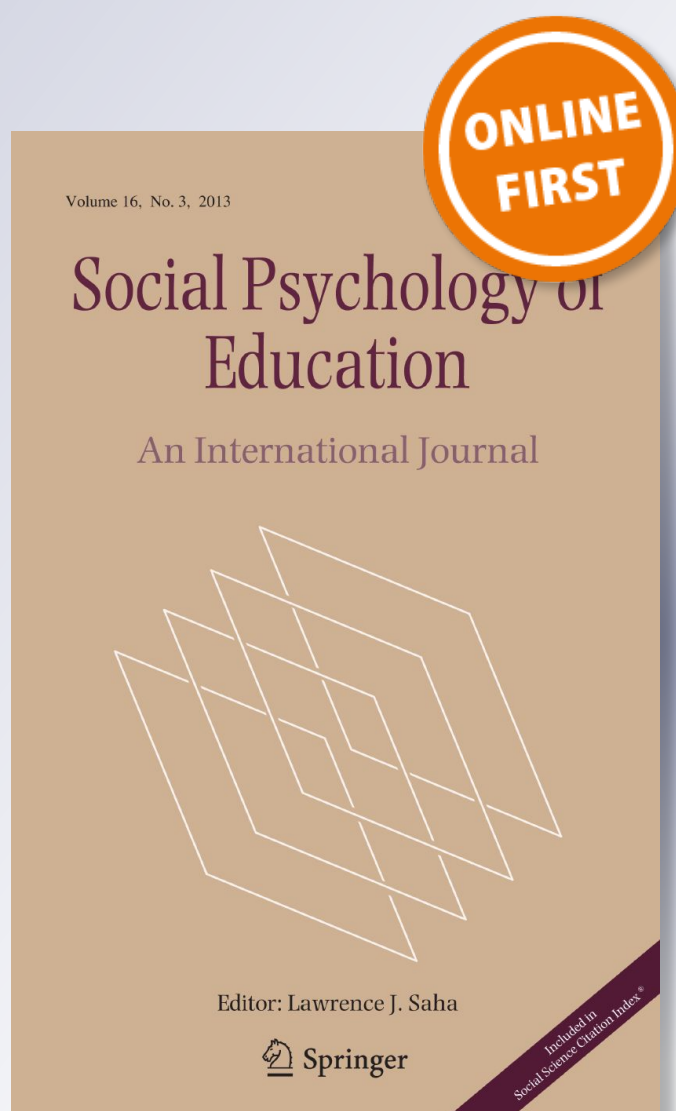*Proposing a working definition for the concept of teacher's pet in the Iranian higher education context*

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Proposing a working definition for the concept of teacher's pet in the Iranian higher education context

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Abstract

The teacher's pet phenomenon is generally regarded as a negative concept by both teachers and students as it violates the principle of fairness. A careful review of the existing literature reveals that the concept of 'teacher's pet' is taken for granted and therefore no inclusive definition has been provided. In response to this gap, the present paper aims to offer an inclusive definition of the concept of teacher's pet in the Iranian higher education context, placing more emphasis on instructors' and students' perceptions. To this end, thirty graduate- and undergraduate students from both genders in addition to fifteen instructors were interviewed. Interpretative phenomenological analysis of the interviews yielded three master themes: (1) 'pet's goals', (2) 'advantages gained', and (3) 'what a teacher's pet does'. Moreover, a number of subthemes were identified for each of the main themes. Taking the three master themes into account, a working definition is proposed. In the end, the results are discussed and implications of the proposed definition are presented.

Keywords Teacher's pet · Working definition · Higher education · Perception · Iran

1 Introduction

Fairness and equality are of paramount importance in educational contexts (Capone and Petrillo 2016), and so teachers, who are responsible for students' value system, are expected to observe fairness and treat their students equally (Babad 2009). This aim is not always fully achieved since teachers have a tendency to exhibit preferential treatment toward specific students (Brown and Dobbins 2004). Among the factors that undermine the fundamental social values of fairness, Teacher's Pet Phenomenon (TPP) is perhaps the most potent and noteworthy (Babad 2009).

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The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines a pet as "a person treated with special favor, especially in a way that seems unfair to others" (Hornby et al. 2010). Along the same lines, TPP deals with a special 'emotional relationship' (mostly a 'love relationship') between a teacher and one or more students in the context of a classroom (Babad 2009). To most educators and students, TPP is negative and thus teachers favoring specific student(s), namely their pet(s) are met with disdain (Babad 1990, 1995, 2009). The presumed significance of TPP is due to its substantial impact on the entire classroom (Chiu et al. 2011; Tal 1987; Tal and Babad 1990).

In the existing body of literature on TPP, all studies (Babad 1990, 1995, 1998, 2001; Chiu et al. 2011; Lu et al. 2015; Opoku-Amankwa 2009; Somersalo et al. 2002; Tal 1987; Tal and Babad 1989, 1990; Trusz 2017) have exclusively focused on school students and interestingly, the concept of 'teacher's pet' has largely been taken for granted with no clear and specific definition provided by any of the scholars. The only exception is Trusz (2017), who provided a general description of a 'teacher's pet' based on Babad's (2009) broad definition of TPP. Another problem with the concept of TPP seems to be the lack of attention directed toward important contextual variables, such as culture. As a result, the present study takes the culture of Iran, as a collectivist country, into careful consideration when investigating the concept of 'teacher's pet'. In other words, given that TPP is concerned with the teacher-student relationship and Iran is a country with a relationship-based system (Hofstede et al. 2010), the concept of 'teacher's pet' can be expected to be more recondite and multi-faceted within the higher education system of Iran with students more likely to be involved in such relationships and picked as the teacher's favorite. As a result of this, the present study aims to propose a comprehensive definition of a 'teacher's pet' within the higher education system in Iran by placing more emphasis on instructors' and students' perceptions of a 'teacher's pet'.

1.1 The teacher's pet phenomenon

Teacher's pet phenomenon is a unique example of radical favoritism in educational contexts (Babad 2009). Babad and her colleagues examined this phenomenon in a series of related studies in the mid-1990s (Tal and Babad 1989, 1990; Babad 1995, 1998). According to Babad (2009), "it is a phenomenon of a special emotional relationship (often a love relationship) between the teacher and a particular student (or two) in the classroom" (p. 106). Pets are the students whose 'special relationship' with the teacher places them on the receiving end of favors due to either real or supposed qualities, and results in rejection by their peers. The teacher-pet relationship is comparable with the 'attached' teacher-student relationship in which pure love for the student can be found (Babad 1995, 1998).

Silberman (1971), a pioneer in exploring this phenomenon, discusses four emotional stances which teachers adopt toward particular students. These include 'attachment, concern, indifference, and rejection'. In Silberman's view, 'attachment' refers to a bond of affection for a specific student as a consequence of their ability to please the teacher. This type of students might be regarded teachers' pets due to the

existence of this kind of emotional tie; however, Silberman refused to mention this term because of the negative connotations associated with this term.

Silberman's (1971) 'attachment' category included two types of students: those that are regarded as teacher's pets and those who are capable students who may please the teacher through their effort and abilities. The first empirical studies on the teacher's pet phenomenon suggested that these two types were different. Students also seem to draw a distinction between the two types of students expressing negative attitudes toward pets because of what they perceive to be blatant favoritism, while acknowledging the efforts and abilities of the second group of students. Conversely, teachers reacted more moderately and claimed that they did not display their affection for a specific student (Tal and Babad 1989, 1990).

In a similar fashion, students' reactions toward teachers who had pets were negative (Babad 1998, 2009). Babad (1995) claimed that students' irritation and anger are reflected in a negative classroom climate, lower morale, and their hostile reactions toward the teacher and pets. Similarly, Somersalo et al. (2002) maintained that classroom conflict might be the consequence of a teacher's display of discriminating behaviors towards pets. Likewise, Chiu et al. (2011) noted that the teacher's authority might contribute to intensifying the teacher's pet phenomenon and classroom conflict; TPP could in turn lead to student maladjustment. In the same vein, Trusz (2017) also found that students evaluated this phenomenon more negatively than teachers and perceived it as being unfair. Concerning three roles explored in this study (i.e., the pet, the leader, and the best student), both the teachers and students perceived the best student positively; however, contrary to the students who judged the pet negatively, the teachers held positive attitudes toward both the leader and pet.

1.2 Stroke behavior

Transactional analysis (TA) is used to achieve a deeper understanding of interpersonal relationships and can change the educational process positively (Barrow and Newton 2015) while maintaining an effective communication between teachers and students (Stewart and Joines 1987). TA is comprised of six components, one of which is stroke. Stroke alludes to any act that acknowledges the presence of an individual (Berne 1988). Stroking behaviors can be verbal or non-verbal, positive or negative, conditional or unconditional. Verbal strokes may range from joining a conversation to saying hello, whereas nonverbal stroke includes smiling, maintaining eye-contact, and the like; positive strokes are enjoyable and rewarding experiences, while negative ones make the strokee feel displeased; conditional strokes deal with our actions and unconditional ones refer to 'what we are' (Stewart and Joines 1987). Furthermore, there exists some evidence showing that stroke is linked to students' feedback (Hattie and Timperley 2007), self-esteem (Hellaby 2004), motivation (Pishghadam and Khajavy 2014), willingness to attend classes (Rajabnejad Namaghi 2016), and teacher's burnout (Yazdan Pour 2015).

1.3 Ingratiation theory

In view of the fact that people employ social influence strategies, such as ingratiation, in search of a better future (Levy et al. 1998), students may also seek strategies to influence the teacher in an attempt to build a positive relationship with him/her. According to ingratiation theory, people use some tactics through their favorable traits to influence those who can guarantee their success (Jones and Wortman 1973). The importance of ingratiation is attached to the value of the goal and the uniqueness of the intended person giving the rewards. The value of the goal depends on the 'need', either internally or externally induced, that an ingratiator feels the target person can fulfill. The uniqueness of the target person can be described in terms of his/her status and power to provide rewards for the ingratiator (Jones and Wortman 1973). These ingratiation strategies are successful given that an ingratiator's intentions remain indistinguishable (Gordon 1996; Jones and Wortman 1973; Shaw and Costanzo 1970). According to Jones and Wortman (1973), there are various strategies for manipulating people: other enhancement, opinion conformity, giving favor, and manipulative self-presentation.

Regarding conformity, Aronson and Aronson (2008) classified it into three kinds: compliance, identification, and internalization. Compliance involves a person's attempt to gain rewards or escape punishment; it affects people least and can be easily altered because the conditions oblige them to comply with other's attitudes. The main factor inducing compliance is the power of a target to hand out reward and punishment. Identification occurs when we perceive the influencer attractive enough to identify with; as the influencer is a model for us, we wish to express the same opinions with them. The impact of identification lasts till a person meets another attractive expert; their beliefs will possibly be replaced by new ones. Internalization, the most enduring one, arises from our aspiration for being right; it is intrinsically motivated. The influencer should be truthful and credible enough to persuade us to follow their beliefs and incorporate their values into our belief system. Most research to date on conformity has shown that people in collective societies are more likely to conform to others (e.g., Aronson and Aronson 2008; Hofstede et al. 2010).

Reviewing the literature, we can find a significant bulk of research conducted on the use and consequences of ingratiation (e.g., Higgins et al. 2003; Vonk 2002; Westphal and Stern 2007). A large body of research has indicated that ingratiation is linked to positive performance evaluations (Gordon 1996), low self-esteem (Kacmar et al. 2004), need for power (Kumar and Beyerlein 1991), and high self-monitoring behaviors (Bolino and Turnley 2003).

1.4 The status of higher education in Iran

Iranian students are expected to take national entrance exams at all levels of study for admission into universities. In order to enter an M.A. program, candidates can either use a scholarship reserved for "talented students" (special criteria have been defined for such students) or alternatively take part in an entrance exam. The

talented student's scholarship is awarded to B.A. students who receive the highest grade point average in their class. As for PhD. programs, students can once again take an entrance exam or benefit from the talented student's scholarship by providing evidence that they are the top students of their class and have published one or more articles in established journals of their field. The PhD. exam consists of two stages: a written examination is conducted on a national scale and an oral interview, which is held locally.

Graduate students are required to take courses for three semesters before embarking on their thesis or dissertation projects. They often submit their topics by the end of the first, second, or third semester (although this tends to vary from one university to another). In the course of these semesters, students should select their supervisors based on their preferences and the instructors' field of expertise. Both the instructors and students have the choice of selecting whom they want to work with. However, there is a working restriction for faculty members as each instructor can work with a limited number of students based on the university rules.

As mentioned earlier, in spite of the existence of studies into the teacher's pet phenomenon, the void of a comprehensive definition of the concept of 'teacher's pet' is particularly felt in the literature. Therefore, drawing on data collected from the higher education system in Iran and by taking into account the instructors' and students' perceptions of this concept, the current research aims to offer such a definition.

2 Method

2.1 Study design and sample selection

This study applied a qualitative Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method to explore students' and instructors' perceptions of a 'teacher's pet'. IPA is not concerned with the nature of the world, but rather deals with the way participants view and perceive the world. It involves participant's perceptions of the phenomena and as experience lies at the heart of participants' perceptions, the researcher's interpretation of the experiences is fundamental to this method (Smith et al. 2009). IPA is used to gather extensive, detailed, and first-person data from participants. This method can be employed to propose theories and models contributing to our better understanding of the meaning of people's experiences (Smith et al. 2009).

The participants of this study were all studying and teaching at universities and institutes of higher education in Mashhad, Tehran, Shiraz, and Ahvaz (e.g., *Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Tarbiat Moddares, Tehran, Shahid Beheshti, Alzahra, Shiraz, Shahid Chamran, Imam Reza, and Tabarn Universities*). Learners of both genders (12 males and 18 females), and three levels of study (BA, MA, and PhD.), and instructors of both genders (9 males and 6 females) with different years of teaching experience (ranging from four to thirty years), took part in this project. The students' age ranged from 19 to 32, and teachers' age ranged between 32 and 62.

Following a form of non-probability purposive sampling, convenience and snowball sampling procedures were adopted. These two types of sampling help to recruit

a diverse sample of participants (Sadler et al. 2010). Through the snowball sampling technique, students who generously contributed to our study were asked to recommend others to participate. This kind of sampling strategy assists the researchers in communicating with more hard to reach informants (Sadler et al. 2010). As for university instructors, convenience sampling was employed in that participants were selected based on their availability. The main criterion for sample selection was the participants' majors; individuals eligible for this project were university students and instructors from different universities, majoring in English Translation, English Literature, and English Language Teaching. Thus, our participants were intentionally selected from the English departments. As a result, our sample of participants was heterogeneous in terms of age, levels of study, years of teaching experience, gender, and the university in which the participants were studying or teaching.

2.2 Data collection

The process of data collection started in March, 2017, and ended in August, 2017, after six months. The researchers sent out a request for interview to several university professors, a number of whom willingly accepted our invitation. Additionally, the students who took part in our project introduced other informants for the interview.

Prior to the interview, all ethical considerations (consent, anonymity, and confidentiality) were taken into account in this study. Participation was voluntary and all interviewees provided explicit consent to being interviewed and audio recorded. The participants were informed of the aim and method of the research, and the approximate length of time it might take. Regarding confidentiality and anonymity, the participants were assured that their information would be treated as confidential and their identities would not be disclosed anywhere. As such, the researchers used pseudonyms for the participants to assure confidentiality.

An in-depth, semi-structured, one-to-one interview was conducted to gain an understanding of the students' and instructors' perceptions of a 'teacher's pet'. The interviews were held in the participants' native language, Persian. Furthermore, in line with IPA requirements, the interview questions were open-ended and non-directive (Smith et al. 2009). As such, we interviewed our participants in a conversational manner using further probing questions to obtain more extensive data (Smith et al. 2009).

Following twenty-eight interviews with the students and thirteen interviews with the instructors, the point of data saturation was reached. Four additional interviews, two with students and two with instructors, were carried out to ensure the saturation of data. Consequently, altogether, the researchers talked to thirty learners and fifteen instructors; the length of each interview ranged from 50 to 245 min.

2.3 Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and IPA was performed to summarize the findings of the interviews. IPA involves four stages: the researcher's familiarization with

the text; identification of themes; clustering of themes and examining the potential relationship among them; and making a summary of the identified themes with the examples indicating each theme (Smith et al. 2009). Following these stages, initially, the researchers carefully read, reread, and scrutinized all the transcripts to capture a general feeling of the participants' reports. Then, the researchers looked for the emerging themes in them; the texts were also coded to provide examples addressing each theme. Subsequently, the researchers examined the overarching- and sub-themes running through the transcripts to explore the potential relationships among them. Finally, by integrating the themes through the texts, common themes describing the participants' experience of the concept under investigation were introduced (Smith et al. 2009).

3 Results

The main question the participants were supposed to answer was: "How would you define a teacher's pet in your own words?" This question subsequently led to two more questions: "Why do some students want to become a pet" and "How can a student become a pet?" Interpretative phenomenological analysis of interviews yielded three master themes: (1) 'pet's goals', (2) 'advantages gained', and (3) 'what a teacher's pet does'. A number of subthemes were identified for each of the main themes. The master theme 'pet's goals' implied two subthemes: (a) 'educational' and (b) 'personal goals'; the 'personal goals' subtheme was comprised of two categories: (1) building a mutual relationship with the teacher and (2) compensating for one's character flaws.

The theme 'advantages gained' consisted of two subthemes: (a) 'academic' and (b) 'non-academic advantages'; the 'non-academic advantages' subtheme was further grouped into (1) social and (2) psychological advantages.

The theme 'what a teacher's pet does' contained one main subtheme, namely; 'ingratiation', which itself was divided into: (a) 'satisfying teacher's needs' and (b) 'covering one's shortcomings'. 'Satisfying teacher's needs' subtheme was divided further into (1) professional and (2) psychological needs; 'covering one's shortcomings' subtheme was also subdivided into (1) academic shortcomings and (2) character flaws.

3.1 Master theme 1: 'Pet's goals'

This theme captures a 'teacher's pet's' tendency to approach the instructor and becoming nominated as an instructor's favorite student. All participants believed that a pet holds a utilitarian view, that is, such a student measures the outcomes of being a pet, and based on their evaluation, they embark on formulating various plans in advance. To be precise, a pet envisions a tangible future (one which involves whatever outcome they are seeking to achieve), and tries to achieve it; they invest in their future by becoming a pet. All participants maintained that a pet intends to achieve their goals effortlessly and quickly; in other words, being a pet is a means to

an end. Moreover, they stated that the goals a pet pursues, can be educational, personal, or both.

3.1.1 Subtheme 1: *educational goals*

For all participants, educational goals served as the primary aim of graduate teachers' pets. This does not mean that pets at the undergraduate level do not strive for such goals at all; however, 90% of them considered this goal as a secondary one. The most frequent codes identified under this theme were: passing the M.A. and PhD. exams, getting good grades, publishing articles, managing to select the intended supervisor for their thesis/dissertation project, having the instructor recommend them for job vacancies, and to a lesser extent, attending conferences. The following examples illustrate this subtheme.

> A teacher's pet intends to impress the instructor to facilitate their employment process (Dr. Zarei, male, 20 years of teaching experience, 42 years of age).
> A teacher's pet tries to get high grades without studying much (Farnoush, B.A. student, 23 years of age).
> Being a teacher's pet made my classmate the top student during her B.A. studies, leading to her admission to the M.A. program without taking the entrance exam through being granted the talented students' scholarship (Ali, M.A. student, 24 years of age).

3.1.2 Subtheme 2: *personal goals*

According to the participants, both graduate- and undergraduate teachers' pets work toward this goal but this goal takes priority over the academic one for undergraduate pets. The results showed that a pet's goals were usually to (a) 'build up a mutual relationship with the teacher' (emotional and/or professional relationships) and/or (b) 'compensate for one's character flaws'. Some of them enjoy interacting with the instructor on a personal level and others on a professional level to improve their knowledge of their field of study. The teacher-pet relationship can be teacher-initiated or student-initiated. It is worth mentioning that since we are usually unaware of our character flaws, whatever we do to compensate for our flaws, is assumed to be unconsciously done. Hence, a pet may not consciously set out to compensate for their character flaws. Participants' most frequently-cited codes for this subtheme included: establishing good rapport, achieving positive feelings, social support, and the need to feel important as well as attracting other's attention. This subtheme is represented in the following excerpts.

> My favorite student always raises her hand and comments on what is being discussed, though her comments may not always be of value. I think she just enjoys being noticed and recognized by her peers (Dr. Ramezani, female, 4 years of teaching experience, 33 years of age).
> Having an emotional relationship with the instructor makes a teacher's pet feel pleased. Something that does not exist in their other relationships (Nazanin, female, PhD. student, 32 years of age).

A teacher's pet is a student who seeks an alternative way to establish a good relationship with their instructor (tries to build an emotional bond); they can't do so through active involvement in classroom activities (Hamid, male, B.A. student, 23 years of age).

Having a good relationship with the instructor helps a teacher's pet shape the instructor's decisions (Azadeh, female, PhD. student, 31 years of age).

3.2 Master theme 2: 'Advantages gained'

As the results revealed, 'advantages gained' is another important defining feature of a 'teacher's pet'. All the informants emphasized the privileges given to the students on account of being a pet. They noted that a pet tries to win the instructor's approval in hopes of some advantages and privileges which seem unfair to others. To be exact, with their needs in mind, a pet attempts to build good rapport with the instructor and capture his/her attention in quest of special treatment. Based on the findings, this subtheme was subdivided into (a) 'academic' and (b) 'non-academic advantages'.

3.2.1 Subtheme 1: *academic advantages*

This embraced all educational advantages offered to a teacher's pet. Since instructors are resources and liabilities in academic achievement, they can provide their favorite student(s) with academic benefits. Various codes concerning this main subtheme were found: financial support, educational assistance, employment opportunities, and talent development. The following excerpts imply that the academic advantage was a major subtheme in students' and instructors' talks describing a 'teacher's pet':

A teacher's pet ingratiates themselves with the instructor in pursuit of a better grade (Dr. Honarvar, male, 28 years of teaching experience, 53 years of age).

Instructors provide teaching opportunities for their pets (Atefeh, female, PhD. student, 32 years of age).

A teacher's pet has access to expertise (professors) and the number of their publications will increase due to collaboration with the instructor (Emad, male, M.A. student, 28 years of age).

3.2.2 Subtheme 2: *non-academic advantages*

In addition to receiving educational benefits, over 96% of interviewees maintained that a teacher's pet also gains advantages in the academic setting which are not necessarily concerned with educational purposes. This subtheme consisted of (1) 'social' and (2) 'psychological advantages'. The 'social advantages' minor subtheme was related to being recognized and accepted by peers and enhancing reputation. This subtheme is evident in the following excerpts.

Instructors tend to speak well of their favorite students. As a result of this, there is a widespread belief (mostly false) that they have special qualities (Reza, male, M.A. student, 23 years of age).

A teacher's pet tries to be in the forefront of the instructor's attention to receive respect and admiration (Mohammad, male, B.A. student, 20 years of age).

(2) The 'psychological advantages' minor subtheme suggests common psychological benefits gained through being a teacher's pet. Nearly all participants reported that pets benefit from establishing good rapport with the instructor. These benefits include improved self-esteem because of receiving positive reinforcement from the instructor, a greater sense of self-confidence, being the focus of the instructor's attention, flirting, improved mood and emotional state, reduced feeling of anxiety, and so on. The following participants expressed aspects of this minor subtheme.

A teacher's pet experiences reduced stress as well as increased calmness due to receiving positive strokes from the instructor (Helma, female, PhD. student, 32 years of age).

A teacher's pet feels a sense of achievement as a result of receiving further encouragement (Dr. Tabrizi, female, 20 years of teaching experience, 47 years of age).

A teacher's pet becomes more motivated and self-confident because the instructor provides them with positive feedback on their performance (Amir, male, B.A. student, 20 years of age).

3.3 Master theme 3: 'What a teacher's pet does'

As previously mentioned, a teacher's pet pursues aims in the expectation of receiving benefits in return. The results indicated that they employ strategies orienting them towards their goal. To achieve their goals, they often develop a game plan, based on which they perform a range of activities. According to the findings, to be designated as a pet, they need to gain approval in advance through doing whatever they can; in a sense, for the pet, the end justifies the means.

3.3.1 Subtheme: *ingratiation*

All participants referred to 'ingratiation', either implicitly or explicitly, to describe a 'teacher's pet'. They described a 'teacher's pet' as an ingratiator and an obedient student who aligns him/herself with the instructor's beliefs even if they are in contradiction with his/her own view. The interviewees asserted that a pet ingratiates themselves to the instructor so as to (a) satisfy teacher's needs and/or (b) cover their own shortcomings. It is worth noting that in case of a teacher-initiated relationship, a student is sometimes selected as a pet by the instructor without having done anything special. However, even in such instances, the pet exhibits certain behaviors to maintain their status as the instructor's favorite student.

(a) 'Satisfying teacher's needs' contained (1) 'professional' and (2) 'psychological needs'. (1) The 'professional needs' addressed the instructor's educational

and financial needs. A teacher's pet does a range of activities including, assisting the instructor in giving lectures, organizing conferences, enhancing the instructor's professional reputation by speaking highly of him/her among other students and instructors, facilitating the instructor's progress through assisting in the process of writing articles, compensating for the instructor's incomplete knowledge, and doing all the instructor's dirty work. The following quotations represent this minor subtheme.

> A teacher's pet can accelerate the instructor's development through assisting them in writing and publishing articles and books (Hamid, male, PhD. student, 32 years of age).
> Instructors with limited knowledge seek academic promotion, so they ask their pet(s) to help them write as many articles as they can (Emad, male, M.A. student, 27 years of age).
> The instructor has a busy schedule and needs someone to do their tasks for them" (Elahe, female, B.A. student, 21 years of age).
> To reduce his workload, the instructor asks his pet(s) to mark exam papers, collect data for his own projects, and edit papers (Dr. Taheri, female, 20 years of teaching experience, 48 years of age).

(2) The 'psychological needs' include the need for approval, power, support, appreciation, attention, being liked, and other such needs. A pet performs different kinds of activities like, giving a sense of calm and security; making the instructor feel good and important; boosting confidence and self-esteem; and giving a sense of achievement by providing him/her with positive reinforcement and feedback; and bolstering reputation. The following examples clearly show this minor subtheme.

> Frequently giving positive feedback to the instructor leads to boosting his/ her confidence and making him/her believe that he/she is on the right track (Mohsen, male, M.A. student, 23 years of age).
> I feel secure when my pet is there because I know he always supports me (Dr. Roshani, female, 4 years of teaching experience, 33 years of age).
> Whenever students voice objection against the instructor in the classroom, the teacher's pet helps to overcome it (Dr. Salmani, male, 4 years of teaching experience, 33 years of age).

(b) 'Covering one's shortcomings' include (1) academic shortcomings and (2) character flaws. The participants mentioned that a teachers' pet also attempts to hide their personal weaknesses by whatever they do. Their weaknesses include (1) academic weakness which refers to their insufficient knowledge regarding the subject matter and their need for the instructor's assistance and support in their work. Two examples are presented below.

> A teacher's pet can't pass the entrance exams without the instructor's help (Sahar, female, PhD. student, 32 years of age).
> A teacher's pet can't write an article on his own and thus asks for the instructor's help (Masoud, male, M.A. student, 28 years of age)

(2) Character flaws describe imperfections and defects reported by the participants. These flaws involve the need for attention, approval, appreciation, support, and/ or a role model as a result of not having a strong sense of self, being noticed, and attention. Over 95% of participants noted that a pet catches the instructor's attention through flirting, smiling, frequently meeting with the instructor, actively participating in activities, providing feedback, telling jokes, buying gifts, and ingratiation. Two participants provided good examples that highlight this minor subtheme.

> A teacher's pet is a dependent person who seeks to approach an authority in quest of his support (Amir, male, PhD. student, 32 years of age).
> My classmate who is a teacher's pet, captures the instructor's attention by buying gifts, flattery, asking rhetorical questions, turning on her charm, and doing her homework regularly (Mina, female, PhD. student, 26 years of age).

So far, the definitions of a 'teacher's pet' have been either implied or explicit; the implied version is derived from the definition of TPP by Babad (2009) and the explicit ones are those provided by dictionaries. There seems be no difference and incongruity between the implied and explicit definitions of this concept. The implied definition refers to pets as "students favored by teachers because they have actual and/or alleged characteristics that are highly valued by teachers, but not necessarily by classmates" (Trusz 2017, p. 708). The explicit one, the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary definition, is "a person treated with special favors, especially in a way that seems unfair to others" (Hornby et al. 2010). According to the mentioned definitions, both types are broad definitions lacking a comprehensive and useful framework to be used as a starting point to conduct further research. This is what we will endeavor to achieve now.

As maintained throughout this section, the definition of a 'teacher's pet' has emphasized three main domains: what a pet does, the pet's goals, and advantages gained. Having incorporated theses three aspects, we arrived at an inclusive definition, which is as follows:

A teacher's pet is a student who is involved in a special and purpose-built relationship with the teacher usually through doing whatever it takes to gain approval for undue advantages and privileges that seem to defy the principles of equality and justice and arouse other's jealousy and irritation.

4 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to offer a definition for the concept of 'teacher's pet' in the Iranian higher education context based on the students' and instructors' perceptions. Analysis of the data indicated that this concept was rather complex and multifaceted and encompassed three major aspects: (1) what a pet does; (2) the pet's goals; and (3) advantages gained.

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no conceptual definition has been proposed in the global context in general and in the context of Iran in particular. Accordingly, the researchers cannot draw an accurate comparison between the definitions. Our tentative definition confirms the definition provided by the Oxford Advanced

Learner's Dictionary, in which a teacher's pet is "a person treated with special favor, especially in a way that seems unfair to others" (Hornby et al. 2010). Similarly, our proposed definition is in line with the implied definition asserted by Trusz (2017) that pets are students who are "favored by teachers……" (p. 708). Likewise, as TPP deals with a special 'emotional relationship' (mostly a 'love relationship') between a teacher and one or more students (Babad 2009), it can be inferred that Babad may consider a pet as one or more students who have an 'emotional relationship' (mostly a 'love relationship') with a teacher. This study both confirms and contradicts this implied definition in the sense that the teacher-pet relationship can be, but need not to be, emotional. Our research demonstrated that this relationship is like a transaction including professional and emotional relationships and has many aspects and complexities.

Concerning the theme of 'pet's goals', it is assumed that our behaviors are goal-oriented and social interactions are grounded in our personal purposes (Weinstein and Deutschberger 1963). Furthermore, according to expectancy-value theory, when we perceive that our behavior leads to an attainable and valued goal, we tend to undertake that behavior (Weiner 1992). Consistent with these statements, it was found that a pet pursues an attainable and valued goal and takes steps to act upon them. The participants maintained that one of the pets' goals is to exhibit a tendency to decrease emotional distance between themselves and the teacher. This finding hints at the concept of immediacy (Mehrabian 1969) which is mostly applied to teacher's behaviors, but in this case it seems that a student uses immediacy behavior techniques. Our participants mostly asserted that a pet tries to reduce their distance from the teacher to foster a close relationship with the teacher to receive strokes. Moreover, being recognized and acknowledged by the teacher is another main goal of a pet which coincides with the concept of stroke proposed by Berne (1988). Nearly all participants, either implicitly or explicitly, addressed the point that a pet tries to receive strokes through whatever they do; a pet may attract the teacher's attention through asking rhetorical questions, sitting in the front row and close to the teacher in hopes of maintaining eye-contact with the teacher, always giving the teacher positive feedback, and the like to receive the teacher's approval, appreciation, and attention. Moreover, as claimed by Hellaby (2004), stroking raises the learners' self-esteem on the one hand, and since almost 70% of the participants noted that a pet tends to receive reinforcements to increase their self-esteem, on the other hand, it can be deduced that a pet may tend to receive more strokes to compensate for their potential lack of self-esteem.

To account for the second theme 'what a teacher's pet does', we draw upon the three role-related theories, ingratiation (Jones and Wortman 1973), self-monitoring (Snyder 1972), and impression management theories (Schlenker 1980). All these theories are concerned with different aspects of self-presentation (Shaw and Costanzo 1970). As mentioned by the participants, a pet employs manipulative acts to achieve their goal; ingratiation and conformity are the main acts which lead to other ones. In line with ingratiation theory (Jones and Wortman 1973), the majority of our participants noted that a pet uses ingratiation strategies to influence the teacher who has power and status and who can provide them with some advantages. As asserted by almost all of our participants, a pet tends to overcome their shortcomings,

academic weaknesses and/or character flaws, through whatever they do. According to over 95% of the participants, a pet wins the teacher's favor to enjoy assistance and support in their work and they might also manipulate the teacher's impression to seek attention, approval, appreciation, support, and the like.

The findings also support Jones and Wortman's (1973) contention that in line with the target person's needs, an ingratiator offers some benefits to a target (i.e., support, approval, favors, etc.). Responses underscoring the satisfaction of the instructor's needs by the pet corroborate this claim. Almost all of the participants maintained that a pet may ingratiate themselves with the teacher to address the teacher's professional and psychological needs. As mentioned by all graduate students and 10 teachers, a pet can serve as an assistant to the teacher by helping in the process of writing articles to facilitating the teacher's progress. Our participants stated that the teacher expects their pets to do a series of activities on their behalf including, redrafting their notes, assisting them in giving speeches, editing other students' articles in lieu of the teacher, and so on. Furthermore, our participants argued that approval, appreciation, and the attention seeking behaviors of a teacher are also likely to be addressed through a class of strategic behaviors by a pet. For example, our participants contended that a pet can boost the teacher's confidence and self-esteem by supporting and complimenting them.

As mentioned in the literature review, there are various strategies to manipulate people: other enhancement, opinion conformity, giving favor, and manipulative self-presentation (Jones and Wortman 1973). Our findings can be interpreted in light of these approaches since the concept of teacher's pet has many characteristics in common with ingratiation theory. Other enhancement was repeatedly reported by the participants as one of the main tactics tried by a pet. To be judged positively, a pet boosts the teacher's confidence and self-esteem by giving the teacher compliments. This strategy is effective since it makes a teacher feel pleased. Other enhancement would be successful if the ingratiator praises features the target cherishes (Jones and Wortman 1973). Our participants emphasized the fact that before engaging in the act of ingratiation, a pet identifies and reorders a list of the teacher's priorities and then, they praise those exact features. Therefore, they can win the teacher's favor through this tactic and make the teacher like them. This is consistent with Shaw and Costanzo's (1970) argument that the success of other enhancement lies in the fact that liking tends to be mutually shared in relationships.

Regarding conformity and its classification, compliance, identification, and internalization (Aronson and Aronson 2008), we can assign pets to one of these categories. A compliant pet is induced to accept the teacher's beliefs by their desire to obtain rewards. They pretend compliance until they achieve their goal; they refrain from voicing contrary opinions although they inwardly believe their own beliefs are correct. A possible justification for their compliance might be acting out of fear of not being disliked by the teacher for disagreeing because accruing benefits results from their being liked by the teacher. An identifying pet aspires to be like the teacher; the teacher's attractive qualities drive the pets to consider them a role model and adopt similar attitudes and values. As long as they hold continued esteem for the teacher, they embrace similar beliefs. An internalizing pet integrates the teacher's values into their own belief system owing to the credibility and trustworthiness of

the teacher; they unconsciously project a persona of the teacher. The third category is reflected in a claim by Jones and Wortman (1973) that the ingratiator's own values and attitudes may gradually change through their voicing of conformity to a target. The fact that a pet may exhibit a higher level of conformity can be related to four factors. First, as mentioned by Aronson and Aronson (2008), one of the factors affecting conformity is the extent to which a person feels secure in a group. Consequently, a pet's conformity may lie in their possible feeling of insecurity in their relationship with the teacher. Feeling insecure might result in a stressful environment for them and increase their anxiety which manifests itself in their high levels of conformity. The second reason can be explained in light of their self-esteem. Individuals enjoying high self-esteem show a greater tendency to voice disagreement than those with low self-esteem (Aronson and Aronson 2008). Accordingly, our findings reinforce this fact since the participants argued that a pet might conform to compensate for their low self-esteem. In the same vein, the participants pointed out that a pet perhaps tends to look good and be liked by living up to the teacher's expectations to achieve their goal. Thus, our results also manifest what Aronson and Aronson (2008) have claimed; that is, an individual conforms to be accepted and liked by a target. Additionally, there is evidence that having expertise, authority, and social status are critical features resulting in conformity (Aronson and Aronson 2008). Hence, it can be concluded that a pet's conformity probably arises from the teacher's access to social and cultural capitals, power and status.

Another strategy of ingratiation is giving favors, which communicates respect and liking for a target (Jones and Wortman 1973). Our findings confirmed the application of this strategy; our participants frequently noted that a pet may do favors for the teacher such as buying gifts for the teacher, marking exam papers, and over pampering their instructors by bringing them coffee. The last tactic used by an ingratiator is self-presentation which deals with enhancing their attractiveness through expressing their positive qualities to a target. As mentioned earlier, effective self-presentation depends on the extent to which the ingratiator can express the qualities that are consistent with the target's preferences (Jones and Wortman 1973). Hence, there seems to be a clear connection between this tactic and what the participants noted regarding what a pet does. In keeping with the teacher's preferences, a pet describes their own positive attributes to bring about the desired effect. A pet usually adopts this tactic in the form of self-enhancement as a result of their need for appreciation, approval, and support. As Shaw and Costanzo (1970) maintain, 'modesty' as a self-presentation strategy can reflect an individual's reliance on and 'noncompetitive relationships' with a target. The participants argued that a pet displays modesty in the form of obedience to the teacher. They may assume that showing obedience can help them in gaining approval and eventually establishing a friendly relationship with the teacher.

On a broader level, it seems quite reasonable to take into account the conditions that are conducive to ingratiation. As mentioned in the literature review, Iranian university students study in a GPA-based system, in which they are evaluated based on their grades. Moreover, the talented student's scholarship can act as a gateway for a student's admission to higher levels of study. Additionally, the supervisors in M.A. and PhD. projects may play a principal role in facilitating

their own students' interview process to pass the PhD. exam. Hence, due to having studied in such a competitive environment, the students might feel higher levels of anxiety and insecurity resulting in their willingness to become a pet; being a pet can set the stage for their educational success. Furthermore, taking the culture of Iran into account, Jones and Wortman (1973) affirmed that ingratiation is pervasive within the social structure of a society in which people are reliant upon each other due to unfair distribution of 'social' and 'personal' resources. In accordance with this view, since Iran is amongst the hierarchical cultures in which social inequality exists (Hofstede et al. 2010), the reason behind a pet's ingratiation in this context can possibly be explained by this fact. Additionally, as the participants argued that a pet may have low self-esteem, our results seem to confirm the assertion that ingratiation is related to low self-esteem (Kacmar et al. 2004).

The second role-related theory is self-monitoring, which deals with the extent to which a person tries to control and manipulate the images other people have of him/her in the interactions. High self-monitors are good at managing their self-presentation by showing themselves to have special attributes, and being aware of other's actions. They seek information needed for their anticipation of a target's traits whom they intend to impress (Snyder 1972). In addition, high self-monitors are more inclined to show conformity to other's beliefs (Snyder and Monson 1975). Based on the aforementioned features, it seems that a pet shares some characteristics with a high self-monitor. Prior to approaching the teacher, pets seek relevant information to construe him/her regarding his/her traits, and then they mold their images to suit the teacher's preferences and impress him/her; to quote one of the participants, "[A] pet is always faking; they put on a different face in the presence of the teacher; they should be smart either way" (Farnoush, female, B. A. student, 22 years of age). In addition, a pet is similar to a high self-monitor in conforming with the teacher's opinions. The justification for a pet to employ self-monitoring processes can be related to the fact that the regulations of behavior greatly affect social behavior and interactions (James 1980 as cited in Snyder 1972). Therefore, such manipulative acts may help a pet to reach their goals of gaining approval, being liked, and being accepted by the teacher. Thus, since a pet employs ingratiation behaviors on one hand, and shares some characteristics with high self-monitors, on the other hand, it can be deduced that our findings add to the previous finding demonstrating that ingratiation is linked to high self-monitoring behaviors (Bolino and Turnley 2003).

The findings of the present study also confirm impression management theory (Schlenker 1980), which suggests that individuals consciously or unconsciously try to build and maintain identities in social interactions and these identities would in turn influence their behavior in the presence of others, other's behavior towards them, and the outcomes produced from social interactions (Schlenker 1980). As impression management strategies boost self-concept and social identity (Shaw and Costanzo 1970) on one hand, and the need for self-esteem is at the core of this theory (Schlenker 1980), on the other hand, enhancing self-concept would result in the promotion of self-esteem. Therefore, it can be inferred that a pet might employ impression management strategies and behave in 'self-serving' ways to maintain and increase their self-esteem.

Regarding the third master theme, advantages gained, social exchange theory can cast light on this theme. This theory postulates that any interaction yields some outcomes which are interpreted in terms of costs and rewards accrued to both parties. Rewards are considered to be the fulfillment and 'gratifications' gained from and the costs are the adverse outcomes of the participation in any interaction (Thibaut and Kelly 1959). Our study reflects this reality considering that a pet seems to make consciously-plotted moves with the greatest exactness to achieve maximum gains. To be precise, they may estimate their interaction with the teacher regarding its advantages, and then they embark on planning with the aim of engaging in, attaining, and maximizing the advantages. They may try to become a pet to attain their prime goal, gaining advantages.

Since culture provides one of the major points of departure for the current research, it can also clarify these findings. Since culture shapes our lives and influences every action we take (Hofstede et al. 2010), the rationale behind the multidimensionality of the concept of teacher's pet in the context of Iran may be its culture. Iran is a collective and hierarchical society in which a particularist thinking provides individuals with special privileges as in-group members; personal relationships have priority over the task and must be built first (Hofstede et al. 2010). In this sense, a pet's actions are justifiable; all the participants asserted that a pet establishes a close relationship with the teacher first and then starts performing a range of activities to win approval leading to the receipt of special privileges that transcends what is normally acceptable in the higher education context. Although a small fraction of the participants explicitly admitted to be on the receiving end of such privileges, this could still be understood from the responses provided by the other participants who did not explicitly mention the special privileges. The special privileges include financial support, higher grades, being listed as a co-author in published articles, being offered employment opportunities, among many other benefits. Furthermore, a large 'emotional distance' between less and more powerful individuals in the high-power distance countries causes subordinates not to voice opposing views directly; children learn obedience and respect in their families (Hofstede et al. 2010). Thus, as Iran is a high-power distance society (Hofstede et al. 2010) and a pet has been socialized into such a society that has imbued them with these visions, they become dependent on the teacher and show conformity to and respect for the teacher. This finding lends support to the following studies which suggest that individuals in a collective society more often tend to conform to others (Aronson and Aronson 2008; Hofstede et al. 2010).

This study has two limitations. The participants were limited to the students and instructors studying and teaching at certain universities in Iran. Hence, the results may need to be treated with caution and we recommend that further research be carried out with school students in the same context since this definition may not hold up for them. Furthermore, our proposed definition may not fit well with other cultural contexts, so it is worthy to test its generalizability through conducting global studies into the nature and definition of a 'teacher's pet'.

5 Conclusion

This research sought to propose a definition for the concept of 'teacher's pet' in the Iranian higher education context. Taking the students' and instructors' perceptions into account, a comprehensive definition was introduced. This study concludes with some pedagogical implications. Firstly, this definition provides teachers with a good index for determining how vulnerable a learner can be to becoming a pet. Secondly, this definition can also be utilized to design a self-assessment inventory for students to evaluate their own and their peers' susceptibility to becoming a pet and may cast light on the individual differences among those who score high and low on it. Thirdly, the findings of the current research could be helpful to policy makers. By considering educational policies, such as the talented student's scholarship, which may tempt students to become pets, policy makers may need to formulate new regulations. Moreover, since this research is possibly one of the first studies to propose a definition for the concept of teacher's pet in the Iranian context, it can be a basis of comparison for further investigations into different cultures and can be used to identify sources of similarities and differences.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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