

“How Do I Improve My Practice as a Lecturer?”: A Living Educational Theory Research Study of Supporting Students Empowerment through Attachment Theory

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Abstract

This paper explores how I use Living Educational Theory Research (LETR) to improve my practice as a lecturer supporting female students' empowerment. Drawing on my lived experience as a woman navigating patterns associated with avoidant attachment, I examine how my search for psychological security has informed both my personal learning and pedagogical practice. Using attachment theory as a conceptual lens, I explore the relationship between secure attachment, self-worth, confidence, and empowerment within sociocultural contexts shaped by patriarchal expectations. Through reflective writing within LETR, I investigate my living contradictions and examine how clarifying my educational values has informed changes in my teaching practice. These changes have supported the creation of reflective learning spaces where students critically examine their experiences, develop resilience, and recognize their agency. Evidence from practice demonstrates how reflective and values-based pedagogy can support students in reconstructing identities beyond limiting cultural narratives. This study highlights LETR as an epistemological approach to professional practice, enabling educators to align values with action while contributing educational knowledge about empowerment through reflective practice.

Keywords: Living Educational Theory Research; Student Empowerment; Reflective Practice; Attachment Theory; Values-based Pedagogy

Introduction

I begin this inquiry from my own experience as a woman who has struggled to feel empowered. Growing up within a patriarchal family structure, I experienced emotional distance and insecurity that shaped my avoidant attachment style and influenced how I understood myself, my relationships, and my sense of agency. Although I now work as a lecturer committed to supporting students' empowerment, autonomy, and psychological safety, I have come to recognize a living contradiction in my practice: I value empowerment deeply, yet I have not always experienced myself as empowered. This tension prompted a central Living Educational Theory Research (LETR) question (Whitehead, 1989): *How do I improve my practice as a lecturer while I am still learning how to live my values of empowerment and security?*

In my role as a lecturer at a university in Jakarta, where I teach Marriage Counseling in the Guidance and Counseling program, I frequently encounter female students who report adverse experiences within their families of origin. Many students described experiences of emotionally unavailable or neglectful parenting, experiences that continue to influence their psychological well-being and relational choices in adulthood. Feelings of helplessness are commonly expressed, particularly in relation to romantic relationships, where students often feel trapped in unhealthy dynamics and perceive marriage as threatening rather than supportive. These narratives resonate strongly with my own lived experience and have become a significant site for self-reflection on the relationship between my personal history and my pedagogical practice.

Helplessness among female university students is a critical concern within higher education, especially in sociocultural contexts where women's lives are shaped by patriarchal norms and structural constraints. Recent scholarship emphasizes that empowerment is a vital dimension of student learning and development, particularly for women whose opportunities may be limited by cultural, social, and institutional factors (Unterhalter & Howell, 2021; Kabeer, 2020; Rahiman, 2023). Research on women's empowerment highlights the importance of agency, voice, and the capacity to make meaningful life choices (Kabeer, 2016; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015), all of which remain unevenly accessible to women in many educational and familial contexts.

From a psychological perspective, attachment theory provides a valuable lens for understanding empowerment. The foundational work of John Bowlby (1988) demonstrates that secure attachment offers a basis for self-esteem, emotional regulation, and autonomy. More recent studies further confirm that secure attachment is strongly associated with resilience, personal agency, and well-being across the lifespan (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016; Cassidy *et al.*, 2018). For women raised within patriarchal family systems, however, the development of secure attachment and empowerment may be constrained by expectations of obedience, emotional restraint, and limited autonomy (Walby, 1990; Kandiyoti, 1988). Recent scholarship further highlights how these sociocultural constraints continue to shape women's agency, voice, and access to opportunities across different contexts (Kabeer, 1999, 2020; Batliwala, 2007; UN Women, 2020). Contemporary gender scholarship continues to show that such structural conditions have long-term consequences for women's identity formation, relational patterns, and psychological security (Connell, 2009; Kabeer, 2016).

It was through sustained self-reflection that I began to recognize how my own search for psychological safety and secure attachment shaped both my identity and my teaching practice. Living Educational Theory Research offers a methodological and epistemological framework through which educators can critically examine their practice, clarify the values underpinning their actions, and generate knowledge grounded in lived experience (Whitehead, 1989, 2018). Through reflective

writing within LETR, I have been able to explore my living contradictions, confront fears related to insecurity and disempowerment, and gradually align my pedagogical actions with my values. This process has supported both my personal learning and professional development as a lecturer.

As insights from this reflective process were incorporated into my teaching, my practice shifted toward creating learning spaces that enable students to critically reflect on their experiences, develop resilience, and recognize their agency. Reflective and value-informed pedagogical approaches have been shown to support identity reconstruction and student empowerment, particularly within contexts marked by cultural and gendered constraints (Loughran, 2019; Kelchtermans, 2017). Drawing on attachment theory as a conceptual lens rather than as a dominant framework, I sought to support female students in making sense of their relational histories while developing greater confidence and autonomy. Evidence from my practice suggests that these changes contributed to enhanced student engagement, self-awareness, and perceived empowerment.

Despite increasing international recognition of Living Educational Theory Research, its application within Indonesian higher education, particularly in relation to women's empowerment, remains limited. Existing studies in Indonesia have largely focused on gender equity policies, participation rates, leadership, and structural barriers (Yuspiani *et al.*, 2023; Harahap *et al.*, 2023; Rahmaditha *et al.*, 2024), often overlooking the lived experiences and pedagogical identities of lecturers. By foregrounding my personal pedagogical journey and its intersection with sociocultural and gendered structures, this study seeks to address this gap. It aims to contribute original knowledge by demonstrating how Living Educational Theory functions as an epistemology for practice and how reflective, value-driven pedagogy can foster student empowerment in the Indonesian higher education context.

Living Educational Theory as a New Form of my Educational Research

My engagement with Living Educational Theory Research (LETR) emerged from a need to understand and transform a persistent tension within my professional practice. As a lecturer, I am deeply committed to values of empowerment and psychological safety. However, my lived experience as a woman shaped by patriarchal family structures and patterns associated with avoidant attachment – characterized by emotional distancing and difficulties in seeking support within close relationships (Bowlby, 1988; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016) – revealed a living contradiction in my practice: while I sought to empower my students, I was still learning how to live these values fully in my own life. It was this contradiction that led me to adopt Living Educational Theory Research, not merely as a research methodology, but as an epistemology for understanding and improving my practice (Whitehead, 1989; Whitehead & Huxtable, 2024).

My perspective as an educator is therefore inseparable from my personal learning journey. My teaching approach emphasizes critical engagement, reflective dialogue, and empowerment, particularly for female students who have experienced powerlessness within family systems and broader social structures. In this sense, my practice reflects what Whitehead (1989) describes as educational influence as grounded in lived experience, where knowledge is generated through the ongoing interplay between teaching, learning, and self-understanding. Introducing life values into my teaching has become meaningful, not as a

transmission of abstract ideals, but as an invitation for students to critically examine their own experiences alongside mine.

Living Educational Theory, as articulated by Whitehead (1989), refers to the explanations individuals create to account for their educational influence in their own learning, in the learning of others, and in the learning of the social formations in which they practice. I came to understand my research as an attempt to make explicit how my values, particularly those of empowerment and security, were clarified, challenged, and gradually lived more fully through my teaching. Rather than positioning theory as something external to my practice, LETR enabled me to view my practice itself as a source of legitimate educational knowledge.

Self-reflection became central to this inquiry, particularly as my understanding deepened during my postgraduate studies. I adopted Brookfield's four-lens reflective framework, which invites reflection through the lenses of personal experience, students' perspectives, colleagues' insights, and relevant theory (Brookfield, 2017). Engaging with these multiple lenses helped me uncover assumptions underlying my teaching – especially assumptions shaped by my own experiences of insecurity and emotional distance – and to recognize when these assumptions limited my capacity to enact empowerment in practice. Brookfield emphasizes that such critical reflection is essential for identifying distorted or incomplete assumptions that require further examination, a process that proved crucial in my learning.

This reflective process was further informed by John Dewey's (1933) conception of reflection as the disciplined examination of experience, through which learning becomes possible. My learning did not arise simply from teaching experiences themselves, but from deliberately pausing to analyze and document those experiences through reflective writing. Recent scholarship continues to affirm reflection as a foundational practice for professional learning and identity development (McAteer, 2013; Kelchtermans, 2017), with more recent studies also emphasizing its role in shaping professional identity and critical awareness.

As my understanding of LETR developed, I began to see my participation in scholarly communities not as isolated activities, but as dialogical spaces that supported the clarification of my living-educational-theory. Engaging in reflective dialogue with other practitioner-researchers challenged me to articulate my values more clearly and to justify my claims to educational knowledge. This process strengthened my commitment to LETR as a means of sustaining inquiry into my practice and remaining accountable to my values over time (Whitehead & Huxtable, 2024). This dialogical engagement is further illustrated through visual evidence of my participation in the Indonesian Living Educational Theory Research learning community (see Figure 1), which highlights the collaborative context in which my understanding of LETR has developed.



Figure 1. Engagement in the Indonesian Living Educational Theory Research community as a dialogical space for reflective learning and theory development.

Through this ongoing process of reflection and dialogue, I learned to recognize the university classroom as a significant space for adult learning, identity reconstruction, and empowerment. My findings suggest that, when lecturers engage reflexively with their own living contradictions, they are better positioned to create learning environments that invite students to critically examine their experiences and develop a stronger sense of agency. One student, for example, articulated with clarity the importance of continually striving for empowerment, highlighting how reflective dialogue within the classroom supported her growing confidence and self-understanding. Such moments provided evidence of my educational influence and reinforced my commitment to Living Educational Theory as a research approach grounded in practice.

How I Develop my Educational Values

At the beginning of this study, it was important for me to clarify what I mean by 'empowerment' and 'educational values'. Empowerment involves creating positive change and redistributing power, understood as control over resources, knowledge, and social structures (Batliwala, 1993). More recent perspectives conceptualize empowerment as the expansion of individuals' ability to make meaningful choices and exercise agency within sociocultural contexts (Kabeer, 1999, 2020). Educational values, such as equality, authenticity, and empowerment, guide my practice as a lecturer and serve as explanatory principles in Living Educational Theory Research (Whitehead, 1989). Recognizing these values early in my reflection helped me link personal experiences with pedagogical practice.

My first significant encounter with these concepts occurred during a Multicultural Counseling course in my master's program, taught by my lecturer. This course emphasized cultural sensitivity in counseling practice and challenged me to critically examine my assumptions and values. Reflecting through the lens of Living Educational Theory, I began to see the importance of identifying the values that guide my teaching and of generating knowledge grounded in lived experience. This experience laid the foundation for my ongoing commitment to create inclusive, reflective, and empowering learning spaces, especially for female students navigating patriarchal structures.

In this context, I consciously articulate my educational values as explanatory principles. I continually ask myself: *Am I creating a learning environment in which*

students feel empowered to find and express their voice? Am I embodying authenticity and equality in my teaching? Engaging with Living Educational Theory Research also allows me to identify *living contradictions*: moments when my actions do not fully reflect my values. Recognizing these contradictions motivates deeper commitment to improving my practice, strengthening self-awareness, and aligning actions with values as they evolve.

Reflective exercises became central to clarifying and strengthening my values. For example, one reflection task focused on *Gender and Sexual Orientation in Counseling*. Through this task, I explored experiences of gender discrimination and marginalization, particularly among LGBTQ+ individuals. I interviewed a woman who shared the challenges she faced in expressing her authentic identity in a society that often marginalized her (Figure 2). Her story highlighted how empowerment is lived through resilience, authenticity, and the courage to claim one's rights. This experience deepened my understanding of empowerment and reinforced the values of equality, authenticity, and agency in my professional practice.

Myself and My World

I was raised in a family that was anything but uniform. Growing up, I rarely encountered something I could fully call "normal" for myself. The environment around me was filled with differences ways of thinking, ways of living, ways of understanding the world that often did not resonate with what I felt inside. Without realizing it at first, I began to see myself as someone who stood slightly apart. As I moved through life, meeting different people and experiencing new spaces, that feeling did not fade. Instead, it quietly grew. I often found myself questioning where I truly belonged. While others seemed to move with certainty, I was left navigating doubt unsure if I was part of the same rhythm or simply an observer within it.

My world is not always easy to understand, even for myself. At times, it feels like a place full of contradictions between what is expected and what is felt, between what is seen and what is hidden. There were moments when I tried to fit into what the world defined as "normal," even if it meant silencing parts of myself. Living in a heteronormative environment made me believe that love had only one acceptable direction, and anything beyond that was something to question, or even to deny. Learning about the concept of homosexuality was not just an academic understanding for me it became something deeply personal. It gave language to feelings I had long struggled to name. It helped me realize that what I felt was not something foreign or wrong, but something human. Still, understanding did not immediately bring acceptance. There was a long period of resistance, of trying to reshape myself into something more acceptable, more familiar to others.

But reflection has taught me something important: denying myself only created a deeper sense of disconnection. Slowly, I began to listen to my feelings, to my inner voice, to the parts of me I once tried to hide. This process is not linear, and it is not always comfortable. Yet, it is honest. Today, I may still be in the process of understanding who I am, but I no longer see that as a weakness. Instead, it is a journey one that requires courage, patience, and compassion toward myself. In a world that often asks me to conform, I am learning, little by little, to simply exist as I am.

Figure 2. Reflection tasks on "Gender and Sexual Orientation in Counseling."

Figure 2 illustrates my reflective tasks during the course, showing how I engaged with complex topics such as gender. It demonstrates the practical application of reflective exercises in strengthening my educational values and linking personal experiences to professional growth.

These reflective exercises, combined with theoretical engagement, enabled me to integrate personal insight with professional practice. By articulating my values explicitly and using them as standards of judgment, I generate my own living-educational-theory. This theory grows out of lived experience and serves as a resource for improving my teaching practice and contributing to the wider educational community. As my lecturer emphasized, students in higher education have a responsibility to uphold justice. I interpreted this principle as a call to empower those who face social inequities. Allowing women to remain powerless in the face of discrimination is a form of injustice; therefore, pursuing my own

empowerment became a pathway to enable others, particularly my students, to find strength, voice, and agency.

My research perspective within Living Educational Theory Research

The development of my Living Educational Theory Research methodology has made a significant contribution to my teaching practice, particularly in relation to student empowerment. For me, teaching functions not only as a process of personal renewal but also as a means of sharing the knowledge I have accumulated throughout my life, with the intention of enabling students to engage critically with real-world issues. Through the application of Living Educational Theory, I am able to justify and substantiate claims about my teaching practice by grounding them in systematic reflection on experience.

This understanding aligns with Whitehead’s (1989) argument that educational development emerges through reflective inquiry into practice. As Whitehead (1989, p. 41) explains:

I’m assuming that all readers of this Journal will at some time have asked themselves questions of the kind, ‘How do I improve my practice?’, and will have endeavoured to improve some aspect of their practice. I believe that a systematic reflection on such a process provides insights into the nature of the descriptions and explanations which we would accept as valid accounts of our educational development. I claim that a living-educational-theory will be produced from such accounts.

From this perspective, research grounded in professional experience is not only legitimate but also educationally valuable (Whitehead, 1989). Similarly, Brookfield (2017) argues that critical reflection enables educators to examine the assumptions underpinning their practice, identify the conditions under which particular assumptions hold, and recognize when incomplete or distorted assumptions require further scrutiny. Reflective journals, in this sense, support deeper understanding of experience, enhance emotional awareness, foster leadership capacities, and strengthen the ability to respond thoughtfully to complex situations, thereby improving the quality of learning for students (Sherwood & Horton-Deutsch, 2017).

In my teaching practice, I frequently use reflective writing as a pedagogical strategy to support students in identifying and critically examining knowledge related to gender roles (Figure 3). The reflections generated through this process serve as an important source of insight into students’ understandings of the social positioning of men and women. Within this framework, gender is understood not merely as a biological distinction but as a social construction encompassing roles, responsibilities, divisions of labor, and spheres of influence that vary across cultural and social contexts (Connell, 2002; Scott, 1986). These constructions have significant implications for policy formation and for the distribution of resources, opportunities, benefits, and responsibilities between men and women (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

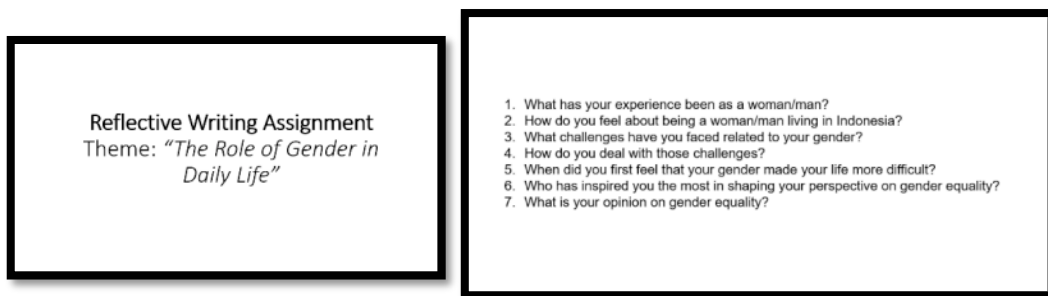


Figure 3. Reflective writing task on "Gender and Sexual Orientation in Counseling" assigned to students.

The figure represents a pedagogical tool used to support students' critical reflection on gender, power, and social justice, and serves as evidence of reflective practice within my teaching.

In Indonesia, discussions of gender are closely linked to questions of rights and obligations between men and women as citizens, as guaranteed by the 1945 Constitution (Undang-Undang Dasar 1945). These constitutional rights include, but are not limited to, the right to security and protection, the right to life, access to education, political participation, economic opportunities, and other fundamental rights (Kementerian Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Perlindungan Anak [KPPPA], 2020). Accordingly, every Indonesian citizen regardless of gender, ethnicity, race, religion, or social class possesses equal rights and is entitled to the same level of well-being. Engagement with these principles led me to recognize that becoming men and women, who can fully realize their potential within a patriarchal culture, is not an easy task. Developing such awareness requires a critical understanding of gender identity (Butler, 1990; de Beauvoir, 1949). However, prevailing conceptions of identity often continue to reflect entrenched binary oppositions, which can be traced to the legacy of Western metaphysics (Derrida, 1976; Irigaray, 1985).

To support the full development of men on an equal footing with women, it is necessary to encourage men to express themselves authentically and without fear of social sanction. Much of the social conditioning experienced by men arises from coercive pressures to conform to dominant gender norms. For instance, when a man expresses emotion by crying, he is frequently labeled as overly sensitive, a characteristic traditionally associated with women. Historically, the concept of gender was often conflated with biological sex and used to define socially prescribed roles, responsibilities, attitudes, and behaviors. As noted by Valentová (2016), men have traditionally been positioned as breadwinners and primary income earners, while women have been assigned roles as housewives and caregivers. This division has aligned men with the public sphere such as politics, paid labour, and civic engagement while confining women to the private sphere of family life, domestic responsibilities, and unpaid labour.

Many young people, particularly women, continue to face difficulties in making independent decisions, whether in relation to their parents or romantic partners. In some cases, parental authority remains dominant, even when such decisions do not contribute to individual well-being or fulfillment. Within traditional cultural norms, domestic work is frequently constructed as an inherent responsibility of women. Women are often

stereotyped as emotional, irrational, and limited in capacity, reinforcing assumptions that they are less suited to leadership roles or certain professional fields (Haliza & Faralita, 2023; de Beauvoir, 1949). Women who pursue careers and compete with men are sometimes stigmatized, while men are socially valorized as rational, responsible, and natural leaders. Contemporary feminist scholars argue that these gendered assumptions are sustained through interconnected social, cultural, and institutional practices that reproduce patriarchal power relations (Walby, 2015; Connell & Pearse, 2015; Ahmed, 2017). Rather than operating solely at the level of family life, patriarchy is embedded within broader community norms, organizational cultures, and state structures, shaping unequal gender relations in both public and private spheres (Fraser, 2016; Crenshaw, 2017). In the Indonesian context, these dynamics continue to influence women's social mobility and access to decision-making power, demonstrating the persistence of patriarchal ideology despite ongoing legal and policy commitments to gender equality (Haliza & Faralita, 2023).

One major factor affecting women's lives is their limited power to make decisions for themselves, a condition shaped by the deeply entrenched patriarchal culture in Indonesia. Inequalities between the social roles of men and women create structural barriers that restrict equal access to opportunities across multiple domains of society. Historically and culturally, women have been positioned as subordinate within what is commonly described as a patriarchal system of power, operating both in personal relationships and in state governance, where policies and institutional practices often remain unfavorable to women (Palulungan, 2020).

In this context, patriarchy can be understood as a complex and evolving social structure that systematically privileges men by positioning them in central roles of authority and granting them greater control over social, economic, and political resources (Walby, 2015). As Rokhmansyah (2013) explains, patriarchal systems embedded in social and cultural life generate persistent gender inequalities that permeate nearly all aspects of human activity. Within such systems, men typically retain primary control, while women are marginalized and excluded from economic, social, political, and even psychological domains, including within the institution of marriage.

Patriarchy also confines both men and women within rigidly constructed categories of identity, reinforcing separation and hierarchy between genders. This compartmentalization is sustained through interpretations of women's identities that are framed from a male-centered perspective. Within this framework, womanhood is often defined as 'not male'. For instance, when men are associated with rationality, masculinity, and participation in the public sphere, women are correspondingly associated with emotionality, femininity, and domesticity (de Beauvoir, 1949; Butler, 1990). The patriarchal construction of masculinity is closely linked to three metaphysical concepts: identity, dichotomy, and nature. Classical Western metaphysics emphasizes identity as a stable essence, requiring each subject to be categorized and defined. Aristotle, often regarded as the originator of the principle of identity, argued that without identity, existence itself would be inconceivable (Derrida, 1976; Irigaray, 1985).

I recognize the sense of helplessness that many students experience, as patriarchal cultural norms in Indonesia frequently limit girls' opportunities to make decisions and assume responsibility for their own lives. In my teaching practice, I therefore pose reflective

questions such as: *“Are the clothes you are wearing today your own choice?” “Did you choose the food you ate today?” “Are you happy?” and “Did you consciously decide to pursue higher education on your own?”* These questions invite students to critically examine whether their everyday actions are grounded in personal agency, whether they feel satisfied with those choices, and to recognize that exercising autonomy does not necessarily have to be difficult. Empowerment, in this sense, is understood as a process of awareness-raising and capacity-building that enables greater participation, decision-making power, control, and transformative action (Mahbub, 2021). One student, for example, shared her experience of being trapped in a toxic romantic relationship and struggling to communicate with her parents, a situation that ultimately left her feeling unable to escape an unhealthy dynamic, an issue that emerged through reflective dialogue in our learning space.

During class, several students shared deeply personal experiences related to intimate relationships characterized by emotional manipulation, infidelity, and persistent feelings of guilt associated with past decisions. They described feeling trapped in unhealthy relationships and expressed beliefs that marriage might offer moral resolution despite recognizing that those relationships were unhealthy. Through reflective dialogue, I encouraged students to critically examine the assumptions underlying these beliefs, particularly the notion that institutional commitment could alleviate emotional distress and guilt. This reflective process enabled them to recognize that well-being, agency, and ethical responsibility cannot be resolved through marriage alone, but instead require self-awareness and autonomous decision-making. This narrative is presented in an anonymized and generalized form. All identifying details have been removed or altered to protect the student’s confidentiality and to prevent recognition by others within the learning context.

Experiences of helplessness often lead both women and men to feel that they have little hope of living fulfilling lives, as repeated constraints can undermine individuals’ sense of agency and willingness to respond constructively to challenging situations. Women, in particular, may develop patterns of learned helplessness through repeated exposure to unpredictable and uncontrollable forms of violence, fostering the belief that they have limited power over their own circumstances (Palker-Cornell & Marcus, 2004). Within Indonesia’s patriarchal cultural context, women are frequently positioned as passive and dependent, with decision-making authority dominated by male figures in families and communities. When girls are not given opportunities to practice decision-making within their families, this limitation often carries into adulthood, making it difficult for them to assert boundaries or refuse harmful demands. These conditions form the social and cultural context within which my educational practice takes place.

In response to these conditions, my teaching practice is intentionally designed to create reflective spaces in which students can examine their experiences, beliefs, and assumptions about agency, responsibility, and choice. Through reflective dialogue and writing activities, I invite students to question taken-for-granted norms that shape their sense of self and their perceived capacity to act. Engaging in this practice has prompted ongoing reflection on my part as an educator-researcher, particularly regarding how my own values of empowerment, care, and justice are expressed in my pedagogical decisions. This reflexive process constitutes a central element of my living-educational-theory, as it involves continuously evaluating how my actions align with the values I seek to live by in my teaching.

Evidence of my educational influence can be seen in the ways students begin to articulate alternative possibilities for their lives through reflective engagement (see Figures 4 and 5). The excerpts illustrate how students critically reflect on gender expectations, identity, and emotional experiences, both as women and men. These reflections show an emerging awareness of personal agency and the tensions between societal expectations and individual well-being. The collective response from classmates, characterized by empathy, dialogue, and the exploration of shared experiences, demonstrates a shift toward greater critical awareness within the learning community. This moment illustrates how reflective practice functions, not only as a personal learning process, but also as a social and relational form of empowerment.

WOMEN WITH ALL THEIR LIMITATIONS

Being born as a woman is not something I chose, yet it is an identity that has shaped my life in profound ways. As the youngest of three siblings, I grew up observing how being a woman comes with expectations that are often silently imposed. From an early age, I learned that being a woman meant being gentle, sweet, and graceful. These qualities were not only encouraged they were expected, as if they defined the essence of who I should be. At first, I believed that being a woman was something beautiful. There was a sense of pride in being seen as caring and nurturing. However, as I grew older, I began to realize that behind those expectations lay a series of limitations. These limitations were not always spoken, but they were deeply felt. They appeared in the way I was treated differently, in the way my choices were questioned, and in the way my freedom seemed more restricted compared to men.

Now, at the age of 21 and still unmarried, I find myself reflecting on my journey as a woman. There are moments when I question whether I have fully accepted this identity or merely adapted to it. Why does being a woman often feel like living within boundaries set by others? While men are often encouraged to explore, take risks, and assert themselves, women are frequently reminded to be careful, to behave, and to fit into certain roles. This difference becomes even more visible in adulthood. Society often places women in a position where they are expected to follow a predetermined path. Questions about marriage, family, and life choices arise, sometimes more as pressure than as genuine concern. It feels as though a woman's worth is measured by how well she fulfills these expectations, rather than by her individuality, dreams, or capabilities.

In many contexts, especially within Indonesian society, women are still seen as secondary to men. Although times are changing and awareness about gender equality is growing, these deeply rooted perspectives are not easily erased. Women continue to navigate between tradition and modernity, between societal expectations and personal aspirations. Yet, within these limitations, there is also strength. Being a woman has taught me resilience the ability to endure, to adapt, and to continue growing despite constraints. It has taught me empathy, awareness, and the courage to question norms that no longer serve fairness.

I have come to realize that being a woman is not about fitting into predefined roles, but about redefining them. It is about acknowledging the limitations, yet not allowing them to define one's worth. Women are not merely what society expects them to be; they are individuals with voices, choices, and the power to shape their own paths. In the end, being a woman is both a challenge and a strength. And perhaps, within that complexity lies the true meaning of womanhood not in perfection, but in the courage to exist authentically despite everything.

Figure 4. Excerpt from student reflection on women's experiences: "It feels as though a woman's worth is measured by how well she fulfills these expectations..."

Figures 4 and 5 present anonymized student reflections that highlight experiences of constraint, emotional struggle, and the development of personal awareness within gendered social contexts. These reflections provide evidence of how reflective writing, as part of my teaching practice, enables students to articulate their lived experiences, critically examine social expectations, and develop a growing sense of personal agency. Together, they demonstrate my educational influence within Living Educational Theory Research, showing how reflective practice supports both individual learning and shared critical awareness within the classroom.

MEN AND THE WEIGHT OF EXPECTATIONS

Growing up as the eldest of five siblings in a metropolitan city like Jakarta has shaped much of who I am today. From an early age, I was not only seen as a child, but also as someone who would eventually carry responsibility someone who would become a pillar for the family. As a man, this expectation felt almost inevitable, as if it had already been written into the role I was meant to play. For 22 years, I have lived within this identity, gradually understanding that being a man is often associated with strength, resilience, and responsibility. These expectations are not always explicitly spoken, yet they are deeply embedded in everyday interactions. A man is expected to endure, to provide, and to lead without hesitation and without complaint.

However, behind this image of strength, there are moments of quiet struggle. There are times when I feel uncertain, overwhelmed, and even lost. Yet, I often find myself holding these emotions back, because expressing them feels like breaking an unspoken rule. I was taught, directly and indirectly, that vulnerability is not something a man should easily show. Over time, this creates a silent tension between what I feel and what I am expected to be.

As I grew older, I began to realize that these expectations do not only come from society, but also from the people closest to me my family. There is an unspoken hope that I will succeed, that I will be able to support them, and that I will carry the responsibilities they entrust to me. While this trust can be a source of motivation, it can also feel like a heavy weight one that I carry quietly, without always knowing how to share it. Through this journey, I have come to question what it truly means to be a man. Is it about being strong at all times? Or is it about having the courage to acknowledge one's own limitations? I am slowly learning that strength is not the absence of vulnerability, but the ability to face it honestly. Being a man should not mean suppressing emotions, but understanding and managing them with awareness.

In today's changing world, the definition of masculinity is evolving. A man is no longer defined solely by his ability to provide or to endure, but also by his capacity to empathize, to communicate, and to grow. Emotional awareness is not a weakness it is a form of strength that allows a person to build deeper and more meaningful connections.

Reflecting on my experiences, I realize that the expectations placed on men can both shape and limit us. They can push us to grow, but they can also confine us within rigid boundaries. Therefore, it is important to redefine these expectations not to reject responsibility, but to humanize it. In the end, being a man is not about perfectly fulfilling every expectation. It is about finding balance between strength and vulnerability, between responsibility and self-care, between who I am and who I am expected to be. And in that balance, I continue to learn, to grow, and to understand myself more fully.

Figure 5. Excerpt from student reflection on men's experiences:

"There are times when I feel uncertain, overwhelmed, and I even lost... yet I am expected to be strong."

All That Has Gone Before: Understanding the Past and Projecting into the Future

This section synthesizes the learning that has emerged from my reflective engagement with the teaching of the Marriage and Family Counseling course and considers how this understanding informs future pedagogical development. Rather than reiterating earlier descriptions of practice, this section brings together key insights generated through the inquiry process and situates them within a forward-looking perspective. Through sustained reflective writing, I came to recognize empowerment as a central educational value shaping my teaching practice. This reflection enabled me to critically examine how gendered and socio-cultural contexts influence students' learning experiences, particularly for female students navigating issues of agency, voice, and power. Engaging with these reflections also prompted me to confront tensions within my own values, especially moments where my intentions as an educator were challenged by uncertainty or internal contradiction.

From the perspective of Living Educational Theory (Whitehead, 1989), this inquiry represents a process of generating knowledge through practice-based reflection, where values are not only articulated but tested and refined through action. The significance of this

process lies not solely in personal development, but in how it informs more responsive and ethically grounded pedagogical choices. Looking forward, the understanding gained through this inquiry provides a foundation for the continued development of teaching practices that consciously support empowerment, critical awareness, and relational sensitivity in counselor education. Future work will focus on extending these reflective practices, strengthening methodological rigour, and further examining how values-led pedagogy can contribute to transformative learning experiences in higher education contexts.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines and the researcher complied with all institutional requirements regarding informed consent, confidentiality, and data protection. Ethical procedures were guided by established professional standards, including the ethical principles of the American Counseling Association (2014) and the American Psychological Association (2017), particularly concerning informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, and the responsible use of client and student data. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, including consent for the use of interview data, selected excerpts from emails and written communications, and relevant images where applicable. Participation was entirely voluntary and had no impact on academic grading, evaluation, or professional standing. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence and to request the removal of specific statements or materials prior to publication.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the dual-role context involving students, particular attention was paid to minimising potential power imbalance and perceived coercion. Participants were assured that their decision to participate or decline would not affect their academic relationship with the researcher. They were advised that some questions might evoke emotional discomfort and were free to pause or discontinue participation at any stage. All identifying information has been removed, and pseudonyms are used in reporting the findings. While careful anonymisation strategies were applied, complete anonymity cannot be absolutely guaranteed due to the contextual nature of qualitative research. Digital data are stored in password-protected and encrypted files accessible only to the researcher and will be retained and securely deleted in accordance with institutional policy. In the interest of ethical transparency and methodological accountability, a blank version of the informed consent form employed in this study is included in the Appendix for reference.

Conclusion

This inquiry has contributed to my professional practice by enabling a clearer articulation and ongoing testing of the educational values that inform my work with students. Through the development of a living-educational-theory, I have come to understand how values such as empowerment, care, justice, and responsibility can be enacted in more flexible, responsive, and contextually attuned pedagogical strategies within counsellor- education. Central to this inquiry is an understanding of student empowerment as a relational and ethically grounded process, shaped by dialogue, reflexivity, and sensitivity to socio-cultural contexts. By making these values explicit and examining how they are lived

out in practice, this research offers insights into how values-led pedagogy can support students' agency and engagement in higher education learning environments.

This study also underscores reflexivity as an ongoing and generative dimension of professional practice. Attending to moments where I experienced myself as a 'living contradiction' provided opportunities to re-examine assumptions, adapt pedagogical actions, and strengthen alignment between espoused values and lived practice. In this sense, such contradictions functioned not as limitations but as sources of educational learning. In line with the tenets of Living Educational Theory Research (Whitehead, 2018), the contribution of this inquiry lies not in producing fixed conclusions, but in offering a practice-based account of how educational values can inform ethical and responsive teaching. The living-educational-theory presented here remains open to further development through continued dialogue with learners and colleagues, and through ongoing engagement with practice in pursuit of more meaningful and empowering educational experiences.

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