



Constructing Academic Legitimacy: A Qualitative Study of Master's Students' Perceptions at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explores how Master's students at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University construct academic legitimacy for their own fields while positioning others as less legitimate. Academic legitimacy—the perceived validity and value of academic work—significantly impacts students' educational experiences, yet remains understudied in non-Western contexts. Drawing on Bourdieu's Field Theory and Social Identity Theory, this research investigates student perceptions of the competitive strategies employed to establish legitimacy for their disciplines while simultaneously devaluing others. Through interviews with 40 Master's students across five humanities programs (Applied Language Studies and Research in Higher Education, Language, Communication & Society, Moroccan Cultural Studies, Translation and Cross-Cultural Communication, and Gender Studies), data analysis revealed four main themes: perceptions of academic hierarchies, strategies for constructing legitimacy while positioning others as less legitimate, navigation of interdisciplinary spaces, and disciplinary knowledge domains. Findings demonstrate that students actively construct legitimacy through capital accumulation, boundary work, and discursive strategies that simultaneously elevate their disciplines while diminishing others. The study contributes to understanding academic identity formation and legitimacy construction in humanities disciplines within Moroccan higher education, revealing how students navigate competitive academic environments through sophisticated positioning strategies that reproduce and sometimes challenge existing disciplinary hierarchies.

Keywords: Academic Legitimacy, Disciplinary Boundary Work, Bourdieu's Field Theory, Social Identity Theory, Student Perceptions, Moroccan Higher Education

Introduction

The landscape of higher education is characterized by complex hierarchies and power dynamics that shape students' academic experiences and career trajectories (Gérard & Lebeau, 2023; Siekkinen & Ylijoki, 2021; Ylijoki, 2022). Within this landscape, the concept of academic legitimacy—the socially constructed recognition of validity and value attributed to academic work, disciplines, and practitioners—plays a crucial role in determining resource allocation, institutional support, and scholarly recognition (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). These dynamics are particularly salient in graduate education, where students are simultaneously being socialized into disciplinary norms while developing their professional identities as knowledge producers.

At Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University's Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Master's students across different humanities programs navigate an environment where certain disciplines may enjoy greater prestige, funding, and recognition than others. This creates a competitive landscape in which students must not only excel academically but also actively construct and defend the legitimacy of their chosen fields. The process through which students engage in this legitimacy construction—particularly how they position their own disciplines as valuable while simultaneously positioning others as less legitimate—remains poorly understood in the context of Moroccan higher education.

Research on academic legitimacy has primarily focused on faculty perspectives or institutional dynamics rather than student experiences (Gonzales & Terosky, 2016). Studies in Western contexts have examined how academic disciplines establish and maintain their legitimacy through various strategies, including methodological rigor claims, practical application emphasis, and theoretical sophistication assertions (Huber, 1990). However, these studies have largely overlooked how graduate students actively participate in legitimacy construction processes.

Recent scholarship has begun to explore the role of student agency in academic hierarchy navigation (Inouye et al., 2022; Matusov et al., 2016; Sun & Wu, 2023). Abbott (2001) demonstrated how professional boundaries are actively maintained through jurisdictional claims and competitive positioning. Similarly, Lamont and Molnár (2002) highlighted the importance of symbolic boundaries in academic contexts, showing how disciplinary distinctions are both reproduced and challenged through everyday practices.

Despite these valuable contributions, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how Master's students actively construct and negotiate academic legitimacy, particularly in non-Western contexts. First, most existing research focuses on established scholars rather than students in the process of disciplinary socialization. Second, limited attention has been paid to the competitive dynamics between closely related humanities disciplines. Third, the specific strategies students employ to simultaneously elevate their own fields while positioning others as less legitimate remain understudied.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how Master's students at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University construct academic legitimacy within the specific context of Moroccan higher education. Understanding these processes is significant for several reasons. For scholars, this research contributes to theories of academic socialization and disciplinary boundary work. For institutions, the findings provide insights into how program positioning affects student experiences and inter-departmental relations. For students, this research illuminates the often implicit strategies through which academic legitimacy is constructed and contested.

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how Master's students construct academic legitimacy for their own fields while positioning other humanities disciplines as less legitimate at the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University. For this study, academic legitimacy is defined as a working definition derived from existing literature (Bourdieu, 1988; Lamont & Molnár, 2002) as the symbolic value, perceived intellectual rigour, and status attributed to a discipline by its students and others within the academic field. This definition guided the initial development of interview questions while remaining open to refinement through participant perspectives.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Literature Review: Disciplinary Boundaries and Student Experience

Research on disciplinary boundaries and academic positioning has demonstrated that disciplines engage in ongoing processes of boundary work to establish their distinctiveness and value. Abbott (2001) showed how professional boundaries are actively maintained through jurisdictional claims and competitive positioning. Similarly, Lamont and Molnár (2002) highlighted the importance of symbolic boundaries in academic contexts, demonstrating how disciplinary distinctions are both reproduced and challenged through everyday practices.

Within higher education, Becher & Trowler (2001) demonstrated how different disciplinary cultures develop distinct approaches to knowledge validation and status construction, showing that disciplines actively engage in boundary work to distinguish themselves from competitors while establishing claims to intellectual territory. Research has also shown that disciplines employ various strategies to establish their legitimacy within academic hierarchies (Huber, 1990).

However, most existing research has focused on faculty perspectives and institutional dynamics rather than student experiences. Gonzales & Terosky (2016) provided insights into how legitimacy operates from institutional perspectives, yet significant gaps remain in understanding how students, particularly in humanities disciplines, navigate competitive academic environments and construct legitimacy for their

chosen fields.

This study integrates two complementary theoretical perspectives—Bourdieu's Field Theory and Social Identity Theory—to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how Master's students construct academic legitimacy for their own fields while positioning others as less legitimate.

Theoretical Framework **Bourdieu's Field Theory**

Pierre Bourdieu's Field Theory provides a powerful framework for understanding how academic legitimacy operates within institutional structures and power relations. According to Bourdieu (1984), a field is a structured social space with its own rules, schemes of domination, and legitimate opinions. For formal definitions of the field as a space of positions and position-takings governed by specific stakes and rules, see Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) and Bourdieu (1996). The academic field is characterized by competition for various forms of capital—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic—that determine one's position within the field's hierarchy (Bourdieu, 1975, 1986, 1988, 2004). Within the academic/scientific field, actors struggle for the monopoly of legitimate authority to consecrate knowledge and define the *nomos* (rules) of the game (Bourdieu, 1975, 2004). Bourdieu also distinguishes between field-specific scientific capital (peer recognition, intellectual authority) and academic or institutional capital (positions, administrative power), whose relative weight structures positions within academia (Bourdieu, 1988, 2004).

Central to Bourdieu's theory are the concepts of habitus, capital, and field. Habitus refers to the internalized dispositions, perceptions, and practices that individuals develop through socialization within particular social contexts (Bourdieu, 1990; see also Bourdieu, 1977). Capital encompasses the resources that individuals can mobilize to gain advantage within a field, including cultural capital (knowledge, skills, educational qualifications), social capital (networks and relationships), and symbolic capital (prestige, honour, and recognition). Symbolic capital is not a separate substance but the recognized, legitimate form that other capitals take when they are misrecognized as merit or authority (Bourdieu, 1986). Relatedly, *doxa* (what is taken for granted) and *illusio* (investment in the game) orient agents' perceptions and practices within fields (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The distribution of these forms of capital is unequal across academic disciplines, creating hierarchies that privilege certain forms of knowledge over others, as analysed in Bourdieu's studies of the academic/scientific field (Bourdieu, 1988, 2004). Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence is particularly relevant, as it occurs when dominant groups impose their worldview as natural and legitimate, causing dominated groups to internalize and accept their subordinate position (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Symbolic violence

operates through misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) and adherence to *doxa*, which make arbitrary hierarchies appear necessary and self-evident (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1990).

In applying Bourdieu's framework to this study, we examine how students from different humanities programs compete for symbolic capital within the academic field. This study addresses this gap by exploring how Moroccan humanities students employ Bourdieusian strategies of capital accumulation and boundary work within their specific institutional context.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), explains that individuals derive part of their self-concept from membership in social groups and strive for positive distinctiveness through intergroup comparison. In academic contexts, disciplinary affiliations function as social identities that shape perceptions of legitimacy and value. SIT specifies three interrelated processes: social categorization (partitioning the social world into in-groups and out-groups), social identification (internalizing group membership and its normative prescriptions), and social comparison (evaluating one's in-group relative to relevant out-groups to maintain a positive social identity) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

These processes have direct implications for how students construct academic legitimacy while positioning other disciplines as less legitimate. Members of high-status groups tend to exhibit in-group favouritism and to defend the status quo, particularly when status differences are perceived as legitimate and stable. By contrast, members of lower-status groups adopt strategies contingent on perceived boundary permeability and the stability and legitimacy of the hierarchy: individual mobility when boundaries appear permeable, social creativity when boundaries are impermeable but the hierarchy is accepted, and social competition—collective action to redefine status relations—when status differences are viewed as illegitimate and unstable (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Integration of Theoretical Perspectives

The integration of Bourdieu's Field Theory and Social Identity Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding academic legitimacy construction at multiple levels. Bourdieu's framework explains the structural conditions and power dynamics that shape academic hierarchies, while Social Identity Theory reveals the psychological processes through which students develop disciplinary identities and employ competitive positioning strategies. Together, these perspectives allow analysis of legitimacy construction at institutional, interpersonal, and individual levels.

This study bridges this theoretical gap by demonstrating how structural field

dynamics (Bourdieu) intersect with social identity processes (SIT) in shaping how humanities students construct disciplinary legitimacy. The integration reveals how students' positioning strategies operate simultaneously at structural and psychological levels, offering new insights into academic socialization processes.

Methodology

Research Design and Rationale

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology, which provides tools for researchers to study complex phenomena within their natural contexts (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Case study research is particularly valuable for exploring contemporary phenomena when boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). The Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University serves as the bounded case, with Master's students from five humanities programs constituting the units of analysis.

A constructivist paradigm guides this research, recognizing that academic legitimacy is socially constructed through interactions and interpretations rather than existing as an objective reality (Stake, 1995). This approach aligns with the study's focus on understanding how students construct meaning about disciplinary value and positioning.

The Researcher's Role and Reflexivity

Both researchers completed their MA in Gender Studies and PhD within this faculty. This insider trajectory afforded contextual knowledge and access but also introduced potential power asymmetries—participants may have deferred to perceived expertise or tailored responses to align with disciplinary expectations. To mitigate these influences, the researchers clarified the non-evaluative nature of the study, maintained a reflexive journal, conducted bracketing exercises to surface prior assumptions, and used member checking to validate interpretations (Berger, 2015).

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process through systematic examination of how the researchers' positionality might influence data collection and interpretation (Patnaik, 2013). This included acknowledging the potential for participants to modify responses based on knowledge of the researchers' academic background and implementing strategies to minimize such effects.

Sampling

Sampling Strategy and Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was selected as the primary sampling strategy, following Patton's (2015) recommendation for selecting information-rich cases that illuminate the research questions. This approach allows researchers to intentionally select participants

who can provide insight into the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015). Maximum variation sampling was employed to ensure representation across all five Master's programs while capturing diverse perspectives within each program.

Sampling Criteria and Justification

Participants met the following criteria: current enrolment or recent graduation (within two years) from one of the five Master's programs, completion of at least two semesters of study, and willingness to discuss inter-program dynamics. These criteria ensured participants had sufficient experience to provide informed perspectives on disciplinary positioning and legitimacy construction.

Recruitment Procedures

Participants were recruited via announcements posted in official and student-run WhatsApp groups that included both Master's and PhD students within the Faculty, and through snowball sampling. In the snowball phase, enrolled participants were invited to forward a standardized study invitation specifying the eligibility criteria (current Master's students or graduates within the past two years from the five focal programs) to peers in their networks; interested individuals then contacted the researcher directly, were screened for eligibility, and scheduled for interview. This referral process extended reach beyond the initial WhatsApp distributions and helped achieve balanced representation across programs and cohorts.

Challenges and Limitations

The research encountered several challenges including potential social desirability bias, reluctance to criticize other programs, and the sensitive nature of discussing academic hierarchies. Mitigation strategies included ensuring confidentiality, using indirect questioning techniques, and building rapport before addressing sensitive topics.

Sample Description

The study included 40 Master's students (21 women, 19 men) representing the five humanities programs. The sample was distributed as follows: Applied Language Studies and Research in Higher Education (8 participants), Language, Communication & Society (8 participants), Moroccan Cultural Studies (8 participants), Translation and Cross-Cultural Communication (8 participants), and Gender Studies (8 participants). Participants ranged in age from 23 to 35 years and were in different stages of their Master's programs.

Data Collection Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, following established guidelines for developing qualitative interview protocols (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide was structured around key areas emerging from the literature review: student experiences with disciplinary hierarchies, perceptions of legitimacy markers, strategies for positioning their disciplines, interactions across program boundaries, and reflections on methodological and knowledge differences. These areas provided a framework for exploring the research questions while allowing flexibility for emergent themes. This approach provided flexibility to explore emerging themes while maintaining consistency across interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

Data Recording and Management

All interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim. Data security was maintained through encrypted, access-restricted storage, with identifying information stored separately from de-identified transcripts. Participant anonymization was implemented using pseudonymous codes in all files. Transcripts were reviewed for accuracy and completeness prior to analysis (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). In the Findings, verbatim quotations are attributed using anonymized participant codes (P1–P40) followed by program affiliation. This is a necessary methodological step because the program affiliation is the primary unit of analysis for this study, which compares legitimacy construction strategies across different disciplinary groups. This approach allows for the tracing of discursive patterns specific to each academic program while ensuring individual anonymity by withholding all other identifying information.

Challenges and Adaptations

The research team encountered data collection challenges including scheduling conflicts during peak academic periods and occasional participant hesitancy when discussing sensitive topics. Adaptations included flexible scheduling and reminders, conducting interviews in private settings, reiterating confidentiality and the non-evaluative nature of the study, and using warm-up and indirect questions to build rapport.

Strengths and Limitations

The interview approach enabled deep exploration of participant perspectives and experiences while maintaining confidentiality. Limitations included potential researcher bias, social desirability effects, and the cross-sectional nature of data collection which

captured perspectives at a single time point.

Data Analysis Thematic Analysis and Data Preparation

Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework was employed to analyse interview data. This approach is particularly suitable for identifying patterns across participants' experiences and perspectives (Byrne, 2022). NVivo software facilitated data organization, coding, and theme development while maintaining analytic transparency.

Six-Phase Framework

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's systematic approach: (1) data familiarization through repeated reading and initial note-taking, (2) initial code generation through systematic data examination, (3) theme identification by grouping related codes, (4) theme review and refinement through iterative analysis, (5) theme definition and naming to capture essential qualities, and (6) report production integrating themes with theoretical frameworks (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Ensuring Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was ensured through multiple strategies including member checking with participants, peer debriefing with colleagues, and maintaining an audit trail of analytical decisions. Ethical considerations included participant anonymization, secure data storage, and obtaining informed consent for all interviews.

Findings

The analysis revealed four main themes related to how students construct academic legitimacy for their own fields while positioning others as less legitimate: (1) perceptions of academic hierarchies, (2) strategies for constructing legitimacy while positioning others as less legitimate, (3) navigation of interdisciplinary spaces, and (4) disciplinary knowledge domains and methodological distinctions. All participant identifiers correspond to the coding system described in the methodology section.

Perceptions of Academic Hierarchies

This theme captures student understanding and navigation of hierarchical structures within humanities programs. Two subthemes emerged: Hierarchical Perceptions and Status Distinctions show how students view and construct status differences between

disciplines, positioning their fields as superior through various legitimacy claims; Internalization and Resistance Patterns reveal psychological processes through which students either accept or challenge existing hierarchical structures, with some internalizing dominant hierarchies while others develop sophisticated resistance strategies.

Hierarchical Perceptions and Status Distinctions

Students from different programs demonstrated varying perceptions of academic hierarchies within the Faculty. These perceptions emerged through participants' descriptions of their experiences and observations rather than direct questions about ranking.

Applied Language Studies students consistently positioned their program as more scientifically rigorous compared to other humanities disciplines. As one Applied Language Studies participant explained:

There's definitely a sense that Applied Language Studies is taken more seriously than some other humanities programs. I think it's because our work is seen as more practical and directly applicable to teaching and translation careers. We're often positioned as the more 'scientific' or 'rigorous' program within the humanities. (Participant 7)

This positioning exemplifies Bourdieu's (1988) concept of symbolic capital accumulation, where students strategically emphasize their program's perceived scientific rigor to enhance their position within the academic field hierarchy. However, this confidence also reveals how dominant positioning can become naturalized, with students viewing their advantage as merit-based rather than structurally determined.

Moroccan Cultural Studies students demonstrated complex positioning strategies that simultaneously acknowledged existing hierarchies while asserting their theoretical superiority. One Cultural Studies participant articulated this tension:

When you talk to students from Applied Language Studies or Translation, there's sometimes this subtle implication that our work is less rigorous or more subjective. But we're studying cultural phenomena that require sophisticated theoretical frameworks and deep contextual understanding that purely technical approaches miss. (Participant 15)

This dual positioning reflects both the internalization of dominant academic hierarchies and resistance through redefinition of scholarly value, illustrating the concept of habitus as both reproductive and potentially transformative in academic field dynamics. The response demonstrates how students from lower-status positions employ sophisticated counter-narratives while still acknowledging the power of dominant legitimacy claims.

Translation students emphasized their practical relevance and market value as sources of legitimacy. A Translation participant noted:

In Morocco, there's a strong emphasis on disciplines that can lead to clear career paths. Translation is respected because people see a direct connection to employment opportunities. When I tell people I study translation, they immediately understand its value, which isn't always the case for some other humanities fields. (Participant 22)

This strategy demonstrates Social Identity Theory's concept of social creativity, where group members redefine comparison dimensions to favour their in-group by emphasizing practical applicability over theoretical abstraction (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This positioning also reveals how external social pressures about employability become internalized as academic legitimacy criteria.

Gender Studies students recognized existing hierarchies while questioning their legitimacy and underlying assumptions. One Gender Studies participant challenged traditional hierarchies:

There's definitely a hierarchy that positions more traditional linguistic approaches as more rigorous, but this hierarchy itself reflects gendered assumptions about what counts as legitimate knowledge. The emphasis on quantification and supposed objectivity often masks subjective theoretical choices (Participant 31).

This critical stance illustrates how students can simultaneously navigate existing field structures while developing counter-narratives that challenge dominant legitimacy criteria. The reflexive awareness of how hierarchies themselves embody power relations demonstrates the sophisticated critical consciousness that can emerge from marginalized positions.

Internalization and Resistance Patterns

Language, Communication & Society students demonstrated complex negotiation between acceptance and resistance of disciplinary hierarchies. As one participant from this program reflected, "I've learned to appreciate systematic analysis methods, but I also recognize that our sociolinguistic approach offers insights that purely structural linguistics misses. We're not less rigorous—we're addressing different questions about language in social context" (Participant 12). This pattern illustrates how students navigate competing legitimacy claims while maintaining disciplinary identity, demonstrating the complex interplay between field acceptance and boundary work. The careful balance between acknowledging methodological standards while asserting distinctive value shows how students manage multiple legitimacy pressures simultaneously.

Cultural Studies students showed varying degrees of internalization versus

resistance to dominant academic hierarchies. One Cultural Studies participant revealed the internal struggle, “Sometimes I catch myself apologizing for our approach being 'less scientific,' but then I remember that we're doing critical work that other programs avoid. We're examining power structures that more traditional approaches take for granted” (Participant 18). This reflects Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, where students initially internalize dominant hierarchies before developing critical consciousness about these power dynamics. The progression from self-doubt to critical awareness illustrates how reflexivity can disrupt the reproduction of academic hierarchies, though this process remains incomplete and contested.

Applied Language Studies students often displayed confident positioning that reinforced existing hierarchies. An Applied Language Studies participant asserted:

I think there's a reason why our program attracts many students and has a strong reputation. The linguistic theories we study and the analytical methods we use give our discipline a solid foundation that some other humanities fields might lack. (Participant 4)

This confident assertion demonstrates how students from higher-status programs reproduce existing hierarchies through discourse that naturalizes their privileged position within the academic field. The attribution of success to inherent disciplinary qualities rather than structural advantages exemplifies how symbolic violence operates through misrecognition of arbitrary power relations.

Translation students exhibited strategic positioning that balanced acknowledgment of hierarchies with assertions of unique value. A Translation participant explained, “While some might see translation as less theoretical than other programs, we combine practical skills with deep cultural understanding in ways that purely academic programs cannot match. Our expertise bridges theory and practice” (Participant 25). This positioning strategy exemplifies social creativity mechanisms, where students redefine evaluation criteria to enhance their group's comparative status while maintaining respect for existing academic structures. The diplomatic acknowledgment of hierarchies while asserting distinctive value demonstrates sophisticated boundary navigation that avoids confrontation with dominant legitimacy claims.

Strategies for Constructing Legitimacy While Positioning Others as Less Legitimate

This theme encompasses active strategies students employ to enhance disciplinary standing while diminishing competing fields. Two subthemes emerged: Capital Accumulation and Boundary Work demonstrate how students strategically acquire additional skills, emphasize measurable outcomes, and engage in sophisticated boundary negotiations to enhance symbolic capital; Discursive Legitimation Strategies reveal

rhetorical techniques students employ to position their approaches as superior, including claims to unique analytical capabilities, social relevance, scientific objectivity, and cross-cultural expertise.

Capital Accumulation and Boundary Work

Language, Communication & Society students strategically accumulated methodological capital to enhance their legitimacy within the academic field. One participant described this strategic approach:

I spend extra time learning corpus linguistics methods that aren't even part of our core curriculum because having those skills gives me credibility. When I can demonstrate proficiency in both qualitative and quantitative approaches, people take my academic opinions more seriously. It also helps me show that our field is more methodologically sophisticated than some others that rely on purely interpretive approaches. (Participant 11)

This strategic capital accumulation demonstrates Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital conversion, where students acquire additional skills to enhance their position within academic hierarchies while simultaneously positioning other approaches as methodologically inferior. The instrumental acquisition of prestigious methodological skills reveals how students actively manage their symbolic capital portfolios to maximize academic credibility.

Translation students emphasized their applied research outcomes and measurable impact as forms of legitimate academic contribution. A Translation participant highlighted, "Our research produces tangible outcomes—improved translation strategies, better cross-cultural communication protocols. Unlike purely theoretical approaches, we can point to specific improvements our work generates in real-world contexts" (Participant 24). This positioning strategy illustrates how students accumulate symbolic capital by emphasizing practical relevance while implicitly devaluing theoretical work as disconnected from real-world applications. The emphasis on measurable outcomes reflects broader neoliberal pressures in higher education that privilege utility over critical inquiry, showing how external demands shape internal legitimacy constructions.

Moroccan Cultural Studies students engaged in sophisticated boundary work that elevated their theoretical sophistication while positioning other approaches as theoretically limited. One Cultural Studies participant explained their strategic approach:

I deliberately incorporate more structured analytical frameworks and systematic data collection in my cultural analysis, even though our field traditionally uses more interpretive approaches. But I'm still doing cultural studies, not linguistics—our questions and theoretical frameworks are different, and I think more relevant

to understanding contemporary Moroccan society than purely linguistic approaches. (Participant 17)

This strategy demonstrates complex boundary negotiation that borrows prestige from other fields while maintaining disciplinary distinctiveness and asserting superior social relevance. The selective adoption of prestigious methodological elements while maintaining disciplinary identity shows how students navigate competing legitimacy demands through strategic hybridity.

Applied Language Studies students leveraged their methodological training as cultural capital while positioning other humanities approaches as insufficiently rigorous. An Applied Language Studies participant stated, “The systematic analysis of language data gives our findings a solid foundation that you can build on. Some of the other humanities programs rely too heavily on subjective interpretations without sufficient empirical grounding” (Participant 8). This discursive strategy exemplifies how students from programs with higher symbolic capital maintain their position by emphasizing methodological rigor while implicitly questioning the validity of more interpretive approaches. The construction of objectivity as naturally superior reveals how scientific discourse functions as symbolic violence, presenting culturally specific methodological preferences as universal standards.

Discursive Legitimation Strategies

Gender Studies students employed discursive strategies that positioned their critical approach as essential for understanding power dynamics invisible to other disciplines. One Gender Studies participant argued:

Yes, linguistics can tell you about language patterns, but it can't tell you how gender shapes discourse or how power operates through language. Only gender analysis can uncover the ways that seemingly neutral academic practices reproduce inequalities. The more traditional approaches simply don't have the theoretical tools to address these critical issues. (Participant 33)

This positioning strategy illustrates the concept of social creativity, where students redefine the valued dimensions of academic work to favour their in-group's distinctive contributions while positioning other approaches as theoretically inadequate. The claim to unique analytical capabilities demonstrates how critical fields construct legitimacy through epistemological distinctiveness rather than methodological conformity.

Cultural Studies students emphasized their social relevance and contemporary applicability as forms of academic legitimacy that traditional approaches lack. A Cultural Studies participant explained:

When people question the value of cultural studies, I emphasize how our analysis helps address real social problems like cultural marginalization and identity conflicts. The more traditional linguistic approaches might be technically sophisticated, but they often fail to connect with urgent social issues facing Moroccan society. (Participant 19)

This discursive strategy demonstrates how students construct legitimacy by positioning their work as socially engaged and practically relevant while implicitly critiquing other approaches as socially disconnected. The appeal to social relevance reflects how contemporary academic pressures for "impact" create new legitimacy criteria that can challenge traditional academic hierarchies.

Applied Language Studies students used claims of scientific objectivity and methodological rigor to position their approach as more legitimate than interpretive humanities approaches. An Applied Language Studies participant asserted, "Our training in quantitative methods and systematic data analysis gives us tools to test hypotheses and verify findings in ways that more subjective approaches cannot match. This scientific approach makes our conclusions more reliable and trustworthy (Participant 5). This strategy exemplifies how students from programs positioned closer to the sciences leverage methodological prestige while implicitly questioning the validity of more interpretive humanities approaches. The equation of quantification with reliability demonstrates how positivist assumptions continue to structure academic hierarchies despite widespread critique of these epistemological foundations.

Translation students positioned their cross-cultural expertise and practical skills as unique forms of intellectual capital that other programs lack. A Translation participant emphasized:

We develop deep understanding of multiple cultural contexts simultaneously, which requires analytical skills that single-culture focused programs cannot match. Our ability to navigate between Moroccan, Arab, and Western academic traditions gives us perspectives that more narrowly focused disciplines miss. (Participant 27)

This positioning strategy demonstrates how students construct disciplinary legitimacy by emphasizing unique competencies while subtly devaluing other programs as culturally limited or overly specialized. The claim to multicultural competence reflects how globalization creates new forms of cultural capital that can challenge traditional disciplinary boundaries.

Navigating Interdisciplinary Spaces

This theme explores student management of disciplinary identities when engaging across program boundaries. Two subthemes emerged: Cross-Disciplinary Communication Challenges demonstrates how students interpret interdisciplinary communication

difficulties, often using these challenges to reinforce in-group preferences and confirm beliefs about disciplinary superiority; Identity Maintenance and Collaborative Opportunities shows how students develop strategies for maintaining disciplinary loyalty while engaging across boundaries, with some reporting transformative experiences while others maintain hierarchical judgments even within collaborative contexts.

Cross-Disciplinary Communication Challenges

Translation students reported difficulties in communicating across disciplinary boundaries, often interpreting these challenges as evidence of their superior precision and methodological clarity. One Translation participant reflected:

When I tried to explain my research on translation theory to students from Cultural Studies, I realized we were speaking completely different languages. Their approach seemed unnecessarily abstract, while ours is more precise and well-defined. It made me appreciate how our methodological training gives us clearer analytical tools. (Participant 23)

This interpretation demonstrates how interdisciplinary challenges can reinforce in-group preferences and contribute to boundary maintenance between academic programs. However, the attribution of communication difficulties to others' inadequacy rather than fundamental paradigmatic differences reveals how disciplinary socialization can limit reflexive awareness of one's own theoretical assumptions.

Gender Studies students experienced unique challenges in interdisciplinary settings, often feeling required to justify their entire field before discussing specific research. A Gender Studies participant described this burden:

In interdisciplinary settings, I often feel like I have to justify my entire field before I can even begin discussing my specific research. There's this burden of proving that gender analysis is valid and rigorous that students from more established disciplines don't seem to face. (Participant 34)

This experience illustrates how students from newer or more critically oriented fields must engage in additional legitimacy work when operating in interdisciplinary contexts, reflecting the unequal distribution of symbolic capital across academic disciplines. The extra emotional and intellectual labour required for basic recognition demonstrates how academic hierarchies create differential costs for participation in scholarly discourse.

Applied Language Studies students interpreted cross-disciplinary communication challenges as confirmation of their methodological superiority and analytical precision. An Applied Language Studies participant observed, "When working with students from other programs, I notice they often struggle to understand our systematic approach to language

analysis. This reinforces my belief that our methodological training gives us more rigorous analytical tools than more impressionistic approaches” (Participant 6). This interpretation demonstrates how communication difficulties across disciplinary boundaries can be used to reinforce hierarchical positioning and confirm existing beliefs about disciplinary superiority. The failure to consider alternative explanations for communication difficulties—such as different but equally valid analytical frameworks—illustrates how privilege can limit empathetic understanding across disciplinary boundaries.

Moroccan Cultural Studies students faced challenges in interdisciplinary spaces but used these experiences to assert their theoretical sophistication and contextual expertise. One Cultural Studies participant responded, “In interdisciplinary collaborations, other students sometimes dismiss our theoretical approach as too complex or abstract. But this complexity is necessary for understanding cultural phenomena that simpler approaches miss. Our theoretical sophistication is a strength, not a weakness” (Participant 16). This response illustrates how students can reframe interdisciplinary challenges as evidence of their field's intellectual rigor while positioning other approaches as overly simplistic. The defence of complexity as inherently valuable demonstrates how fields positioned as “difficult” can transform this perceived weakness into a marker of intellectual superiority.

Identity Maintenance and Collaborative Opportunities

Cultural Studies students developed strategies for maintaining disciplinary identity while engaging in interdisciplinary collaborations, often emphasizing their unique contributions to collaborative work. A Cultural Studies participant described their adaptive approach:

I've learned to emphasize different aspects of my work depending on who I'm talking to, but I always make sure to highlight that our cultural perspective offers insights that purely linguistic approaches miss. Our theoretical framework adds depth that other approaches lack. (Participant 20)

This adaptive strategy demonstrates how students maintain disciplinary loyalty while engaging across boundaries, using collaborative opportunities to assert their field's distinctive value. The strategic code-switching between audiences while maintaining core identity claims shows sophisticated boundary management that enables both collaboration and distinction.

Language, Communication & Society students used interdisciplinary experiences to reinforce their preference for sociolinguistic approaches over more narrowly focused alternatives. One participant reflected:

Discussing methods with Translation students actually clarified for me why I prefer the sociolinguistic approach in our program. I realized that translation studies

is too narrowly focused on practical applications without sufficient theoretical grounding to understand broader social implications. (Participant 13)

This reflection illustrates how interdisciplinary exposure can reinforce disciplinary boundaries and strengthen in-group preferences through comparative evaluation. The use of contrast to clarify identity demonstrates how interdisciplinary encounters can paradoxically strengthen rather than weaken disciplinary allegiances.

However, some Applied Language Studies students reported transformative collaborative experiences that challenged their initial assumptions. An Applied Language Studies participant admitted:

Collaborating on research about gendered language in educational settings has been eye-opening. Working with Gender Studies students showed me perspectives I hadn't considered. It's made me less quick to dismiss gender studies approaches as 'unscientific,' which I admit I used to do. (Participant 9)

This experience demonstrates how meaningful interdisciplinary collaboration can reduce prejudice and challenge existing hierarchical assumptions, illustrating the potential for boundary crossing to transform disciplinary attitudes. The acknowledgment of previous prejudice and subsequent learning suggests that sustained collaboration rather than superficial contact may be necessary for challenging entrenched disciplinary hierarchies.

Translation students found that interdisciplinary collaboration could be mutually legitimizing while maintaining their sense of methodological superiority. A Translation participant described a collaborative experience:

Working with Cultural Studies researchers on translating cultural concepts showed me how translation theory can be enriched by cultural analysis. The collaboration was productive for both sides. It was mutually legitimizing, though I still think our methodological approaches are more systematic and reliable. (Participant 26)

This perspective illustrates how students can appreciate interdisciplinary collaboration while maintaining hierarchical judgments about methodological approaches, demonstrating the persistence of disciplinary positioning even in collaborative contexts. The simultaneous appreciation and hierarchy maintenance reveals how deeply internalized disciplinary identities can limit the transformative potential of collaborative work.

Disciplinary Knowledge Domains and Methodological Distinctions

This theme captures how students define and defend their discipline's intellectual territory through knowledge domain claims and methodological superiority assertions. Two subthemes emerged: Knowledge Corpus and Disciplinary Boundaries show how

students establish intellectual territory through foundational claims, expansive analytical scope assertions, cultural authenticity emphasis, or unique synthetic capabilities; Methodological Superiority and Research Approaches reveal how students use methodological distinctions as primary vehicles for constructing disciplinary legitimacy, with each program asserting unique methodological advantages while positioning alternatives as fundamentally limited.

Knowledge Corpus and Disciplinary Boundaries

Applied Language Studies students positioned their knowledge domain as foundational to language-related research while viewing other approaches as derivative or overly specialized. An Applied Language Studies participant explained, “Our program provides the fundamental linguistic knowledge that other language-focused programs build upon. Translation studies apply our theories, sociolinguistics adds social context, but the core understanding of language structure comes from our systematic linguistic analysis (Participant 3). This positioning strategy establishes a hierarchical relationship where Applied Language Studies serves as the foundational discipline, with other programs positioned as applications or extensions of this core knowledge base. The construction of a disciplinary hierarchy with linguistics at the centre reflects how fields attempt to maximize their symbolic capital by claiming foundational status rather than specialized expertise.

Gender Studies students asserted their field's unique analytical framework as essential for understanding power dynamics invisible to other disciplines. A Gender Studies participant argued:

Our knowledge domain encompasses not just gender analysis but critical examination of all power structures—class, race, sexuality, and nationality. Other programs might touch on these issues, but they lack the theoretical framework to analyse how these systems intersect and reinforce each other. (Participant 35)

This boundary work demonstrates how students define their discipline's knowledge corpus in expansive terms while positioning other fields as theoretically limited in their analytical capabilities. The claim to comprehensive critical analysis represents an ambitious territorial strategy that seeks to establish Gender Studies as essential rather than supplementary to other humanities approaches.

Moroccan Cultural Studies students emphasized their contextual expertise and cultural knowledge as irreplaceable components of humanities education. One Cultural Studies participant stated:

Our program addresses cultural phenomena that cannot be understood through linguistic analysis alone. We study Moroccan identity, cultural practices, and social

dynamics using theoretical frameworks that other programs simply don't possess. This cultural knowledge is essential for understanding contemporary Moroccan society. (Participant 21)

This positioning establishes cultural expertise as a distinct knowledge domain while asserting its superiority over more technical or methodological approaches to understanding social phenomena. The emphasis on irreplaceable local knowledge represents a strategy for claiming intellectual territory through cultural authenticity rather than methodological sophistication.

Translation students defined their knowledge corpus as uniquely bridging theoretical understanding with practical application across cultural boundaries. A Translation participant described their integrative approach:

Our field combines linguistic theory, cultural knowledge, and practical skills in ways that no other program matches. We understand language structure like Applied Language Studies, cultural context like Cultural Studies, but we also know how to navigate between different knowledge systems practically. (Participant 28)

This synthetic positioning claims legitimacy by incorporating elements from other disciplines while asserting unique integration capabilities that justify Translation Studies as a distinct academic field. The strategy of claiming synthetic expertise demonstrates how newer or applied fields can construct legitimacy through integration rather than specialization.

Methodological Superiority and Research Approaches

Language, Communication & Society students positioned their sociolinguistic methods as more sophisticated than purely structural or purely cultural approaches. One participant explained their methodological advantage, "Our methodological approach combines systematic linguistic analysis with ethnographic sensitivity to social context. This gives us analytical tools that are more comprehensive than purely formal linguistic approaches or purely interpretive cultural approaches" (Participant 14). This positioning strategy claims methodological superiority through synthetic combination while positioning other approaches as methodologically limited by their narrower focus. The construction of synthesis as inherently superior demonstrates how interdisciplinary approaches can be used strategically to claim advantages over more specialized alternatives.

Cultural Studies students asserted their critical methodological approach as more intellectually honest and socially relevant than supposedly objective alternatives. A Cultural Studies participant argued, "Our methodological commitment to examining power relations and challenging dominant narratives makes our research more intellectually

honest than approaches that claim objectivity while reproducing existing hierarchies. Critical methodology is more rigorous because it examines its own assumptions” (Participant 18). This methodological positioning challenges traditional notions of objectivity while asserting critical reflexivity as a superior form of scholarly rigor. The redefinition of rigor to include reflexivity rather than objectivity demonstrates how critical approaches attempt to transform rather than simply resist dominant academic hierarchies.

Gender Studies students positioned their intersectional analytical methods as more comprehensive and theoretically sophisticated than single-factor approaches. A Gender Studies participant explained, “Our intersectional methodology examines how multiple systems of oppression interact, which gives us analytical tools that single-factor approaches cannot match. Other programs might study language or culture, but they miss how gender, class, and power shape these phenomena” (Participant 32). This methodological claim establishes intersectionality as a superior analytical framework while positioning other approaches as theoretically inadequate for complex social analysis. The assertion of intersectionality as necessary for adequate analysis represents an ambitious theoretical claim that seeks to establish Gender Studies as methodologically essential for humanities research.

Applied Language Studies students maintained their emphasis on systematic, empirical methods as the gold standard for legitimate academic research. An Applied Language Studies participant insisted, “Our commitment to systematic data collection and analysis provides the methodological rigor that humanities research needs. While other approaches rely on interpretation and speculation, our empirical methods produce reliable, verifiable results” (Participant 10). This methodological positioning reinforces traditional academic hierarchies by asserting empirical methods as superior to interpretive approaches, demonstrating how students reproduce disciplinary hierarchies through methodological claims. The equation of empiricism with reliability and interpretation with speculation reveals how positivist assumptions continue to structure legitimacy claims despite extensive critique of these epistemological foundations.

The findings demonstrate that methodological distinctions serve as primary vehicles for constructing disciplinary legitimacy, with each program asserting unique methodological advantages while positioning alternatives as fundamentally limited. These claims reveal how deeply methodological choices are embedded in broader questions of academic identity and institutional positioning within competitive academic environments.

Discussion

This study reveals complex processes through which Master's students construct academic legitimacy within competitive humanities environments. The findings extend existing theoretical frameworks by demonstrating how legitimacy construction operates

simultaneously at structural, social, and individual levels within a non-Western academic context.

Legitimacy Construction as Active Positioning Work

The first theme demonstrates how students actively perceive and navigate academic hierarchies within humanities disciplines. Consistent with Bourdieu's (1988) field analysis, students recognize existing hierarchies while employing various strategies to enhance their position within these structures. However, the findings reveal more sophisticated resistance strategies than previous research has documented. Applied Language Studies students leverage claims of scientific rigor and methodological sophistication to maintain their advantageous position, while students from programs with less symbolic capital employ creative redefinition strategies that challenge dominant legitimacy criteria.

Capital Accumulation and Boundary Work as Strategic Practices

The second theme reveals how students accumulate various forms of capital while engaging in boundary work that distinguishes their disciplines from others, confirming Social Identity Theory predictions about in-group enhancement through favorable social comparisons (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, the study extends SIT by showing how these processes operate within institutional power structures that constrain available strategies. Students strategically emphasize their program's distinctive strengths—methodological rigor, practical relevance, theoretical sophistication, or social engagement—while implicitly or explicitly questioning other programs' approaches.

Interdisciplinary Navigation as Identity Maintenance

The navigation of interdisciplinary spaces, explored in the third theme, demonstrates how disciplinary identities are maintained and reinforced through cross-program interactions, supporting Lamont and Molnár's (2002) analysis of boundary work in academic contexts. However, the findings reveal paradoxical effects where interdisciplinary encounters can strengthen rather than weaken disciplinary allegiances. Students use interdisciplinary encounters to strengthen in-group loyalty and confirm existing beliefs about disciplinary superiority, contradicting assumptions that exposure reduces prejudice.

Knowledge Domains as Territorial Claims

The fourth theme reveals how students define their discipline's knowledge domains and methodological approaches in ways that establish intellectual territory while

positioning other approaches as limited or derivative. This process exemplifies Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, where certain forms of knowledge are legitimized while others are devalued through seemingly natural academic processes. However, the findings show how this process is contested rather than simply imposed, with students from different positions actively challenging dominant definitions.

Theoretical Implications

The integration of Bourdieu's Field Theory and Social Identity Theory proves productive for understanding legitimacy construction, but the findings suggest modifications to both theories. Bourdieu's concept of habitus appears more agential than originally theorized, with students actively challenging rather than simply reproducing field structures. Similarly, Social Identity Theory's predictions about low-status group strategies require refinement for academic contexts where status is contested and multiple legitimacy criteria coexist.

Contextual Considerations

The Moroccan higher education context provides important insights into how cultural factors shape legitimacy construction. The emphasis on practical applicability and employment outcomes reflects broader social pressures that differ from Western academic contexts. Students' strategies must navigate both international academic standards and local social expectations, creating complex positioning challenges not addressed in existing literature.

Conclusion

This study explored how Master's students construct academic legitimacy for their own fields while positioning other humanities disciplines as less legitimate at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University. The research purpose was achieved through comprehensive analysis of student strategies across four thematic areas.

Regarding perceptions of academic hierarchies, the findings demonstrate that students actively navigate complex hierarchical structures through sophisticated positioning strategies that simultaneously acknowledge and challenge existing power relations. Students from higher-status programs maintain their positions through claims of methodological rigor and scientific objectivity, while those from lower-status programs employ creative redefinition strategies that challenge traditional legitimacy criteria.

In terms of legitimacy construction strategies, students engage in strategic capital accumulation and boundary work that distinguishes their disciplines from others. These strategies include methodological diversification, practical relevance emphasis, theoretical

sophistication claims, and critical consciousness assertions. The sophistication of these strategies indicates that legitimacy construction is an active, strategic process rather than passive acceptance of predetermined hierarchies.

For interdisciplinary navigation, the findings reveal that cross-disciplinary interactions often reinforce rather than weaken disciplinary boundaries. Students maintain disciplinary identities through strategic code-switching and selective collaboration, suggesting that meaningful interdisciplinary transformation requires structured, sustained engagement rather than superficial contact.

Concerning knowledge domains and methodological distinctions, students establish intellectual territory through multiple territorial strategies including foundational claims, expansive claims, authenticity claims, and synthetic claims. These strategies reveal how disciplinary boundaries are actively constructed and maintained through everyday positioning practices.

The research contributes to understanding academic socialization and disciplinary boundary work in several ways. Theoretically, it demonstrates the productive integration of Bourdieu's Field Theory and Social Identity Theory while suggesting refinements to both frameworks. The study reveals more agential and strategic legitimacy construction processes than previous research has documented, particularly regarding resistance strategies employed by students from marginalized disciplinary positions.

Empirically, the study provides comprehensive documentation of legitimacy construction strategies in a non-Western academic context, revealing how cultural factors shape academic positioning. The findings challenge assumptions about passive student socialization and highlight the sophisticated strategic thinking students employ to navigate competitive academic environments.

Recommendations

For institutional administrators, creating structured interdisciplinary collaboration programs that move beyond superficial contact to sustained, meaningful engagement across disciplinary boundaries would help reduce prejudice and enhance collaborative learning. Recognition systems should value diverse forms of scholarly excellence rather than privileging single methodological approaches, while professional development programs could help faculty and students recognize and address implicit disciplinary biases.

For faculty members, pedagogical approaches should explicitly address disciplinary positioning and help students develop reflexive awareness of legitimacy construction processes. Assessment methods need to recognize diverse forms of scholarly contribution rather than privileging traditional academic hierarchies, while collaborative research opportunities should demonstrate complementary rather than competitive relationships between disciplines.

For students, developing critical consciousness about legitimacy construction processes enables more strategic and ethical positioning practices. Engaging in sustained interdisciplinary collaboration rather than superficial contact reduces intergroup bias and enhances learning, while utilizing multiple legitimacy strategies should maintain ethical commitment to supporting rather than undermining other disciplines.

Future research should explore longitudinal changes in legitimacy construction strategies, examine faculty perspectives on student positioning practices, and investigate similar dynamics in other cultural and institutional contexts to enhance understanding of academic socialization processes.

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