, they often waste the creativity that could be employed for a wider field." (Code #20)

Similarly, Neyestani (2016) asserts that students and professors conduct researches based on scientific fashionism rather than an epistemological chain.

Symbolism

According to the experts, sometimes certain functional patterns are symbolized, and the observance of these symbols has turned into organizational rituals. Analysis of experts' opinions indicates that some processes and procedures in the IHES have become symbolic. What seems to be important is the observance of these procedures and processes rather than the efficiency, purpose, or philosophy beyond these procedures. These functions and procedures include the entrance exam to the university, industry liaison office, dissertation defense sessions, comprehensive exam, and the role of the supervisor and advisor in dissertations:

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> "When the entrance exam is held and the capacities of universities are determined, little attention is paid to the needs of society, labor market, and industry (concerning human resources)." (Code #15)
> "I think these industry liaison offices were created only to make our universities claim to be connected to the industry." (Code #14)
> "Dissertation defense sessions have become bureaucratic and formal sessions." (Code #26)
> "The primary issue is the arrangement and reception [of the reviewers] in the session, and the reviewers often raise the same formal and visual points that they do for all students." (Code #7)
> "In the new policies, the logic of the comprehensive exam should reflect the research competencies of doctoral students in designing and conducting scientific research on a doctoral degree level. However, the comprehensive exam we conduct is not literally a comprehensive evaluation. It is more a knowledge assessment than an approach to prove the ability of doctoral students in doing scientific research and writing." (Code #13)
> "Supervisors mostly consider the dissertation as a student activity and are less involved in the research process. In many cases, the supervisor only reviews what the student has done the night before the defense session. It is also the case that the advisor is imposed on the student. In some way, some faculties collude with one another to have their names on more dissertations." (Code #3)

In accordance with this part of the research findings, Samieagilani (2014) states that the dominance of the entrance exam over the Iranian educational system has led to formalism and the loss of motivation, and genuine and voluntary search for knowledge (Sajjadieh & Aali, 2020). Furthermore, In Iranian universities, according to Izadinia's findings (2014), the participation rate of the supervisor in the dissertation and its subsequent articles is less than 10 percent. In the same vein, the most important role of the supervisor in the dissertation is limited to reminding writing points and punctuation. This is while the supervisory loads of one supervisor and one advisor approximately should be 70 percent and 30 percent, respectively (Izadinia, 2014). This finding violates ICMJE recommendations (2019), considering general supervision of the research group as insufficient for authorship credit, and regard authors' contribution to the conception or design of the work as essential for receiving authorship credit.

The Sanctity of Ranking Systems and Domination of Publication in ISI Journals

According to the participants' ideas, the ranking systems of universities, especially systems that value quantitative indicators, and publishing papers in ISI journals have been deemed as the ultimate goal for universities and authorities in Iran; and "All the concern of our universities is to improve their score and ranking in these ranking systems – ranking systems in many of which indicators have no regard for local and regional needs" (Code #17). Besides, "When evaluating the performance of a faculty member or a student, we assess his/her resume as highly credible once we come across an English article or an article published in an ISI journal, but less attention is directed to whether or not the findings of this article are

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applicable at all" (Code #2). Without a shadow of doubt, "the quasi-religious faith in ISI journals and rating systems is wrong" (Davariardakani, 2007, p. 5).

Emphasis on the Formal Aspects of Teaching

The experts asserted that in Iran, the majority of the Iranian teaching staff at universities are caught in Bloom's theory in teaching and, by and large, in its lower levels. They believed that they have even failed to reach the high levels of Bloom's model. One of the interviewees stated that

> "in teaching, it is quite clear that we emphasize the formal aspects of teaching; for example, we are required to have a lesson plan, present the topics at the beginning of the semester, and specify the exam and evaluation method, I mean, specifying all the path through the semester." (Code #15)

Product-Orientedness rather than Process-Orientedness:

According to the views, if research activities are performed in a certain period, they are rewarding for researchers. Thus, researchers are more inclined to study in areas that end in writing (article) within a shorter period. In other words, "research has become a finite process, so that a researcher must do a research work at a finite timeframe, such as A few months" (Code #7). For example, "A student who is researching a post-doc course is told that after three or six months, you will have to publish several articles" (Code #19). Under these circumstances, students and researchers tend to turn to areas that can lead to articles in a faster time. Nevertheless, as Ariannejad (2017) argues, some fields such as mathematics require one to two years of continuous work and effort (on average) to publish a valuable original article.

Domination of Statistics and Methods over the Purpose of Research

according to the experts, research in the IHES has overlooked the content and other related issues and become limited to a series of by-regulations. Methodological constraints are perhaps one of the primary components of ritualism in HE and academic systems. We are imprisoned in methodological traps, in one way or another.

> "Even in graduate dissertation defense sessions, many reviewers judge the statistical section of the dissertation with no regard for the research objectives; that is, if the student uses a variety of complex tests and statistical software programs, his or her work will be appreciated; if not, s/he is criticized for not applying a particular software or test." (Code #9)

As shown in Table 3, Indicators of ritualism in IHES were organized into the fields of research, education, assessment and evaluation, development of HE, and services as five organizing themes. Findings indicate that ritualism in research has more manifestations than in other fields.

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Table 3
Indicators of Ritualism in IHES by Different Areas

Global-Theme	Organizing Themes	Basic Themes
Indicators of Ritualism in IHES	Research	Quantitativeism, Scientific fashionism, Domination of Publication in ISI Journals, Product-orientedness over process-orientedness, Domination of statistics and methods over the purpose of research, Dissertation defense sessions, The role of supervisors and advisors in graduate dissertations
	Education	Certificationism, Emphasis on formal aspects of teaching
	Assessment and Evaluation	The sanctity of ranking systems, Quantitative evaluation and judgment , The entrance exam, The comprehensive exam
	Development of HE	Mushrooming of higher education centers, Quantitativeism in the number of students and faculty members
	Services	Industry liaison offices

Consequences of Ritualism

The results showed that the consequences of ritualism in the IHES involves three organizing themes, including false branding, academic corruption, and academic system inefficiency.

False Branding

About half of the participants stated that false branding is a highly important consequence of formalization in procedures and processes in the IHES. This means the creation of an appropriate perspective of an individual, a system or a university with advertising purposes in a false manner rather than a real one. Based on the views expressed, false branding was categorized in five basic themes: quasi-university, quasi-professor, quasi-student, quasi-scientific-research journals, and quasi-researcher:

> "We have reached a state of anarchism of quantitative development and university construction in Iran where the word "university" meaning a "unified scientific community does not appear appropriate for many higher education institutions in the country. "Perhaps the term 'university booths' or 'higher education kiosks' is the most appropriate term to describe such so-called university centers." (Code #22)
>
> "Usually, full professors are not experts and scientific mujtahids in their field. … All of these professors have promoted and cleverly gone through the hierarchy of rank promotion to be full professors." (Code #13)
>
> "The phenomenon of "quasi-students" or "student-employee" is spreading in Iranian universities. These students, who are mainly employed, typically seek to improve their organizational position or gain certain privileges through the academic degree, such as a certain license or progress in politics." (Code #15)
>
> "In Iran, every university publishes three to four research journals. In most cases, these journals do not fulfill the domestic scientific demands, nor the social needs, nor do they contribute to the production and expansion of the frontiers of science in the global arena. They play no scientific role except as part of the promotion mechanism." (Code #27)

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> "The article-game and lust of article writing in the Iranian academic community has led us to encounter researchers who publish articles weekly and occasionally daily." (Code #14)

Evidence suggests that in Iranian society, institutions such as the university are only an imitation of a real university with the role and function they are doomed to play in modern societies (Fekouhi, 2019). It has been suggested that, in the Iranian universities, some professors are as beautiful as costume jewelry. They have titles, have scientific status, are full professors, associate professors, distinguished professors, or top professors. However, real professors and scientists are rare. Furthermore, certificationism has led to a state where out of ten students, you can find no more than one who is reliable and creative. Only one out of hundreds of wandering souls in the corridors of the colleges are capable of successive blossoming (Neyestani, 2016).

Academic Corruption

According to the experts interviewed here, ritualism has displaced scientific norms, caused widespread corruption in Iranian higher education institutions, and marginalized the honor and integrity that are the basis of knowledge creation. It has also isolated people who adhere to ethical principles. According to these views, corruption has penetrated into the IHES in various forms and dimensions, including academic prostitution (Selling university degrees), scientific exploitation, bullying, enterprises selling scientific products, favoritism, fraud and plagiarism, corrupt socializability:

> "Do not look at the big universities in the country, such as the University of Tehran, Amirkabir, or Isfahan. You need only to look at the universities established in the farthest corners of the country. With 5% or 10% of the average scores in the doctoral exam, a student starts studying for a doctorate. In fact, s/he just pays to buy a doctoral degree. Is this something other than academic prostitution?" (Code #28)
>
> "Sometimes some faculties oblige a student in order for themselves to promote. 'To get a grade, to pass, to defend your dissertation, etc. you have to write an article with my name on it." (Code #11)
>
> "This concept of bullying is seen at both the individual and organizational levels, i.e., the faculty exerts excessive force on the student, or the system as a whole forces the student or the faculties." (Code #4)
>
> "Ask any of the higher education actors what comes to mind when you hear the name of Enghelab Street in Tehran. Without exception, one of the things they will answer is selling a dissertation, a research paper, ISI and Q1, writing a book, and so on." (Code #3)
>
> "Our journals have become gangsterism and comradeship. Many journals you can find that publish an article with one phone call. ..." (Code #13)
>
> "Some faculties abide by the forms. They plagiarize, they slack off and only aim to be promoted and become full professors." (Code #10)
>
> "In Iran, we have trained our students in a way that they embrace corruption. They will easily say yes to corruption because they see that the teacher, who should actually be in charge of education, is making exploitations and asks

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> students to write articles for him/her, write books for him/her, serve him/her in different ways in return for a grade." (Code #25)

Izadinia (2014)asserted that power relations play an essential role in the relationship between the supervisor and the student. For example, many faculties include their names as an author in articles to which they have not made any contribution. However, studies indicate that educational corruption in higher education is not limited to the Iranian context and "it is a common phenomenon in almost every university in the world" (Mattar, 2021, p. 2). For example, Chapman (2002) showed that 31%, 38%, and 42% of students in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, respectively, believe that corruption is widespread among university professors (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2012). "According to a 2012 Open government report, Russians perceived HE to be the fourth most corrupt sector in the country" (Fursova & Simons, 2014, p. 25). Chen and Macfarlane (2016) also reported cases of misconduct, including falsification, fabrication, and plagiarism in Chinese higher education researches. Furthermore, Denisova-Schmidt, Huber, and Leontyeva (2016) found in their research that senior (fifth year) students are significantly more likely than first years to engage in informal activities and corrupt behaviors (Such as cheating in exams, and downloading term papers from the Internet).

Inefficiency and Ineffectiveness of the University System

For the interviewees and experts, the existing conditions prevailing in the IHES have resulted in the inefficiency of the university and its inability to meet the quality requirements of educational, research, counseling, and social services. Our results showed that this organizing theme consists of five basic themes, including a) the separation between university and society, b) ineffectiveness of research projects, c) vulnerability and reduced public trust in the university and academics, d) failure and positional arrogance, class chaos and turmoil.

Separation between University and Society

Civic engagement has become an institutional priority of higher education at an international scope (Bowen, 2010). Boyer (1996, p. 11), in this connection, maintains that "the academy must become a more vigorous partner in the search for answers to our most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems". However, according to the views expressed by the experts participated in this study, "the university in Iran does not fulfill the demands of different sectors of society… There is virtually no organic link between the university and other sectors of society" (Code #26). Quite to the contrary, evidence suggests that the Iranian universities do not function as a reference to record and perform the pathology and analysis of the far-reaching sufferings of the society (Ariannejad, 2017).

Ineffectiveness of Research Projects

Different lines of research in Iran is concerned with problem-solving; however, it is more concerned with the promotion of faculty members rather than the promotion of the society. According to the experts, "most articles are useless and have no benefit for the progress of the country. The science that we are spreading in Iran will neither produce power nor wealth" (Code #19). The results indicate that in the IHES, the knowledge obtained from

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research has little "social application" (Gaunand, Hocdé, Lemarié, Matt, & de Turckheim, 2015).

Vulnerability and Reduced Public Trust in the University and Academics

According to the participants, one of the most important consequences of the deviation and malfunctioning of IHES is the vulnerable public trust in academics and universities as institutions.

> "When the news of plagiarism is spread by Science and so on, when our students easily buy dissertations and articles, and families are informed about how faculty members are loading students with research burdens, this trust is ruined in one way or another." (Code #25)

Research suggests that in other countries the lack of ethical standards and increased corruption at the HE level have discredited the tertiary education (Fursova & Simons, 2014) and distrust in university graduates (Adebisi, Adebisi, & Arogundade, 2012).

Failure /Positional Arrogance and Class Chaos (Turmoil)

Some of the experts stated that there is a phenomenon in the IHES which is called class failure or frustrated dignity: "We are dealing with a wide range of young graduates who have received their university education but have not been able to change or improve their social class positions" (Code #24). According to the experts, class failure as well as class turmoil stands for a new large group that does not easily fit into any of the existing socio-economic classes.

> "A large group (university graduates) who have elevated their spirits to be in the middle or upper classes but whose material life is in line with those of the lower classes resemble immigrants who are in an in-between space with no sense of belonging either way and are not considered as part of these conventional classes.... A person who came from an unskilled working class from a small town but who now has a university degree and is, for example, an unemployed engineer is one of the images in this huge group. Such a person does not belong to that working class nor the class that engineers belong to." (Code #24)

The results indicate that the Iranian universities have not only been unsuccessful in preparing individuals for future social and personal life and their "professional socialization" (Kicherova, Efimova, & Khvesko, 2015) but also have led to their frustration and despair.

Discussion

Although we particularly dealt with the indications of ritualism in the higher education in Iran, there are some certain facts and reviews of literature that indicate that ritualism and deviation from the functions of the academic institutions are not limited to Iran and it is possible that they may occur in any academic system. Clearly speaking, based on our findings, we can argue that there are certain factors in any society that can lead academic institutions to ritualism and malfunctioning: the role of the state/ a lack of academic independence, commercialization (i.e., the domination of neoliberal policies), international

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norms (i.e., language and ranking systems), and institutional norms (i.e., reward systems, hierarchy based on non-academic discourse, and symbolic violence).

The Role of the State/ Lack of Academic Independence

One of the biggest contradictions in the scientific field is that it largely relies on government budgets and, therefore, suffers from a certain dependency. This dependence within independence (or vice versa) is highly ambiguous because the state, which creates conditions for the minimum independence of these institutions, still has the power to impose obligations on them (Fekouhi, 2018a). Nonetheless, fulfilling many of the university's current missions regarding the society can only be achieved by a significant measure of academic independence and freedom. The statement "the modern university must be freed from all restraints", which Derrida (2001) mentions at the beginning of his book *L'universie' Sans Condition* also emphasizes the fact that the university institution – in which the knowledge is produced – can exert on processing knowledge only when it is able to free itself from any restraint through deconstruction. Without academic freedom and independence, both scientific ethics and the existential philosophy of science will be entangled in complications (Farasatkhah, 2020). According to the functionalist approach, scientific freedom is considered a necessary structural tool for the scientific and academic community. Without scientific freedom, the university and the scientific community would become dysfunctional or malfunctioning and cannot fulfill their mission of producing, exchanging, promoting, and transferring knowledge and specialized services. According to the normative approach, moreover, any kind of external normalization for the scientific community is the an anomaly and will cause anomie (Farasatkhah, 2003).

Commercialization

The dominance of neoliberal and enterprise thought over the university institution and the commodification of knowledge and commercialization as the "key mission" of the university, on a part with its commitment to teaching and open inquiry, is crucial to confuse centre with periphery and to misunderstand that the particular mission of universities can do that no other institutions can exert on. Basic research and well-educated (not just well trained) students are public goods: goods that unfettered markets will fail to produce enough of them" (Evans, 2004, pp. 110-111). According to the experts, business activities of universities target the "academic rationality" (Kutinlahti, 2005 as cited in Gholipour & Abbasi, 2009, p. 15) and "institutional integrity" (Danaeefard, 2004, p. 186) of the university, and imposes the ethos and values of commerce on academic rites (Geiger, 2004). This is while these activities threaten the academic honesty (Choong & Brown, 2007). This also threatens the missions of the university institution in education and research as well as the fundamental values of HE, such as the principle of academic freedom (French, 2005 as cited in Gholipour & Abbasi, 2009, p. 15).

International Norms (Languages and Ranking Systems)

Language

The use of English language as the common language of scientific communication, the growth of the international labor market for researchers and scientists, and the growth of

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information and communication technology are in line with globalization (Hosseinimoghaddam, 2018). However, in developing countries, such as Iran, with the focus placed on "advanced" universities, this linguistic mechanism generally means distancing from the "national" language and dominating the "international language". Under such circumstances, without the slightest hesitation, universities enforce scientists and academicians to write in English, publish "ISI" articles, and author authoritative English-language books, which always holds a substantially higher values than the works written in their national language (even if left tacit). The outcome of this policy is commercialization, purchase and sale of articles, and widespread misconduct (Fekouhi, 2018b).

Ranking Systems

Given the fact that each country has its specific system of HE, it is very difficult to rank universities outside the national borders with uniform and consistent criteria (Shin, Toutkoushian, & Teichler, 2011). One of the most controversial aspects of ranking systems is their structures (i.e., numerical or clustering approach). "The main line of criticism targeting this structure claims that the differences among closely ranked universities can be due to statistical artifacts rather than real differences" (Buela-Casal, Gutiérrez-Martínez, Bermúdez-Sánchez, & Vadillo-Muñoz, 2007, p. 12). Opponents of rating systems argue that this approach has invoked universities to prioritize and give due credence to quantifiable numbers of research publications and graduates, international rankings, and global curricula over national relevance and local curricula (Qadir, 2016). Sometimes politicians use the results of ranking systems to show the economic power and development of their country. Hence, they impose the quantities emphasized by rating systems through the policies and laws issued to universities.

Institutional norms

Reward Systems

According to Bourdieu's findings, it is possible to reflect on a conceptual framework for functional analysis of the growing ambition of some faculties in countries such as Iran for "presentation" of articles and "making" books, and the harm that such a process can leave on science (Yemeni Douzzi Sorkhabi, 2018). Comparing scientists' strategies to storytelling, as Bourdieu states, the symbolic actions that scientists take to recognize their 'stories' are, at the same time, strategies for gaining influence and power through which scientists seek to honor themselves. In this acquisition of power, the reward system in universities leads the most productive scientists to the most productive paths (Bourdieu, 2007). Referring to Merton, Bourdieu (2007, p. 34) further adds that "the institution of science has created a complex system for allocating rewards to those who live in accordance with its norms in various ways,". Thus, the current "scientific reward" system sometimes make the field of science narrower for innovators and wider for followers of norms. This is mainly because, Academicians have to behave within the pre-defined frameworks in order to achieve their interests such as promotion. This is in stark contrast with creativity and innovation requiring deconstruction.

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Ritualism & Iranian Higher Education

Hierarchies based on Non-Academic Discourse

In the academic system, according to Bourdieu, academic privileges, promotions, articles, etc., are tools that create hierarchies in the academic field. However, this hierarchy is not necessarily based on the discourse of the academic system. In the academic system, a person who is a full professor is assumed to be necessarily more literate than an assistant professor, because s/he has passed the recognized scientific standards (authoring books, articles, etc.). However, in Bourdieu's opinion, the academic system does not always operate according to the knowledge vastness and correct measurement tools. Meanwhile, one's knowledge of the field, area of specialty, and communications and links, among others, may also lead to scientific advancement and values added to/reduced from one's work. For example, publishing in ISI journals is a criterion for measuring knowledge and scientific validity in our country. Anyone can achieve scientific promotion only by knowing the techniques of writing articles of different types. In many cases, these techniques provide ways to circumvent deep and precise knowledge and gain academic credentials, in addition to various forms of plagiarism and immoral behavior (such as the abuse of multidisciplinary collaboration) (Fekouhi, 2018b).

Symbolic Violence

Symbolic violence describes "a type of non-physical violence manifested in the power differential between social groups" (Septiani, 2020, p. 2). This is a similar concept to the Marxist idea of 'false consciousness', whereby people internalise the discourses of the dominant, meaning that "the most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural" (Smith, 2007, p. 4). The fact that someone at the university knows that their position may be damaged, that they may not be recruited, that their articles may not be published, that they may lose their job, etc., is a form of symbolic violence (Fekouhi, 2018b). In effect, individuals absorb the structures and hierarchies of the social settings in which they exist (fields) into their 'mental structures' (habitus) (Swingewood, 2000, p. 214). Therefore, all regulations, such as those of recruitment, the promotion of faculty members, and the defense of postgraduate dissertations, can be subject to symbolic violence.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings show that ritualism and deviations of universities from the institutional functions had certainly occurred in the Iranian universities (in the field of research more than other fields). Part of these circumstances was attributable to the universities themselves and a bigger part to the external conditions of the universities to which the universities are subordinate. This ritualism and malfunctioning as such have resulted in the extension of institutions like university and higher education institutes so that they are, truly speaking, caricatures and shadow of how the modern university might work. This is the main factor which has provided the main impetus to discuss the corruption in Iranian universities.

It is unquestionable that any movement to improve the status quo strongly requires rethinking the existing procedures and undertaking certain measures such as paying attention to institutional independency of universities, the expansion of higher education institutes based on spatial development and mission-oriented programs of universities at

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local, national, regional and international levels. Furthermore, to illuminate ritualism, it is highly required to designing local evaluations systems, revising the regulations and protocols and high-profile documents regarding the employment and promotion of faculty members and defending sessions of graduate and post-graduate thesis and dissertations, and modification of research and educational expectations of faculty members.

Finally, it must be noted that the Iranian higher education institutes differ with respect to their financial resources, structures, and mission (see Ameri, 2015). This very fact puts a limitation on the interpretation of our findings: they are interpretable at macro levels and, undoubtedly, cautions may be taken in generalizing the findings to specific higher education in Iran. Furthermore, we suggest that future researchers may study and compare the range and degree of ritualism at different universities and higher education institutes in Iran and other countries.

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