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## SELF-DENIGRATION IN DOCTORAL DEFENSE SESSIONS: SCALE DEVELOPMENT AND VALIDATION

### Abstract

The dissertation defense as a complicated conflict-prone context entails the adoption of elegant interactional strategies, one of which is self-denigration. This study aimed to develop and validate a self-denigration model that fits the context of doctoral defense sessions in applied linguistics. Two focus group discussions provided the basis for developing this conceptual model which assumed ten functions for self-denigration, namely good manners, modesty, affability, altruism, assertiveness, diffidence, coercive self-deprecation, evasion, diplomacy, and flamboyance. These functions were used to design a 40-item questionnaire on the attitudes of applied linguists concerning self-denigration in defense sessions. The confirmatory factor analysis of the questionnaire indicated the predictive ability of the measurement model. The findings of this study suggest that self-denigration in doctoral defense sessions is the social representation of the participants' values, ideas and practices adopted as a negotiation strategy and a conflict management policy for the purpose of establishing harmony and maintaining resilience. This study has implications for doctoral students and academics and illuminates further research on self-denigration in other contexts.

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### Key words

academic discourse, politeness, self-denigration, grounded theory, dissertation defense.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The dissertation defense session is a mandatory oral examination in the higher education system of many countries. It is the culminating genre of doctoral education (Mežek & Swales, 2016). This is a communicative event which is held to assess the doctorateness of a dissertation by a panel of academics (Trafford & Leshem, 2009). In this criticism-prone context, the participants' main purpose is "the performing of academic personae, be they candidates, committee members, speakers or questioners" (Mežek & Swales, 2016: 362). In non-Anglophone contexts like Iran, where English is a foreign language (EFL), besides conforming to the academic rituals of the session, the participants observe their local cultural norms and values in dealing with the requirements of the setting.

An important feature of the talk in this context is that the participants, especially the examiners, "wear their scholarship sufficiently lightly so as not to alienate the other participants" by trying to be "careful and thoughtful human beings" (Mežek & Swales, 2016: 363). This characteristic feature of the defense is maintained by adopting different speech acts and politeness strategies such as self-denigration, which is conventionally perceived as an expression of good manners and deference (Gu, 1990; Kádár, 2010; Sharifian, 2017). However, due to the face-threatening context of the defense with all its evaluative comments, self-denigration seems to be more than a politeness strategy. Contemporary studies on self-denigration confirm novel functions of this phenomenon for which the existing models fail to account, such as seeking solidarity, seeking comfort, showing off, and managing interactional troubles (Kádár & Zhou, 2021; Speer, 2019).

In light of what has been mentioned above and the unprecedented variations in the functions of self-denigration, this phenomenon deserves more attention, particularly in EFL contexts where the participants are influenced by their local cultures. Therefore, the development of a more thorough model encompassing different functions of self-denigration and its affordances and constraints seems indispensable. As research on the discursive properties of defense sessions, particularly in non-Anglophone contexts, is scarce (Mežek & Swales, 2016), this study seeks to improve our theoretical understanding and empirical knowledge of the interactions in the challenging and controversial context of defense sessions in terms of self-denigration. This is accomplished using the grounded theory methodology, which is an "inductive, comparative, emergent, and open-ended approach" (Charmaz, 2014: 12) to data collection and analysis. It is a philosophical position which focuses "on the meanings ascribed by participants" and revolves around "the views, values, beliefs, feelings, assumption, and ideologies of individuals" (Creswell, 2012: 429). The methodology offers a set of guidelines for coding the data which can lead to a theory grounded in the data. In an attempt to develop a measurement model for self-denigration, the current study strives to answer the following questions:

- 1) How is self-denigration regarded by the defense session participants?
- 2) Under what conditions is self-denigration adopted? What is the significance of denigrating oneself in a defense session?
- 3) How do the participants think, feel, and act while they denigrate themselves in a defense session?
- 4) Is the constructed measurement model valid in terms of predicting self-denigration in defense sessions?

## 2. INTERACTIONS IN IRANIAN EFL DOCTORAL DEFENSE SESSIONS

A doctoral defense session has a different speech exchange system compared to ordinary conversations, which involve a predetermined sequence of events and different turn-taking practices providing the participants with different opportunities to take part in the interaction. Defense session interactions are amalgamations of cultural and professional practices (Izadi, 2016). Each session has its own interaction style. The opening interaction is a ceremonial speech in which the supervisor formally introduces the candidate, the dissertation and the reviewers, and welcomes the participants. The next stage is devoted to presenting a summary of the dissertation by the candidate who is expected to “proudly defend the document” using persuasive scholarly presentation (Swales, 2004: 169). The main part of a defense is the question and answer section with a critical academic style. Typically, following the rules of conversation, one examiner speaks at a time. The candidate might be invited to immediately respond to the comments raised by each examiner, or he/she might be asked to take down all the questions voiced by the examiners and subsequently respond to the questions in order. However, due to the argumentative nature of the session, the participants might also use overlap and interruption as a strategy for turn-taking because “turns at talk are emergent in the common sense of coming into being in the moment of inter-action” (Arundale, 2020: 46). Thus, for different purposes such as approving or rejecting what someone is saying, the participants may take up the turn without being nominated.

The question and answer section of the defense is the point at which the examiners exhibit their knowledge and expertise on the topic by “questioning, giving critical comments, disagreeing and calling attention to mistakes” (Don & Izadi, 2011: 3784). Accompanied by an exchange of pleasantries, the informal aspect of the interaction is used “to lubricate the wheels of the genre” and maintain “solidarity and cooperation” while the academic dimension is ascribed to the purpose-driven nature of the defense, which is “to explore seriously the relevant issues in both considerable depth and breadth” (Swales, 2004: 170). The defense proper is the most challenging part for the candidate, who is required to provide adequate explanations and justifications for the issues raised by the examiners to prove his/her “original contribution to knowledge” (Swales, 2004: 169).

Because of its criticism-generating nature, the interaction in this part evokes face-threatening acts that compel the participants to resort to different face maintaining and face supporting acts (Don & Izadi, 2011). In some instances, these circumstances lead to over-politeness, which is mainly concerned with the interpersonal aspect of the talk in a defense session. Over-politeness is one of the socially appropriate rhetorical strategies which seems to make Iranian defense sessions distinct from Western defenses. It is manifested in a situation where the participants insist on the observance of formalities and are excessively concerned with creating relational connections with their interlocutors. Compliments and compliment responses are occasions which are prone to over-politeness in an Iranian defense session because of the discrepancy between Persian societal roles and professional institutional roles (Izadi, 2016).

As the main goal of the defense is not to establish interpersonal relationships but to defend one's claims, adopting too much formality and ritual politeness called *taarof* in Persian might be perceived as irrelevant, inapposite, inadequate, and over-polite (Izadi, 2016). The cultural schema of *taarof* spreads more subjectivity and implicitness in Iranian defense session interactions as compared with Western defenses, in which the interactions are more objective and explicit. Still, this extreme politeness can be conceived of as conformity to the conventional norms of the setting and act as a relational ritual practice (Kádár, 2013) which is associated with the Iranian notion of politeness. Awareness of these cultural rhetorical differences is important as noncompliance with the norms might affect the final result and the participants' interpretation of the defense interactions.

The closing of the defense session consists of two parts, the evaluation segment and the results, usually conducted in Persian. The evaluation section, which comes under "occluded genres" (Swales, 2004: 18), is held privately by the supervisor, the advisor, the representative of the higher education department, and the examiners. The candidate and the other participants are asked to leave the room so that the committee members can evaluate the dissertation and decide on the score. Finally, in the results section, when everyone is invited back to the room, the supervisor announces the result.

### 3. SELF-DENIGRATION

Self-denigration is a politeness maxim performed by denigrating self or elevating others (Gu, 1990). Influenced by communities' diverse social values (Page, 2019), it has different meanings in different contexts and cultures (Kádár, 2019; Yu, 2013; Zare, 2016). It is usually equated with the cultural schema of modesty or humbleness (Sharifian, 2008), used to convey esteem or respect (Gu, 1990; Sharifian, 2017), and build rapport (Walkinshaw, Mitchell, & Subhan, 2019), particularly in Eastern cultures. It is also believed to be a strategy for receiving more compliments (Spencer-Oatey, Ng, & Dong, 2008). Self-denigration is a context-

sensitive and intersubjective phenomenon (Page, 2019). A number of situational factors determine the use of self-denigration such as “the relative status of individuals, degree of intimacy, presence or absence of evaluation concerns, prior interpersonal experiences, and different social settings” (Kim, 2014: 2). By way of example, one of the situations in which speakers instantiate self-denigration, particularly in Eastern cultures, is when someone receives a compliment or praise for an achievement, a performance, or success (Allami & Montazeri, 2012; Drbseh, 2015; Sharifian, 2005, 2008). Review of the literature in this area revealed a cline of self-denigration on which Western and Eastern cultures are plotted at the two extreme ends. However, regardless of the individuals’ cultures and languages, they observe different degrees and forms of self-denigration co-constructed based on the context, which is due to the dynamicity of the language and the intentions behind self-denigration. Furthermore, the focus on the boundaries of self-denigration has moved away from relatively narrow considerations and it is difficult to determine clear-cut borderlines between different aspects of self-denigration (interactional, dispositional, and situational). As a matter of fact, it seems that the above-mentioned dimensions can coexist in the underlying intentions behind denigration in an interaction. Therefore, taking the local and dynamic nature of the interaction into consideration, self-denigration in some situations might be more interactional, and in some other circumstances it might be more situational, or dispositional.

Changes in our views of globalization have also precipitated new patterns of self-denigration to occur. For instance, Eslami, Jabbari, and Kuo, (2019) and Kádár and Zhou (2021) showed that in Eastern cultures, besides the ceremonial function of showing deference and modesty, self-denigration fulfills a number of semi-conventional and unconventional socio-pragmatic functions. These novel functions are even expressed by newly-coined conventionalized self-denigrating expressions.

In his cross-cultural study of self-denigration in Persian and Australian English, Sharifian (2005) observed that, in Persian, the receivers of the praise do not accept the compliment; instead, they mainly attribute what is being complimented to others (God, family members, teachers, etc.), deny it, or simply downgrade it in order to be regarded as modest and enhance other’s face. This is mainly the case in face-to-face interactions, and compliments in Persian digital communications (e.g. on Facebook) seem to be used with a different intention, for instance, as a self-promotion strategy (Eslami et al., 2019). In Sharifian’s study, Australians, however, showed more tendency toward accepting compliments. Furthermore, they portrayed self-denigrating comments in these circumstances as dishonest, exaggerated, or ironic. In other studies, downgrading compliments on topics like possessions and character, for instance, was reported as the most frequent compliment response by Australians (Tang & Zhang, 2009). Therefore, even in the same cultural groups, people might have different interpretations of self-denigration because these cultural schemas “are represented in a distributed fashion across the minds in a cultural group” (Sharifian, 2003: 187).

A number of studies have explored the interactional aspect of self-denigration focusing on first language speakers like Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and English (Gu, 1990; Kádár, 2010; Kim, 2014; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2008; Yu, 2013; Zare, 2016). Analyzing a corpus of natural conversations of male university students, Zare (2016) studied self-denigrating humor or self-mockery and how it was responded to in Persian. The results indicated that self-denigrating humor was used as a response to a former humor or as a reaction to embarrassment for saving one's own or other's face, and to bring a shared amusement to the conversation. According to the results of this study, self-denigration functions as an interactional strategy to build a sense of in-group solidarity between the interlocutors.

Similar studies on self-denigration have focused on speakers of English as a second language (Sharifian, 2005, 2008; Walkinshaw et al., 2019). For example, self-denigration in lingua franca interactions of Asians has been investigated by Walkinshaw, Mitchell, and Subhan (2019). The study showed that Asians tend to self-denigrate in "informal, non-role-assigning, non-task-focused interactions" (p. 40) in their English as a lingua franca talk to manage the interpersonal relationships between the interlocutors. According to this study, self-denigration occurs as a first or a second turn in an interaction. The first turn self-denigration can be a stand-alone utterance or an utterance following a speaker's positive self-evaluation. As a second turn, self-denigration is believed to be a relational strategy used as a response to compliments, criticisms, or neutral statements and questions.

Based on the circumstances, the participants rely on their own pragmatic knowledge of the context and decide if an utterance is polite, impolite, or politic. Leech (2014) presumes the existence of a cline of politeness, and distinguishes between socio-pragmatic and pragma-linguistic politeness. The former refers to the interlocutors' pragmatic awareness of the situation while the latter is concerned with the participants' speech intentions and the linguistic items they use to express those intentions. It appears from the literature that the pragmatic boundaries of self-denigration have expanded. Different intentions might emerge as the participants are co-constructing meaning and actions in the course of the interaction. Therefore, taking the local and dynamic nature of the interaction into consideration, this study contributes to the field by exploring self-denigration in Iranian applied linguistics doctoral defense sessions, mainly by developing a scale for exploring the intentions of the defense participants and their perceptions of self-denigration.

## 4. METHOD

### 4.1. Data and participants

This mixed-methods study is part of a larger grounded theory research which focuses on self-denigration in the interactions of applied linguistics doctoral defense

sessions. In this study, applied linguistics is used as a general term covering the two disciplines of English language teaching and translation studies. “In a broad sense, applied linguistics is concerned with increasing understanding of the role of language in human affairs” (Wilkins, 1999: 7). It draws “from numerous outside sources, such as psychology, education, and sociology, and which embraces myriads of interrelated groups, ranging from TESOL, corpus linguistics, second language acquisition, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), to the sociology of English language teaching” (Hadley, 2017: 11). To gain insights into the “norms, values, and experiences” (Hughes & DuMont, 1993: 775) of defense session participants concerning self-denigration, two almost homogeneous focus group discussions (FG) were conducted (Table 1).

Focus groups	Participants	Total time (min)	Total number	Gender		Average age	Average years of teaching experience
				Males	Females		
FG1	Faculty Members (FM)	120	8	6	2	52.8	21.5
FG2	Doctoral graduates (DG)	90	7	6	1	42.5	17.2

**Table 1.** Focus group participants’ demographic information

The focus group discussions consisted of a small number of semi-structured questions designed based on Krueger and Casey’s (2015) categories, including:

1. Do you self-denigrate in your everyday life? How? Why?
2. What does self-denigration mean to you?
3. Do participants in the academic context of a defense session self-denigrate? How?
4. Who do you think tends to self-denigrate more in a defense session, the examiner, the supervisor/advisor, or the candidate? Why?
5. Do participants self-denigrate to achieve relational connection with or separation from their interlocutors? How?
6. Is there anything else you would like to say about why participants self-denigrate in a defense session?

To establish a comfortable and collegial atmosphere, and ensure the smooth flow of communication, the focus group discussions were conducted in Persian. The questions were originally raised in English and the participants were free to respond in Persian or English. The participants switched to English mainly when they wanted to use academic terminology. To promote active participation, the moderator used a variety of techniques, such as “probing silent members to join the discussion, asking follow-up questions, using open-ended or indirect techniques” (Galloway, 2020: 291). As a matter of fact, these questions functioned as a point of departure and the discussions led to more questions and discussions which helped the researchers formulate the codes and conceptual categories.

Questionnaire	Total number of respondents	Gender		Average age	PhD holders	PhD students	Examiners	Supervisors/ Advisors
		Males	Females					
Pilot	35	17 (48.57%)	18 (51.43%)	37.83	16 (45.71%)	19 (54.28%)	7 (20%)	8 (22.85%)
Final	218	123 (56.42%)	95 (43.58%)	40.11	136 (62.39%)	82 (37.61%)	61 (27.98%)	57 (26.14)

**Table 2.** Demographic information of questionnaire respondents

The findings of the focus groups were used to determine different aspects of self-denigration, conceptualize a model, and develop a questionnaire. The constructed questionnaire was administered twice. First, as a pilot questionnaire, it was validated by nine applied linguistics academics and then was sent to a representative sample of 100 applied linguistics doctoral students, recent graduates and scholars chosen randomly from the PhD members of the Teaching English Language and Literature Society of Iran (TELLSI) from whom only 35 members filled this questionnaire (Table 2). After collecting and analyzing the data, and determining the internal consistency of the questionnaire ( $\alpha = .92$ ) the main questionnaire was administered to a larger sample of respondents chosen through purposive sampling. To optimize the response rate, the final questionnaire was not only sent to the PhD holder and student members of TELLSI and applied linguistics academics but was also sent to Applied Linguistics, Teaching English as a Foreign Language, and Translation Studies social media groups and channels (i.e. WhatsApp and Telegram applications) asking doctoral students and graduates to fill out the form and forward it to others. After two weeks, 246 questionnaires were filled and returned, of which 28 questionnaires were excluded because they were completed by BA or MA holders and the remaining 218 questionnaires were analyzed.

#### 4.2. Procedure

The first step in analyzing the data was transcribing, coding, and analyzing the focus group discussions through conducting multiple levels of coding in a recursive fashion. The data from the two focus groups were constantly compared and contrasted with each other and with the researchers' field notes and memos (Charmaz, 2014). The detailed analysis of the discussions yielded valuable data regarding the meanings, characteristics, functions, and the linguistic and non-linguistic representations of self-denigration. These findings were categorized to construct a conceptual model.

Then, a 40-item questionnaire was designed based on the categories of the conceptual model to explore the attitudes of a wider population concerning self-denigration. Four items were designed based on the first four recurrent codes of each category. For a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), at least 3-4 indicators per factor or

function are necessary (Boomsma, 1985; Marsh & Hau, 1999). The questionnaire was administered in Persian to stay faithful to the focus group participants' original ideas and avoid any misunderstandings or communicative conflict that may occur due to translating the items into English. The respondents' attitudes were measured on a five-point Likert scale (on a continuum from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree').

To obtain specific responses and encourage the respondents to make a decision, even number scaling was used for the main questionnaire (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Therefore, based on the results of the pilot questionnaire and the comments received from the respondents, the undecided option was removed. The researchers tried to design impersonal items for the questionnaire as the aim of the survey was the identification of the functions. In addition, the questionnaire items did not address any of the defense session participants to avoid preconceptions and biases of the researchers and to decrease the level of threat or sensitivity which would provoke negative emotions or insincere responses from the participants.

The link for the online pilot questionnaire was emailed and texted to the representative sample (100 members of TELLSI). Thirty-five respondents completed the pilot questionnaire. Researchers suggest a sample of 30 participants as the "reasonable minimum recommendation for a pilot study where the purpose is preliminary survey or scale development" (Johanson & Brooks, 2009: 399). The final questionnaire was completed by 218 applied linguists. For CFA models with 3 or 4 indicators per factor, the sample size should not be less than a hundred; otherwise, minor effects might sometimes falsely indicate statistical significance (Boomsma, 1985; Marsh & Hau, 1999). In sample sizes less than 200, the chi-square may fail to reject an unfitting model while with a too large sample may falsely reject an adequate model (Gatignon, 2010; Singh, Junnarkar, & Kaur, 2016). Therefore, researchers suggest a sample between 200 (MacCallum & Austin, 2000) and 300 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013) respondents.

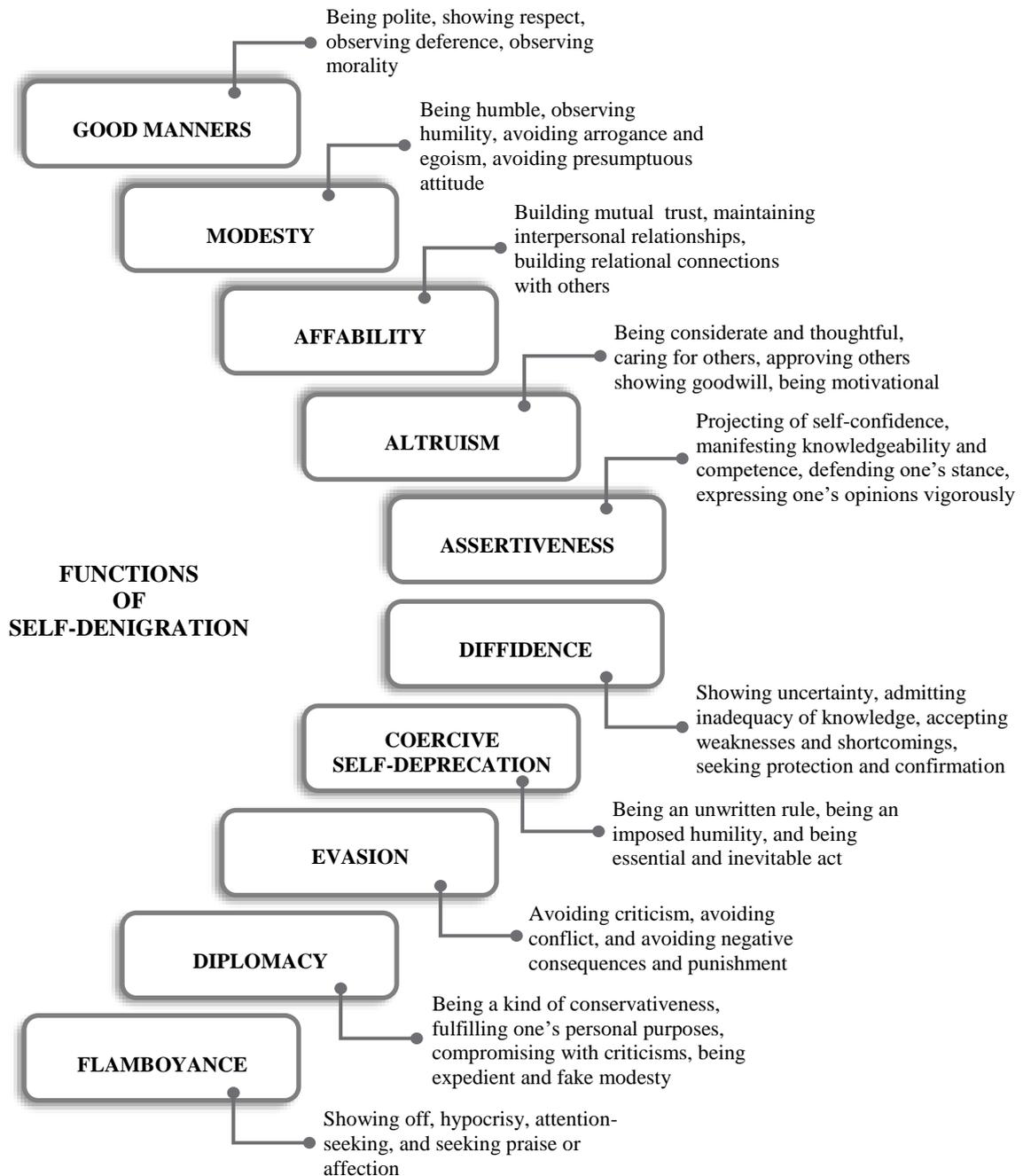
The construct validity and the internal consistency of the questionnaire were calculated. To confirm the scale and to see whether the results of the quantitative analysis of the questionnaire were consistent with the researchers' understanding of the construct in the conceptual model composite reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the measurement model were assessed. Multi-level confirmatory factor analysis was also conducted leading to the deletion of a number of items in the final analysis.

## **5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **5.1. Building a conceptual model**

In the formal context of an oral defense, each interlocutor has a specific hierarchical role to play (e.g. candidate, supervisor, examiner, etc.). As such, due to "conflicting face needs" (Hay, 2001: 74), the participants find themselves in a politeness

predicament wherein observing politeness turns into a challenging situation. According to the analysis of the focus group discussions in this study, self-denigration is one of the interactional strategies adopted by defense participants. As they argued, they self-denigrate based on the requirements of the session, their interlocutors, and their own institutional roles in the session.



**Figure 1.** Conceptualization of functions of self-denigration in doctoral defense sessions

The qualitative analysis of the data revealed that self-denigration functions as a social representation which is defined as a “system of values, ideas, and practices” of a community (Moscovici, 1973: xiii). The analysis of the focus group discussions resulted in a nuanced conceptualization of self-denigration. Figure 1 above shows the functions of self-denigration and provides examples of the focus groups’ participants’ attitudes for each of the functions. As the focus group participants stated, the borderlines between these intentions are hazy in that the defense session context is complicated and individuals might have different intentions to pursue in each circumstance. The hypothesized model in this context predicted a number of intentions or functions for self-denigration: *Good Manners, Modesty, Affability, Altruism, Assertiveness, Diffidence, Coercive Self-deprecation, Evasion, Diplomacy, and Flamboyance* (Figure 2).

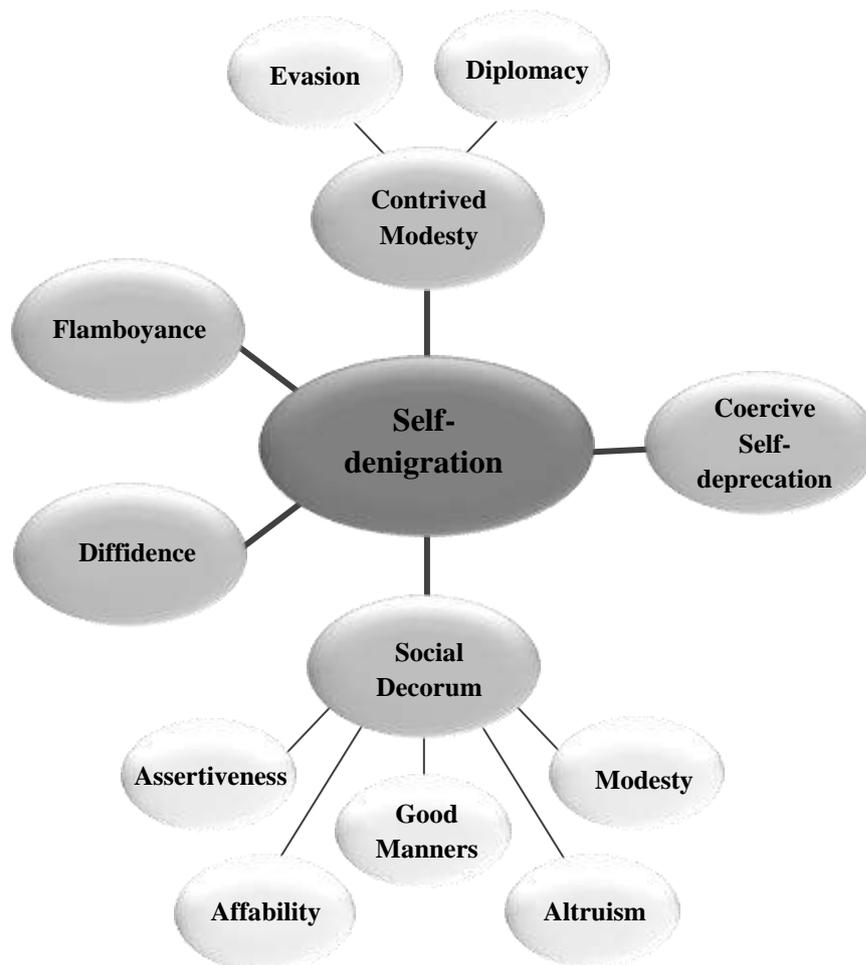


Figure 2. Conceptualization of self-denigration in doctoral defense sessions

Using the bottom-up approach, the participants' ideas were grouped and categorized based on their similarities and then assigned a title. For instance, codes denoting friendliness, which is the basis of building relational connections with others, were categorized under Affability while codes indicating goodwill, considerateness, and thoughtfulness were classified as Altruism. It is noteworthy that, as coding in grounded theory is done in a recursive and iterative manner, the codes were categorized and recategorized several times during the initial, focused, and theoretical phases of coding. The first five functions were sub-categorized under a more general function called *Social Decorum*. Evasion and Diplomacy were also considered as the two subsets of a higher category, that is *Contrived Modesty*. The following extracts from the interactions of the focus group discussions, with their English translations, led to the above-mentioned functions:

(1) Good Manners:

یه جورایی به همون تعارف و اینا شاید بشه ربطش داد چون ما ایرانیها خیلی عادت داریم تعارف بکنیم، شکسته نفسی بکنیم.  
[Somehow, we can relate it to comity and things like that because we Iranians are accustomed to comity and self-denigration.]

(2) Modesty:

افرادی که به نظرم توی فرهنگ ما از تواضع استفاده نمی‌کنن، فکر می‌کنم یه جورایی مغرور به نظر میان.  
[I think those who do not observe modesty in our culture seem to be kind of arrogant.]

(3) Affability:

ه دیگه interpersonal relationship این همون.  
[This is the same as the interpersonal relationship.]

(4) Altruism:

رعایتش می‌کنه. در واقع داره بهش لطف می‌کنه. کمکش می‌کنه.  
[He/she is being considerate of him/her. In fact, he/she is being kind to him/her. Helping him/her.]

(5) Assertiveness:

حقیقتاً آدم واقعا سر دوراهی قرار می‌گیره. به جایی شما در واقع می‌دونید اطلاع دارید .... کتابهای زیادی رو خوندید در همون حوزه. از یه جنبه دوست دارید که جواب رو بدید و از یه جنبه ی دیگه ... باید حواستون به حاشیه های کار که شاید از متن هم مهم تره باشه. یعنی حواستون باشه شما دارید به کی این جواب رو می‌دید.  
[You really find yourself at a crossroads. In some instances you are actually sure of your knowledge. You have read a lot of books in that area. On the one hand, you like to respond and on the other hand ... you have to consider the peripheral issues which might even be more important than the work. I mean you have to be careful who you are talking to.]

(6) Diffidence:

فکر می‌کنم به خود این epistemology شخص داور یا استاد راهنما هم بستگی داره. مثلا من دیدم آقای دکتر ... که بیشتر orientation qualitative داره و مسائل رو relative می‌بینه و knowledge رو context bound می‌بینه. و هر چقدر هم مطمئن باشه همیشه یه space می‌ذاره برای تردید و شک و درستی نقد طرف مقابل.  
[I think it also depends on the epistemology of the examiner or the supervisor. For example, I've seen Dr. ..., who mainly has a qualitative orientation and sees things as

relative and sees knowledge as context-bound. No matter how sure he is, he leaves some space for his own doubt and the accuracy of the other parties' criticism.]

(7) Coercive self-deprecation:

من احساس می کنم گاهی اوقات ممکنه این دیکته شده باشه و توصیه ای باشه. یعنی بعضی وقتها این توصیه بشه از سمت یک باز فردی در جایگاه بالاتر قرار داره.

[I feel that it can sometimes be dictated and advised. That is, it can be advised by someone who is in a higher position.]

(8) Evasion:

گاهی اوقات راهنما به دانشجو میگه هر چیزی که داور گفت بپذیر تایید کن تشکر کن و challenge ایجاد نکن. این بحث توصیه ای بودنش که واقعا ابزاری بودن این رویکرد رو حالا در اون شرایط مشخص که می تونه جلسه دفاع باشه رو نشون میده.

[Sometimes the supervisor tells the student to accept, confirm, and appreciate whatever the examiners suggest, and don't create a challenge. That it's a recommendation actually shows its instrumentality particularly in defense sessions.]

(9) Diplomacy:

سوپروایزر بیشتر این کار رو انجام می ده. چرا؟ چون به دو دلیل یکی اینکه پای سوپروایزر اینجا گیره به این دانشجو. و یکی دیگه هم اینکه دانشجو بلد نیست به قول دکتر چون command English نداره بلد نیست self-denigration خوب انجام بده. بنابراین استاد راهنما زحمتشو می کشه. میخواد نمره بگیره برای دانشجو.

[The supervisor self-denigrates more. Why? Because of two reasons. First, the supervisor is responsible for the student. And second, the student does not know how to self-denigrate. As Dr.... said because he/she doesn't have a good command of English and doesn't know how to self-denigrate appropriately; therefore, the supervisor takes the trouble. He/she wants to get a grade for the student.]

(10) Flamboyance:

خوب حالا ممکنه من هم نگاهم به استاد راهنما و دیگر همکاران باشه که اونجا نشستن که نمیخوام come across as snobbish هم اینکه خوب اون self-denigration رو انجام میدم و خودم رو ارتقا می دم. همون چیزی که الان گفتم. یعنی ضمن اینکه من knowledge این پایان نامه رو دارم، تواضع کافی رو هم دارم که حواسم باشه که خیلی خودمو proud نشون ندم.

[Well, I might be considerate of the supervisor or my other colleagues who are sitting there because I don't want to come across as snobbish, and well, I self-denigrate and promote myself as well. It is what I just said. That is, not only do I have the knowledge of this dissertation, I am modest and careful enough not to display myself as proud.]

In order to have a more reliable understanding of self-denigration and its functions in defense sessions and validate the hypothesized model, a questionnaire was constructed to make the measurement of the attitudes of a larger population of applied linguistics academics possible. The items of the questionnaire were chosen from the participants' responses in the focus group discussions. The meaning of each function is presented in Figure 1 above which was extracted from the careful categorization and classification of the codes.

## 5.2. Quantitative analysis: Validating the conceptual model

Two hundred and eighteen respondents completed the four-point Likert scale questionnaire. This section presents the validity of the hypothesized model using CFA. The aim was to determine the conformity of the conceptual model constructed in the qualitative phase of the study with the results of the quantitative data collection and analysis. In fact, the theoretical model was compared with the reality model to see how well the data fits.

Multi-level CFA was conducted in this study as some of the factors had subcategories with lower levels of abstraction. The first-order CFA dealt with the relationship between the lower level variables (the questionnaire responses) and the 10 functions of self-denigration. According to the results of the qualitative phase, seven factors were categorized under two main factors with a higher level of abstraction, namely, Social Decorum and Contrived Modesty for which a second-order CFA was conducted. Second-order CFA was performed because in this model some of the factors or lower level variables are themselves latent variables. As said earlier, the first five factors were categorized under Social Decorum as their higher-order latent variable. Similarly, Evasion and Diplomacy were regarded as the subcategories of Contrived Modesty. Therefore, these two factors were assessed separately through conducting a second-order CFA. The third-order CFA assessed the relationship between the five main functions of self-denigration (Social Decorum, Diffidence, Flamboyance, Contrived Modesty, and Coercive Self-deprecation) and evaluated the whole model. The following sections present the assessment of the measurement models and the structural models at different levels.

### 5.2.1. First-order CFA

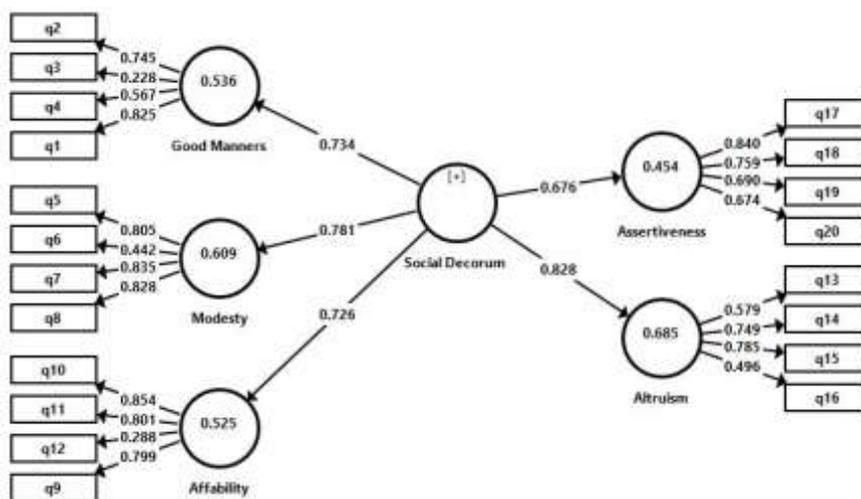
To identify the degree of accuracy of the components and the relationship between the indicators and the latent variables, the first-order CFA was performed. In the first-order CFA, if the absolute values of the factor loadings of each of the indicators corresponding to the hidden variable are greater than .7, the measurement model will be homogenous. Some scholars suggest deleting indicators with factor loadings less than .40 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), or .32 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). If the loading value is less than .70, the number of the indicators are few, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct is greater than .50, then the indicators can be retained (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). It is necessary to see if the indicators provide a consistent and precise measure of the construct. To that end, the factors were divided into three sections, Social Decorum with its latent variables, Contrived Modesty with its subcategories, and the rest of the factors with no subsets.

If the loadings of each factor with its construct (t-value) is positive and greater than 1.96 at .05 level and greater than 2.58 at .000 level, the indicator can measure the latent variable precisely (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As can be seen in Table 3, all the items except items 3 and 12, for the measurement model of Social Decorum

showed acceptable factor loadings. To put it in another way, the t-value corresponding to each factor loading is higher than its critical value which equals 2.58 at 0.000 level. As a result, it can be inferred that these indicators have the appropriate precision for the measurement of the latent components of Social Decorum, and hence can be used in the final analysis (Figures 3 and 4).

Factor	Item	Loading	t-value	Sig	Result
Good manners	Q1	.82	9.69	.000	✓
	Q2	.74	7.31	.000	✓
	Q3	.22	1.36	.172	X
	Q4	.56	4.78	.000	✓
Modesty	Q5	.80	26.83	.000	✓
	Q6	.44	4.03	.000	✓
	Q7	.83	22.46	.000	✓
	Q8	.82	27.68	.000	✓
Affability	Q9	.79	20.90	.000	✓
	Q10	.85	32.99	.000	✓
	Q11	.80	24.39	.000	✓
Altruism	Q12	.28	2.16	.055	X
	Q13	.57	7.48	.000	✓
	Q14	.74	16.89	.000	✓
	Q15	.78	18.27	.000	✓
Assertiveness	Q16	.49	3.69	.000	✓
	Q17	.84	32.23	.000	✓
	Q18	.75	13.64	.000	✓
	Q19	.69	11.45	.000	✓
	Q20	.67	11.21	.000	✓

**Table 3.** Factor loadings and t-values of the measurement model of Social Decorum



**Figure 3.** Factor loadings of the measurement model of Social Decorum

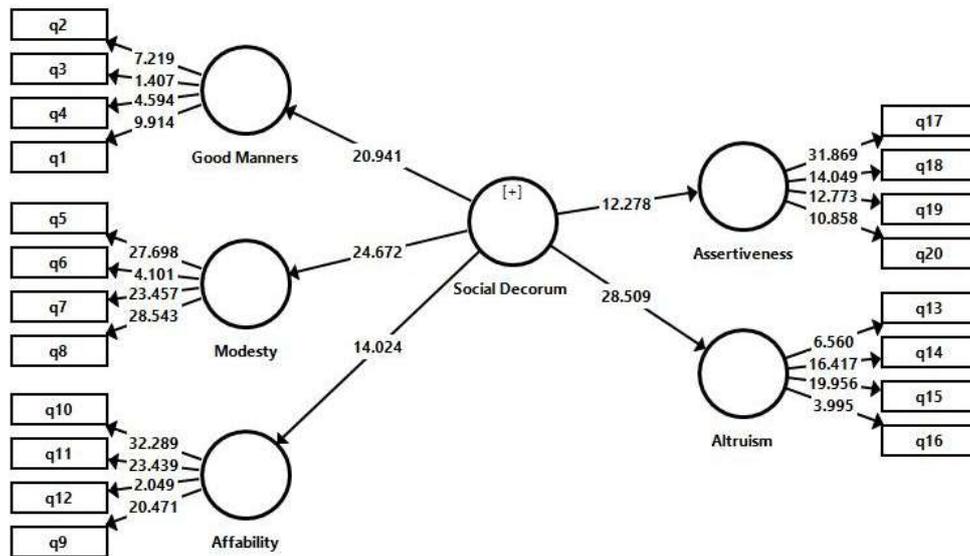


Figure 4. T-values of the measurement model of Social Decorum

Similar to the first factor, the measurement model of Contrived Modesty was assessed separately using first-order CFA. As can be seen in Table 4, all the items except item 31 showed acceptable factor loadings for Contrived Modesty. Therefore, all the other indicators can be kept in the final analysis because they enjoy the appropriate precision for the measurement of the latent variables (Figures 5 and 6).

Factor	Item	Loading	t-value	Sig	Result
Evasion	Q29	.85	36.82	.000	✓
	Q30	.85	41.48	.000	✓
	Q31	.18	1.52	.050	X
	Q32	.79	22.19	.000	✓
Diplomacy	Q33	.77	22.29	.000	✓
	Q34	.75	21.61	.000	✓
	Q35	.75	16.61	.000	✓
	Q36	.77	23.76	.000	✓

Table 4. Factor loadings and t-values of the measurement model of Contrived Modesty

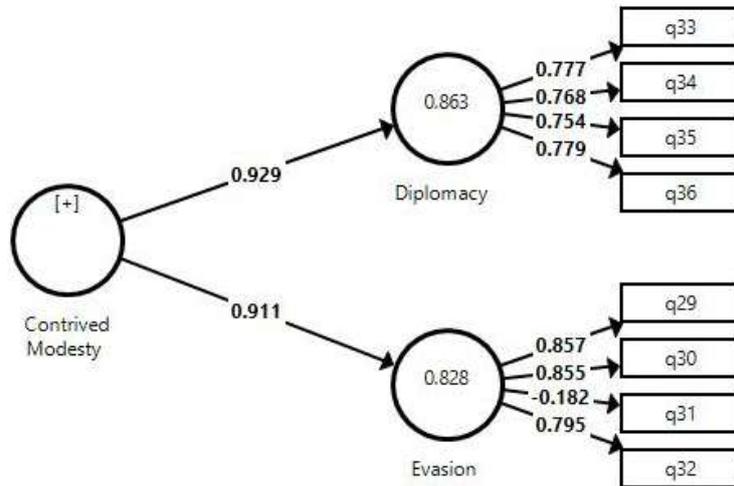


Figure 5. Factor loadings of the measurement model of Contrived Modesty

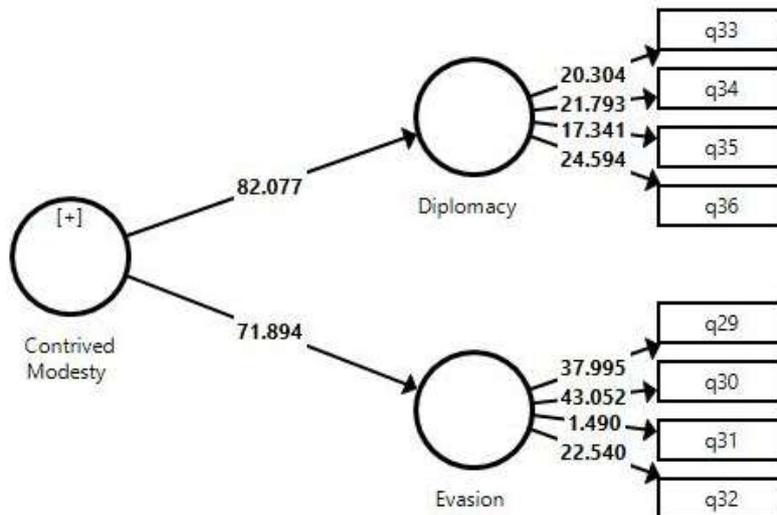
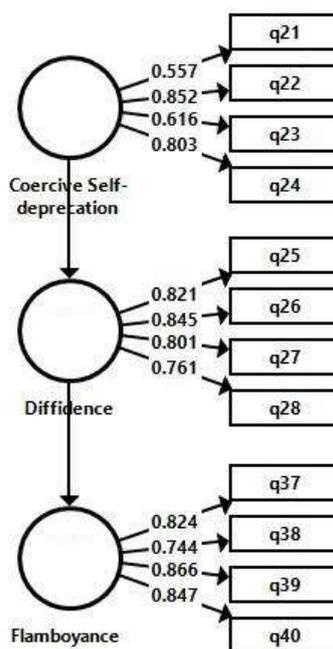


Figure 6. T-values of the measurement model of Contrived Modesty

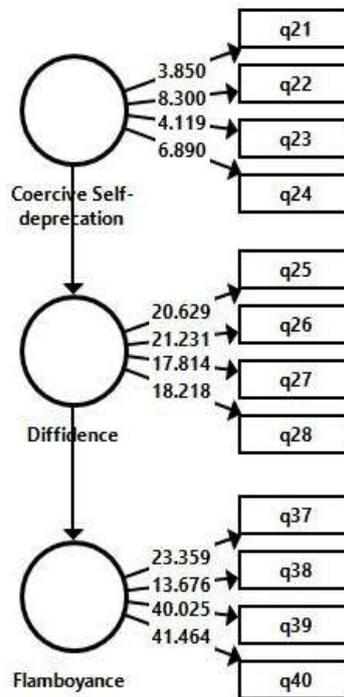
The first-order CFA of the remaining dimensions of self-denigration, namely Coercive Self-deprecation, Diffidence, and Flamboyance, confirmed the acceptability of the indicators. Hence, according to the factor loadings and the t-values shown in Table 5, all the items can be retained in the final analysis as they have the acceptable precision for the measurement of the latent variables. These values are also shown in Figures 7 and 8.

Factor	Item	Loading	t-value	Sig	Result
Coercive Self-deprecation	Q21	.55	3.98	.000	✓
	Q22	.85	7.32	.000	✓
	Q23	.61	3.97	.000	✓
	Q24	.83	7.73	.000	✓
Diffidence	Q25	.82	19.20	.000	✓
	Q26	.84	18.78	.000	✓
	Q27	.80	17.98	.000	✓
	Q28	.76	16.66	.000	✓
Flamboyance	Q37	.82	22.73	.000	✓
	Q38	.74	13.32	.000	✓
	Q39	.86	38.69	.000	✓
	Q40	.84	40.56	.000	✓

**Table 5.** Factor loadings and t-values of the measurement model of Coercive Self-deprecation, Diffidence, and Flamboyance



**Figure 7.** Factor loadings of the measurement model of Coercive Self-deprecation, Diffidence, and Flamboyance



**Figure 8.** T-values of the measurement model of Coercive Self-deprecation, Diffidence, and Flamboyance

Given the above, according to the results of the first-order CFA, only three indicators (i.e. 3, 12, and 31) did not have acceptable factor loadings and had to be considered for deletion from the hypothesized model of self-denigration in the final instrument (see the Appendix). The removed indicators are as follows:

3. Self-denigration in defense sessions is a cultural issue and is mainly performing social ritual
12. The purpose of self-denigration in defense sessions might be complimenting an interlocutor
31. Self-denigration in defense sessions is a kind of patience

In addition to CFA, composite reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the measurement model were also assessed. Composite reliability was used for assessing the internal consistency reliability of the model. Composite reliability measures greater than .70 are indicative of acceptable reliability. Its values (Dillon–Goldstein’s rho) for all the variables associated with the components of self-denigration were found to be greater than the criterion, so the reliability of the measurement model was confirmed (Table 6).

To verify the convergent validity of the variables, the AVE coefficient was calculated. In order to be a valid model, the lowest 50% of the variance from the

observable variables should be taken by the latent constructs in the model. According to the estimated values of the index given in Table 6, all of the AVE values exceeded 0.50, so convergent validity was confirmed and the measurement model enjoyed good internal consistency.

Factor	Composite Reliability	AVE
Good Manners	.70	.58
Modesty	.82	.52
Affability	.79	.65
Altruism	.75	.50
Assertiveness	.83	.65
Coercive Self-deprecation	.80	.51
Diffidence	.88	.65
Evasion	.74	.59
Diplomacy	.85	.53
Flamboyance	.89	.67

**Table 6.** The composite reliability and AVE values of the structural model

The discriminant validity of the factors was calculated using Fornell-Larcker criterion test by the examination of the cross-loadings. According to the Fornell-Larcker index, the square root of the AVE for each latent construct should be higher than the correlations of other latent variables. As illustrated in the following tables, the square root of AVE for each latent variable surpassed the maximum correlation of the latent variables, implying the satisfactory discriminant validity of the measurement model for all the factors (Tables 7, 8, and 9).

Factor	Affability	Altruism	Assertiveness	Good Manners	Modesty
Affability	.80				
Altruism	.59	.70			
Assertiveness	.37	.44	.80		
Good manners	.39	.48	.37	.76	
Modesty	.35	.57	.35	.58	.74

**Table 7.** The results of the Fornell-Larcker index for the discriminant validity of the structural model of Social Decorum

Factor	Diplomacy	Evasion
Diplomacy	.77	
Evasion	.69	.73

**Table 8.** The results of the Fornell-Larcker index for the discriminant validity of the structural model of Contrived Modesty

Factor	Coercive Self-deprecation	Diffidence	Flamboyance
Coercive Self-deprecation	.71		
Diffidence	.30	.80	
Flamboyance	.29	.48	.82

**Table 9.** The results of the Fornell-Larcker index for the discriminant validity of the structural model of Coercive Self-deprecation, Diffidence, and Flamboyance

### 5.2.2. Second-order CFA

As stated earlier, seven factors were teased out under the two latent variables of Social Decorum and Contrived Modesty for which a second-order CFA was conducted. Second-order factor analysis is performed because in this model the lower level variables are themselves latent variables which in turn affect the observable variables (i.e. the indicators). The first step in this stage is assessing the quality of the measurement model which was calculated by the cross-validated communality (CV Com) index. In fact, this index measures the ability of the path model in predicting observable variables through their corresponding hidden variable values. Positive CV Com value indicates an appropriate reflective measurement model. As is seen in Table 10, the CV Com values for the latent variables are positive and high which confirm the quality of the measurement model of both factors.

Factors		CV Com
Social Decorum	Good Manners	.45
	Modesty	.55
	Affability	.40
	Altruism	.53
	Assertiveness	.35
Contrived Modesty	Evasion	.48
	Diplomacy	.35

**Table 10.** The cross-validated commonality index of the measurement model of Social Decorum and Contrived Modesty

As Table 11 demonstrates, the factor loading values in the second-order factor analysis are desirable. The composite reliability values indicate high internal consistency of the variables. The AVE value also confirms the convergent validity of the model. To measure the relationship between the variance explained for the latent variable with the total variance, the coefficient of determination or  $R^2$  which is bound between 0.0 and 1.0 was calculated. Values which are closer to 1.0 are more

desirable. A value of 1.0 indicates a perfect fit, and is thus a highly reliable model for future forecasts. R<sup>2</sup> values equal to .19, .33, and .67 are described as weak, moderate, and substantial, respectively. The R<sup>2</sup> values for the factors of Social Decorum were found to be good in the estimated model (Table 11).

Factor	Loading	t-value	Sig	R <sup>2</sup>	AVE	Pc	Alpha
Good manners	.73	22.95	.000	.53	.57	.875	.872
Modesty	.78	24.45	.000	.60			
Affability	.72	14.92	.000	.52			
Altruism	.83	27.04	.000	.68			
Assertiveness	.67	13.15	.000	.45			

**Table 11.** The results of the second-order CFA of Social Decorum

The quality of the structural model was evaluated using cross-validated redundancy (CV Red) coefficient in which values greater than 0 show that the observed values are well-constructed, indicating the predictive ability of the structural model. In other words, if the CV Red values are positive, the structural model enjoys satisfactory quality. CV Red values equal to .02, .15, and .35 are described as weak, moderate, and substantial, respectively. The CV Red coefficients in all variables are positive and greater than .35 which indicate high quality of the structural model (i.e., good manners = .38, modesty = .45, affability = .37, altruism = .46, and assertiveness = .35).

The second-order CFA was also performed for Contrived Modesty. As is shown in Table 12, the factor loading values in the second-order CFA of Contrived Modesty were also desirable.

Factor	Loading	t-value	Sig	R <sup>2</sup>	AVE	Pc	Alpha
Diplomacy	.92	.79	.000	.86	.57	.85	.79
Evasion	.91	.70	.000	.82			

**Table 12.** The results of the second order CFA of Contrived Modesty

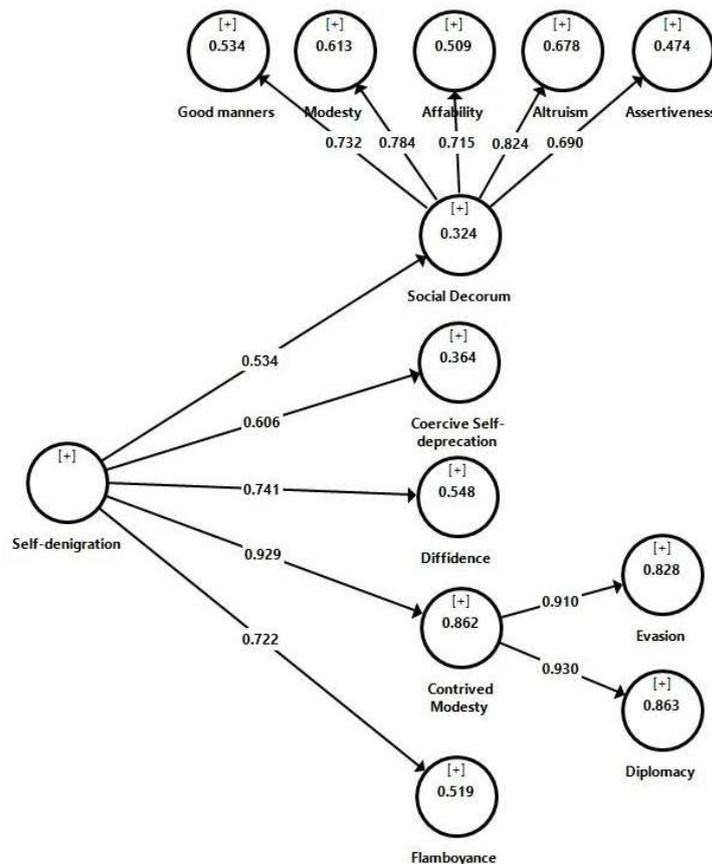
### 5.2.3. Third-order CFA

The third-order CFA assessed the relationship between the five main functions of self-denigration. The following are the values of factor loadings and the t-tests of the third-order CFA. As indicated in Table 13, the factor loadings were adequate. The high values of composite reliability and Cronbach’s Alpha indicate acceptable internal consistency. The value of AVE also confirms the convergent reliability of the total model. The R<sup>2</sup> values for each of the factors of the model were also at appropriate levels (Figures 9 and 10).

Factor	Loading	t-value	Sig	R <sup>2</sup>	AVE	Pc	Alpha
Social Decorum	.53	3.68	.000	.32	.52	.85	.72
Coercive Self-deprecation	.60	12.91	.000	.36			
Diffidence	.74	22.87	.000	.54			
Contrived Modesty	.92	61.64	.000	.86			
Flamboyance	.72	16.55	.000	.51			

**Table 13.** The results of the third-order CFA of the total model of Self-denigration

The CV Red coefficient for the model was also calculated to determine the quality of the structural model. The CV Red coefficient in all variables was close to or greater than .35 which indicated good quality of the conceptualized model (i.e., social decorum = .35, coercive self-deprecation = .37, diffidence = .32, contrived modesty = .39, flamboyance = .33). The loadings and the t-values of the factors of the total model are shown in Figures 9 and 10.



**Figure 9.** Factor loadings of the total model of Self-denigration

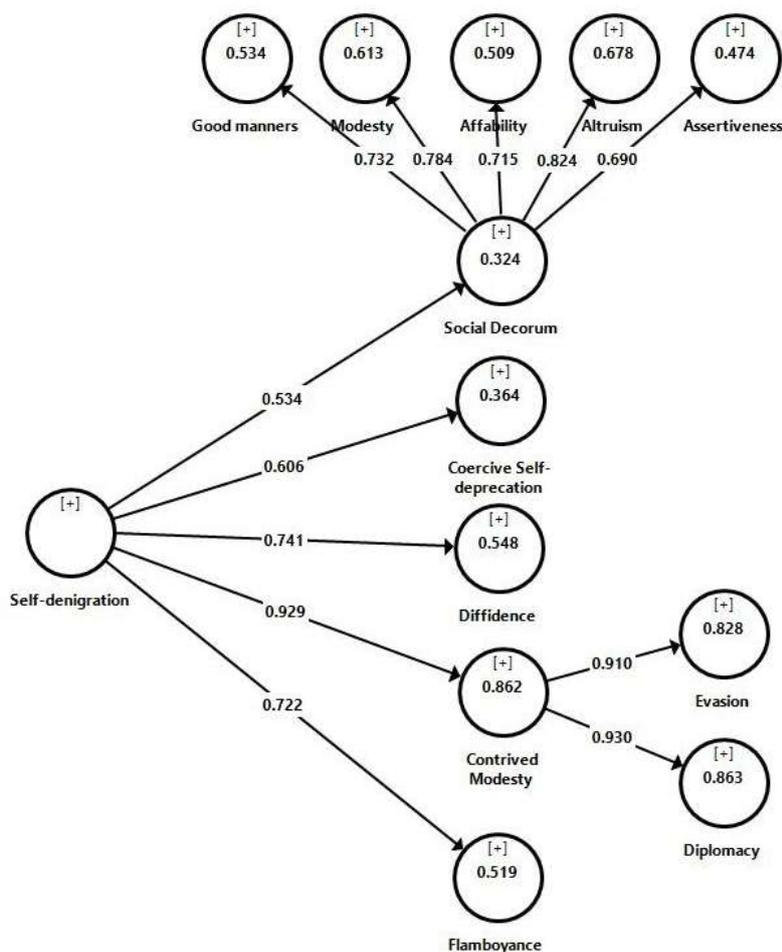


Figure 10. T-values of the total model of Self-denigration

## 6. CONCLUSION

This mixed-methods research investigated the perceptions of applied linguistics academics toward self-denigration. The evaluation of the attitudes of the defense session participants is important in that it raises the discourse communities' pragmatic awareness with respect to the norms, conventions, and expectations of this context. This consciousness-raising is particularly beneficial for EFL learners in the criticism-generating and conflict-prone context of a defense session. The qualitative aspect of this study allowed the in-depth exploration of the ideas and experiences of the applied linguists. What emerged from the qualitative analysis of the data is that self-denigration in defense sessions is the social representation of the participants' values, ideas, metaphors, beliefs, and practices which can be traced within social constructionism and symbolic interactionism. Because as was implied in the focus group participants' ideas, almost in all instances, the purpose of self-

denigration is “to establish social order, orient participants and enable communication among members of groups and communities” (Sammut & Howarth, 2014: 1800).

The results of the validation of the questionnaire confirmed that the instrument is suitable for evaluating the attitudes and perceptions of applied linguists concerning the meanings and functions of self-denigration in doctoral defense sessions. All the functions and indicators were found to be valid and reliable except the items representing self-denigration as social ritual, complimenting, or patience. Considering the importance of these three concepts in Iranian culture, further research is certainly needed to investigate these notions and the potential reasons for their rejection by the questionnaire respondents.

As the boundaries of self-denigration have moved away from relatively narrow considerations of showing deference and modesty (Kádár & Zhou, 2021), more research on self-denigration would be desirable. The questionnaire developed in this study can be used to explore other contexts where hierarchical power relations affect the behaviors of the individuals and make the distinguishing between polite and politic tricky. Furthermore, it is a question of future research to investigate self-denigration in other disciplines, languages, and other settings such as job interviews, television interviews, and doctoral program entrance interviews to test the fitness of the model proposed in this study to see how it might apply to those settings.

[Paper submitted 11 Aug 2021]

[Revised version received 9 Nov 2021]

[Revised version accepted for publication 18 Nov 2021]

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### Appendix

#### The validated questionnaire on self-denigration in Applied Linguistics doctoral defense sessions

Indicators	
1	The purpose of self-denigration in defense sessions is being polite, observing deference, and observing morality.
2	The purpose of self-denigration in defense sessions is respecting the knowledge and expertise of the examiners, supervisor, or advisor.
3	Self-denigration in defense sessions is used for saving self and other's face.
4	Self-denigration in defense sessions is showing appreciation.
5	Self-denigration in defense sessions indicates obedience and less presumptuous attitude.
6	Self-denigration in defense sessions indicates lack of arrogance and egoism.
7	Self-denigration in defense sessions indicates modesty and humility.
8	The purpose of self-denigration in defense sessions is building relational connection with others.
9	Self-denigration in defense sessions is used to build mutual trust.
10	Self-denigration in defense sessions is used to maintain interpersonal relationships.
11	Self-denigration in defense sessions indicates considerateness and caring for others.
12	Self-denigration in defense sessions is goodwill.
13	Self-denigration in defense sessions might be used for motivating others.
14	Self-denigration in defense sessions might be used for approving others.
15	Self-denigration in defense sessions is the projection of self-confidence.
16	Self-denigration in defense sessions is the manifestation of knowledgeability and competence.
17	Self-denigration in defense sessions might be used as a polite defense of one's stance and personal opinions.
18	Self-denigration in defense sessions might be a technique for expressing one's opinions vigorously.
19	Self-denigration in defense sessions is an unwritten rule.
20	Self-denigration in defense sessions is imposed humility.
21	Self-denigration in defense sessions is essential and inevitable.
22	Self-denigration in defense sessions is recommended.
23	Self-denigration in defense sessions might be a sign of uncertainty.
24	Self-denigration in defense sessions might indicate admitting inadequacy of knowledge.
25	Self-denigration in defense sessions might indicate accepting weaknesses and shortcomings.
26	Self-denigration in defense sessions might indicate seeking protection and confirmation.
27	Due to the nature of the defense session, self-denigration in defense sessions is used to avoid criticism.
28	The purpose of self-denigration in defense sessions, due to the critical nature of the defense session, is avoiding conflict.
29	Self-denigration in defense sessions is used to avoid negative consequences and punishment.
30	Self-denigration in defense sessions is a kind of conservativeness.
31	Self-denigration in defense sessions might be used for fulfilling one's personal purposes like getting a score.
32	Self-denigration in defense sessions is used to compromise with criticisms.
33	Self-denigration in defense sessions is expedient and might be fake.
34	The purpose of self-denigration in defense sessions might be showing off.
35	The purpose of self-denigration in defense sessions might be hypocrisy.
36	The purpose of self-denigration in defense sessions might be attention-seeking.
37	The purpose of self-denigration in defense sessions might be seeking praise and affection.