

# Postpositivist Realist Theory of Identity Expanding Notions of Gender in Teacher Education

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## Introduction

**I**N GUADALUPE VALDES' (1996) ethnographic study of Mexican immigrant families, girls participated in classroom activities in ways that reflected their positionality in the family structure (cooking, cleaning, taking care of younger siblings). Such participation was interpreted by their American teachers as odd; some children didn't want to engage in fantasy or pretend play. One kindergarten girl was described by her teacher as being beyond her years, "tired...not a very vibrant little girl jumping around, moving around, talking, not laughing, not a very happy joyful little girl...kind of quiet, reserved" (1996, p. 145). She participated in class by straightening or cleaning up what other children had left in disarray. The teacher's prediction was that she would be in the lowest reading group the following year and need a tutor, however, "she might snap out of it...all she has to do is realize she can do it, and she can snap out of it" (1996, p. 145). The teachers in Valdes' study could not make sense of this behavior; they assumed that all "normal" youngsters understood and desired to engage in fantasy or pretend play.

When these girls began to participate in classroom activities by cleaning, picking up after their classmates, and passively remaining on the sidelines of the other children's active, laughing play, a disconnect occurred between the teacher and student. The teacher's notion of culturally appropriate play, the sort of play that is active, joyful, and imaginative was in stark contrast to the vision of participation that the girl held. Appropriation of behavior from home to school context is standard (e.g., Heath, 1983; Valdes, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999) and much research on teacher education highlights the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy as a way for teachers to facilitate academic success for the students in their classrooms (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2006; Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2001; Peregoy & Boyle, 2005). In the above scenario, however, the teachers' cultural misapprehension or ideological disagreement with the Mexican girls participation in classroom activities put into question the student's ability to read and that ability was dependent on whether she chose to "snap out of it" or not. There was no reflection on the part of the teacher to rethink her own situated, culturally informed background and the teaching position that, often, grows from it.

In this paper, I argue that a postpositivist realist theory (PPRT) of identity in teacher education curricula could transform and empower the challenging, yet productive relationship between teacher and female immigrant English language learners (ELLs). Postpositivist realist theory is outlined in Satya P. Mohanty's 1993 essay, "The Epistemic status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Post-Colonial Condition." In this work Mohanty outlines 1) the relationship between experience and identity as a genuine philosophical or theoretical issue, and 2) a framework for a better way to think about identity than the alternatives provided by essentialists and postmodernists. I particularly focus on PPRT's conception of experience to provide a framework for teacher candidates to develop what I call *habits of inquiry*. Such inquiry, I believe, can foster more accurate evaluations of female immigrant language learners and expand preservice teachers' notions of gender in ways that support their students' academic achievement.

Mohanty states that experience

can yield reliable and genuine knowledge, just as it can point up instances and sources of real mystification.... Experiences can be 'true' or 'false,' can be evaluated as justified or illegitimate in relation to the subject and his world, for 'experience' refers very simply to the variety of ways humans process information. (2000, p. 32)

By valuing experience as an important part of identity construction, teacher candidates form a complex picture of the factors that influence identity construction and better understand the situated, interconnection between culture and gender.

The role of identity in the classroom cannot and should not be ignored; in fact, identity is a productive means of entering and understanding other lives as we are empowered by them. The construction of identity for English language learners is unique in that background experience and identity factors often undergo a fundamental shift as one adjusts to a (new) U.S. context. For female ELLs, this shift is compelling as changes in the role of gender may not only signify a change in individual conceptualizations of gender but also in family structure as well as within the larger ethnic community. By engaging in a PPRT of identity, teacher educators create a venue for teacher candidates to explore the individual, situated contexts that influence identity construction and the social, political, and cultural factors that inform it. Such analysis lends itself to a complex inquiry that more accurately reflects the lived experiences of immigrant women and girls as they navigate school settings. This analysis also lends a reflective component that turns the gaze inward so that teacher candidates can examine their own cultural expectations related to U.S. conceptualizations of gender norms. This reflection could assist in more clearly delineating between culturally nuanced behaviors (such as passive play) and academic potential (e.g., the ability to read). Validating individual, subjective accounts as important components of identity construction is key to this exploration.

Throughout this paper "identity" refers to the way a person understands their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands their possibilities for the future (Norton, 2000). While there are several components to an individual's overall identity construction, they are often spoken of in delineating terms (gender, ethnic, cultural, racial, socioeconomic class, and others). Notwithstanding such distinctions, however, social and cultural identity become less marked as researchers ground their theory in more specific sites of practice, the particular locations wherein they teach classes or are involved with teacher education (Norton, 2000). In this context, gender takes on a unique role in

that immigrant women have a situated identity that is mediated by interconnections between their previous context (country of origin) and their new one in the U.S. (Ng, 1981).

### Gender Identity for Immigrant Women/Girls

As female English language learners (ELLs) enter schools in the United States, cultural notions of gendered identities become evident with the disparities between the new context and the familiar context. Navigating and redefining one's gender identity in the U.S. represents an intersection between identity factors that play out differently for individuals with respect to their disparate background contexts. Lorraine Gilpin describes her experience and struggle to locate a theory of identity that validates and acknowledges her personal experience.

As a Third World woman of color and Black immigrant educator in the United States, my interpretation of the world reflects the fluidity of identity as I move back and forth between the identities with which I came to the United States and the identities I have acquired here. Thus, my mediated and evolving identity cannot be adequately explained through the all-or-nothing theories that have been in the forefront of traditional discussions of identity (2006, p. 10).

Because of her position within the various communities that encompass salient identity factors, any limited theory of identity could not begin to characterize or account for Gilpin's life experiences, as it could neither be essentialized nor denied (Gilpin, 2006). As she attempted to patch together a theoretical framework to reflect her experience, Gilpin discovered the work of Grande (2000) who spoke to the complex, transcendental, and often challenging negotiation one incurs when trying to find a theory of identity to account for the complex layers involved in real life. Grande (2000) maintained that essentialism, postmodernism, and critical theory all fail to account for the particular needs of indigenous peoples, arguing for a theory of identity that is both intellectually defensible and located in everyday struggles.

While Gilpin presents her situation as unique and singular, according to an essentialist, postmodernist, or critical theorist framework, her account would be unreliable, invalid, or lacking credibility. In addition, if her situation were connected to the shared experience of others, she would have to erase or deny aspects that make her experience unique (Gilpin, 2006). Moya articulates this either/or scenario,

in assuming that our options for theorizing identities are inscribed within the postmodernism/essentialism binary—we are either completely fixed and unitary or unstable and fragmented selves. The advantage of a realist theory of identity is that it allows for an acknowledgment of how the social categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality function in individual lives without *reducing* individuals to those social determinants. (Moya, 2000, p. 80)

The issue of epistemic privilege emerged, leading discussions of identity away from neo-conservative and postmodernist ideals in favor of an alternative theory of identity that allowed for individual experience as well as the influence of social constructions to inform one's theoretical framework. Presenting teacher candidates with a theory of identity that is located in the daily struggles and experiences not only of the ELLs in their classrooms but also within themselves can foster a transformative personal awareness/understanding of the role of gender identity in teaching, while at the same time empowering the relationships they build with their students.

## Postpositivist Realist Theory of Identity

Satya P. Mohanty (2000) articulates a position for postpositivist realist theory of identity, emphasizing how identities can be both real and constructed, politically and epistemically significant, on one hand, and variable and nonessential, on the other. Mohanty (2000) argues that individual knowledge is based on the cognitive and theoretical grounds on which knowledge is constructed. In effect, people construct their knowledge from the resources that they have with group knowledge from personal and social experiences, and interactions based on cognitively mediated processes.

The...advantage of the realist approach to experience and identity is that it explains how the oppressed may have epistemic privilege, but it does so without espousing a self-defeating or dubious kind of relativism with separatist implications. To have a cognitivist view of experience is to claim that truth content can be evaluated, and thus potentially shared with others. (p. 58)

Mohanty (2000) further asserts that epistemic privilege is partial, influenced, and shaped by social location, and needs to be revised and understood hermeneutically. As such, not only do subordinate groups have a stake in a postpositivist realist framework, all of humanity benefits from better understanding the information and knowledge gleaned from various situated positionalities. As teachers and teacher educators, we can grow from the perspectives and lived realities that our students present to us as we revisit and revise our own understandings of individual identity frameworks.

By setting up a framework for teacher candidates to question their individual beliefs and values in relation to social, political, and cultural influences, teacher educators facilitate a model of inquiry that recognizes cultural context in relation to gender construction. The realist framework, however, is an openly interpretive position in classroom communities and is subject to scrutiny by all, so that the descriptive knowledge drawn, through dialogic engagement with challenging issues, can help formulate moral conclusions. For teacher education this means providing curricula that presses teacher candidates to examine their own personal beliefs about the role of gender in identity construction and the culturally nuanced ways that their (American) beliefs are present in expectations of student behavior and modes of participation. At the moment of misunderstanding in the opening scenario, the benefits of such inquiry could have compelled the teacher to rethink the students' passive participation as a culturally mediated norm of play, distinct from predictions of the student's ability to read. It also means placing class discussion at the center of instruction, so that teacher candidates can disabuse their peers of oppressive thinking and draw out oppositional experience-based views of other students (Macdonald, 2002), thus employing Mohanty's requirement in PPRT to evaluate truth content in relation to group knowledge.

In posing conceptions of gender identity, students and teacher will have to take each claim seriously, but not necessarily validate it. The entire classroom community will have to discuss interpretations of the social facts that inform their feelings, and be open to discovering that their interpretation might be wrong. A post-positivist realist theory of identity, in its conception of experience, does not accept all personal claims as valid and revision occurs continually as new information is presented and analyzed. Discussing one's conception of experience, however, does not ensure collective agreement or understanding. Teacher candidates can misinterpret immigrant gender differences as hierarchical and render them illegitimate based on their own Western beliefs about women's role in the family, career, marriage, and distance from extended

family. Yet, in the process of dialogic engagement, PPRT presses students and teacher to come closer to a sense of moral understanding by making apparent the social facts of positionality and status, highlighting how experiences in daily life empower us differently. In this disclosure, empowered differences across English language learner and native English speaker, immigrant and native, men and women, we can begin to recognize the epistemic privilege that specific groups might have, owing to their particular experiences in a U.S. context. From this recognition, the importance of epistemic cooperation across the differences identified in such discussion may, in fact, simultaneously inhabit any or all of the above categories and help us come to see the importance of building shared social knowledge to better describe and thus empower our collective world. In this sense then, the realist framework serves as an openly interpretive position in classroom communities and assists in forming some difficult moral conclusions, thus assisting educators in addressing the tension between cultural autonomy and moral universalism in diverse classrooms.

### The Concept of Identity

The concept of identity has posed challenges to the theoretical perspectives of activist women of color, conservative pundits, postmodernist theorists, and feminists worldwide. The response to these challenges has varied widely. Ethnic studies scholars and various student groups have organized around identity categories insisting that they do not devolve into essentialist programs (Brettschnieder, 2001; Narayan, 1997; Phelan, 2001). Neo-conservatives argue for the abandonment of such groupings on the grounds that paying attention to particular identities will unnecessarily stratify our society and obscure our shared human attributes (Bennett, 1992; Finn, 1991; Hirsch, 1987; Schlesinger, 1992). Conversely, postmodernists argue that to grant ontological or epistemological significance to identity categories is misguided (Habermas, 1981; Popkewitz, 1991; Rorty, 1989). Postmodern theorists have problematized the notion of identity, in particular, arguing that “it never comes in an easily defined package and it can never be adequately expressed through tidy categories of essentialist attributes” (Butler, 1990). This approach had led to the development of a linguistically sensitive, historically embedded, and textually oriented methodology for social scientific research (Foucault, 1972; Lyotard, 1979). Postmodern accounts focus on social control and self-regulation (Foucault, 1978, 1979), emphasizing how these goals are achieved through normalized social practices and the exclusion of critical or competing forms of understanding (Fletcher, 2000).

Debates regarding selves and cultural identities have shifted considerably with the influence of poststructuralism (e.g. Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze, Guattari, Kristeva, and Derrida), which has undermined conventional understandings of identity by discounting the possibility of objective knowledge. Poststructuralists argue that prevailing theories of identity lack the intellectual resources to distinguish between different kinds of identities. They contend that a theory of identity is inadequate unless it allows an analysis of the epistemic status and political salience of any given identity and provides the individual with the resources to ascertain and evaluate the possibilities and limits of different identities. Neither neo-conservative nor postmodernist theories of identity can do this. As a result, critics who have adopted either of these two approaches have tended to overestimate or underestimate the influence that political context has on actual identities (Moya, 2000). The self, the argument goes, can have no nature because subjectivity does not exist outside the grammatical structures that govern our thought; rather, it is produced by those structures (Cherryholmes, 1988; Foucault, 1979). Because subjects exist only in relation to ever-evolving webs of signification and because they constantly differ as time

passes and meanings change, the self—as a unified, stable, and knowable entity existing prior to or outside language—is merely a fiction of language, an effect of discourse (Deleuze & Guattari, 1977; Foucault, 1972). Social and cultural identities, it is argued, are similarly fictitious because the selves they claim to designate cannot be pinned down, fixed, or definitively identified; in addition, to speak of identities as “real” is to naturalize them and disguise the structures of power involved in their production and maintenance (Ellsworth, 1992).

Recognizing the relationship between gender construction and cultural context is important to understanding how gendered behavior may play out for female English language learners. This navigation is also informative for teacher candidates as it frames the knowledge that they bring to the classroom. For example, customs and traditions are a standard part of cultural inquiry in multicultural education, and examinations of the rationale or purpose behind maintaining customs associated with specific gender roles can illustrate alternative perspectives of the role of women. In the traditional notions of gender in the U.S., women take care of the home and children; men work outside the home and are financially responsible for the family. This scenario has changed and modified over the past decades as women have begun to work outside of the home, but for many immigrant families a traditional delineation of gender roles still exists. As such, preservice teachers may associate such a delineation negatively, rather than as a way for female ELLs to assert a sense of independence that *strengthens* their bond to family and community members while living in a new environment. This may play out, for example, by maintaining a patrilineal hierarchy within the family context even while the woman takes on a new role of working outside of the home or becomes the primary wage earner. A shift in perspective then, between teacher candidate and immigrant women/girls, begins to occur as notions of gender identity are seen as being influenced by and tying to cultural beliefs.

A postpositivist view facilitates such a shift for preservice teachers by emphasizing the importance of shared perspective as a way to reevaluate individual perspective. It is an openly interpretive position where shared knowledge is seen to better describe and empower our interpretation of the world. For immigrant women and girls whose life experience can vary so greatly according to country of origin, native language, reason for immigration, amount of time in the U.S., among others, the need to validate singular accounts of experience is the key to assisting in broader understandings of the complex factors that inform and frame student learning. With a wider lens to comprehend culturally nuanced behaviors and points of view, preservice teachers learn to modify/adapt classroom curricula to meet the needs of their students, therefore promoting access to academic achievement.

According to the neoconservative viewpoint, however, focusing on individual experience is seen as a way to stratify society and obscure our collective human attributes. As such, subjective accounts of identity weaken and distract from a shared sense of American culture. Such perspective places importance on a unitary identity as a way to strengthen U.S. society, rendering identity-based notions of “difference” as overrated (Moya, 2002). This is in stark contrast to a postpositivist view which acknowledges the dynamic reconfiguration of identity as new information is presented, holding such reconfiguration as a vital element in knowledge construction. Promoting the notion of a fixed sense of identity in teacher education obfuscates the frames of reference that inform the learning of immigrant women/girls and inadvertently requires them to know culturally nuanced material without teaching (or perhaps recognizing) that the content is culturally laden.

In turn, postmodernist conceptions—which tend to deny that identities either refer to or are defined by the social world—have been unable to evaluate the legitimacy or illegitimacy of different identity claims. Because postmodernists are reluctant to admit that identities refer outward (with varying degrees of accuracy) to our shared world, they can view identities as

arbitrary and as unconnected to social and economic structures (Fletcher, 2000; Moya, 2000; Taubman, 1990). Just as the postmodernist dismissal of identity is based on a denial of the possibility of objectivity, so Mohanty's realist reclaiming of identity is based on a reaffirmation of the possibility of objectivity as conceptualized in a postpositivist framework. In direct opposition to postmodernism, realists contend that humans can develop reliable knowledge about their world and about how and where they fit into that world (Hames-Garcia, 2000; Nguyen, 2000). This does not mean, however, that postpositivist realists do not have a critical belief in the possibility of theoretically unmediated knowledge, rather they assert that all observation and knowledge are theory mediated and that theory-mediated objective knowledge is both possible and desirable. They replace a simple correspondence theory of truth with a more dialectical causal theory of reference in which linguistic structures both shape our perceptions of and refer (in more or less partial and accurate ways) to causal features of a real world (Mohanty, 2000; Moya, 2000). In this sense, a conception of objectivity is an ideal of inquiry rather than a condition of absolute and achieved certainty.

Postmodernists rightly conclude that there is no such thing as a context-transcendent, subject-independent, and theoretically unmediated knowledge; they therefore conclude that there can be no such thing as objective knowledge (Mander, 1978; McLaren, 1986; Wexler, 1981). Postpositivist realists understand objectivity differently in the sense that objective knowledge can be built on an analysis of the different kinds of subjective or theoretical bias or interests (Gilpin, 2006; Heyes, 2000; John, 1996). Truth claims are fallible and open to revision on the basis of new or relevant information. In fact, it is realists' willingness to admit the (in principle, endless) possibility of error in the quest for knowledge that enables them to avoid positivist assumptions about certainty and unrevisability that inform the (postmodernist) skeptics' doubts about the possibility of arriving at a more accurate account of the world (Mohanty, 2000; Moya, 2000). Just as it is possible to be wrong about one's experience, it is also possible to arrive at more accurate interpretations of it. This distinguishes the realist theory of identity from cultural relativism.

### Teacher Education and Immigrant Women/Girls in Post-positivist Realist Theory

The unique contributions of post-positivist realist theory to the pedagogical situations raised above have the potential to expand teacher candidates' notions of gender in two significant ways (See Figure 1). First, the granting of epistemic privilege gives priority to the individual, situated experiences of immigrant women/girls when theorizing ways to modify teaching strategies in teacher education classrooms. Such prioritization assists teacher candidates to better understand the variable factors that influence student behavior and the rationale behind it. This facilitates a line of questioning about identity and difference that starts with an examination of identity factors of student then expands inward to teacher candidate, making the inquiry twofold, with experience and situated knowledge as the focal point. The importance of this dual inquiry helps teacher candidates to see themselves as "cultural beings" (Sleeter, 1996) and to recognize that their teaching practices and thoughts about gender identity are culturally informed and constructed, just as those of their students. This recognition, I believe, is key to instilling *habits of inquiry* that seek to understand the reasons behind difference and alternative ways of knowing in the classroom. It has the power to bring teacher candidates, who may not have experienced similar types of challenges, closer to becoming aware of the influences that motivate behavior and approaches to academic tasks; it also assists in raising awareness of their own culturally

nuanced pedagogy. Gilpin states, “Without epistemic privilege the insights I gained in [social] contexts and that others gain in similar settings cannot contribute to overall understandings of identity nor serve as a springboard for empowering pedagogy” (2006, p. 14).

It is important to note, however, that while the granting of epistemic privilege has the potential to foster important awareness for preservice teachers and to empower immigrant women/girls, it does not ensure an unproblematic connection between understanding and experience. When immigrant women/girls have not cultivated a capacity to critically reflect on their experiences, they may internalize an oppressed sense of their ability to claim such a privilege, so that they accept the status quo of their own cultural norms or the new ones in the U.S.. This may mean that teachers need to restructure the format of student participation in classroom discussion so that more creative opportunities exist for these students to share their experiences; for example, through drawing, painting, role play, theatre, among others.

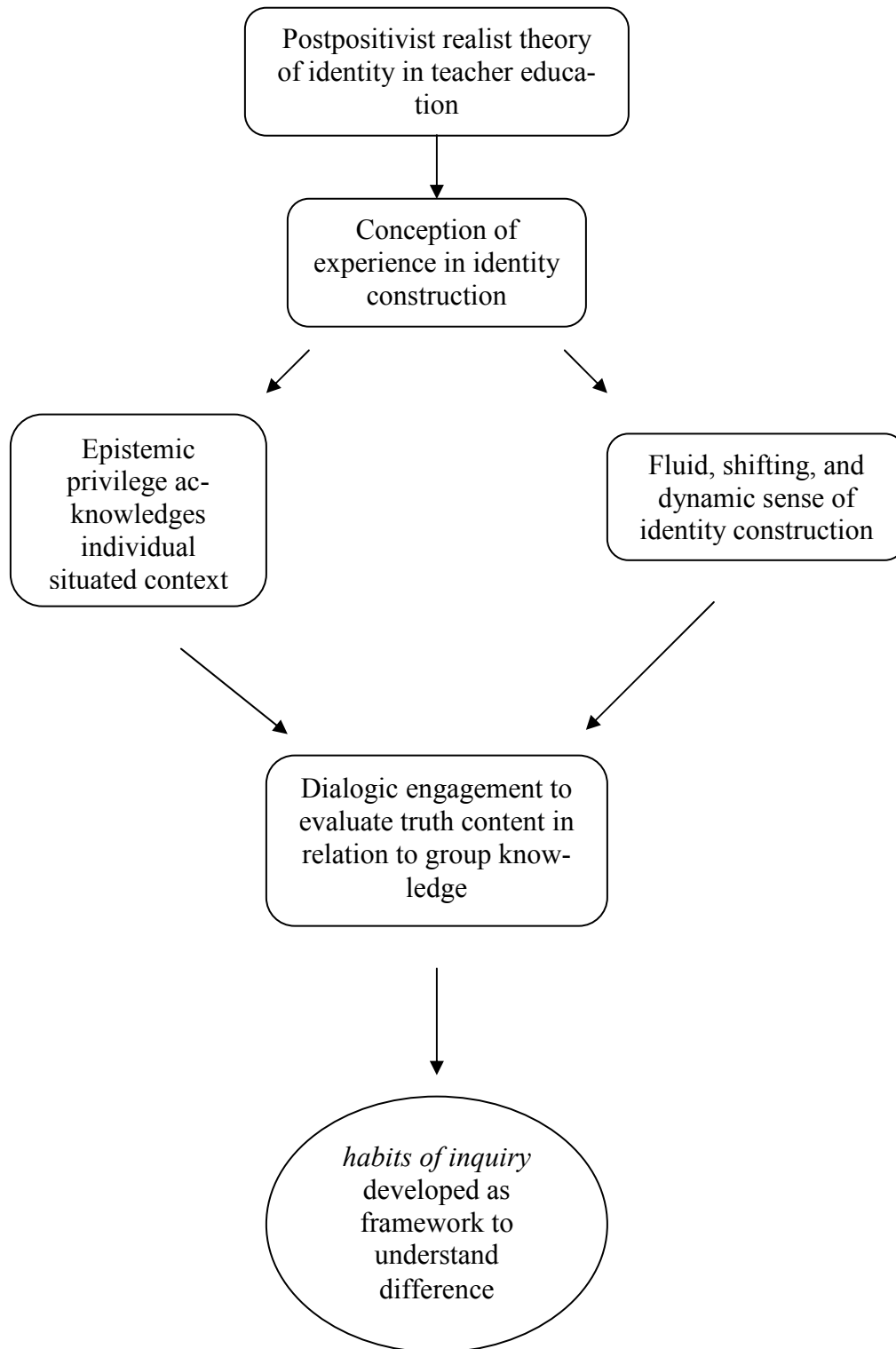
An essential second piece of the unique contribution and promise that PPRT holds for teacher education is the emphasis on identity construction that is fluid, shifting, and dynamic. With such an emphasis, it is possible to see gender identity not as a static, fixed entity, but rather as a situational, contextually influenced aspect of humanity. This allows for more accurate understandings of the ways that status and cultural positionality play out in daily experiences, and how this influences our perceptions and knowledge. Such varied experiences become highlighted in classroom discussions with teacher candidates, as Amie Macdonald (2002) iterates in her experience as a teacher educator,

ironically... the most effective reply comes not from me but from my drawing out the oppositional experience-based views of other students. I therefore rely on student voices to give credence to the view that racist, classist, homophobic, and misogynist thinking is both unethical and illogical. Especially powerful though is the testimony of students who have been directly victimized by the kind of oppressive thinking demonstrated in the discussion...the tenor of the discussion changes markedly...with several students cautiously modifying their analyses of the case. (pp. 115–116).

Engaging personal experience within a collective struggle for knowledge offers possibilities of theorizing the complexity of the relationships between our experiences, our identities, and our assertions about the world, without reducing them to essentialized descriptions of who we are (Macdonald, 2002). When teacher candidates analyze the ways that female immigrants assert a sense of independence and the rationale for it, they engage in cultural inquiry that can work to demystify stereotypes about alternative gender roles, classroom behavior, and student interactions. An essential goal and focus throughout this inquiry is to recognize that issues of gender and culture are multiple in focus, scope and conceptual orientation and that one perspective is not inherently superior or liberating in comparison to another.

In these two important ways, PPRT’s conception of experience can provide a useful framework for teacher candidates to develop *habits of inquiry* to better understand difference and work on more accurate interpretations of female immigrant language learners, thus expanding notions of gender in ways that support their students’ academic achievement. These habits are established largely through discussion that challenges perspectives and individual identity positions where collective agreement or understanding are open to reconfiguration. In the process of such dialogic engagement, a PPRT foundation presses students and teacher to come closer to a sense of moral understanding by making apparent the social facts of positionality and status, highlighting how experiences in daily life empower us differently.





**Figure 1.** Postpositivist realist theory of identity in teacher education

## Conclusion

While cultures and societies have different ways and means of assigning status to individuals, to understand the relative status of women in different cultural and social settings, a deeper understanding is needed of how diverse cultures and societies condition (and are conditioned by) constructions of gender. At the same time, we may need to consider whether certain rights claims can span across cultures and societies and if so, how might we as teacher educators deal in our practice with the challenge of balancing respect for cultural differences while not abandoning our views based on support of universal human rights, at least in the public sphere.

By deconstructing the hierarchy that renders one conception of gender identity as superior or more liberating than another, we, as teacher educators, can work toward better understandings of the relationship between gender and culture in the lives of our English language learners. Initiating discussions about the varied contexts wherein identity formation takes place, we allow for a detailed examination of the post-positivist realist theory of identity and the ways that it can account for the lived experiences of individuals' and their unique, socially situated knowledge regarding gender construction.

With an analysis of the theoretical influences of identity, broader conceptualizations are possible so that new teachers can enter their teaching situations with a sense of the factors that influence immigrant and ELLs' gendered identities. In the education of future teachers, a knowledge base is required that addresses identity in ways that capture the complexity of identity construction and explicate how aspects of gender factor into maintaining a sense of balance and place in the native culture while attempting to do the same in their new one.

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