



The Dynamics of Self-Actualization Among Working Women Pursuing Higher Education: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract: *This study aims to explore the meaning of self-actualization among women who simultaneously undertake the roles of worker and university student. Employing an interpretative phenomenological approach, the study involved four early adult women who were actively employed while pursuing higher education. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using reflective thematic analysis to identify the essence of participants' lived experiences. The findings reveal that self-actualization is understood not as a final achievement but as an ongoing process of negotiation between professional demands, academic aspirations, and personal identity formation. Participants encountered challenges such as time conflicts, physical exhaustion, and emotional fluctuations, which were interpreted as integral to personal growth. Self-regulation, personal efficacy, and goal orientation emerged as central factors in sustaining commitment to capacity development. The study indicates that self-actualization among working women pursuing higher education is constructed through contextual, reflective, and adaptive processes, positioning it as an existential experience continuously negotiated within complex social circumstances.*

Keywords: *Self-Actualization; Working Women Students; Phenomenology; Self-Regulation; Identity Negotiation*

Introduction

Women's participation in higher education and the professional workforce has increased substantially over the past two decades, including in Indonesia. This shift reflects not only expanded access to educational resources but also evolving social aspirations and identity constructions among women in public life. An increasing number of women simultaneously undertake professional employment while pursuing higher education, whether to enhance career mobility, expand intellectual competence, or secure long-term socioeconomic stability. While this dual engagement opens opportunities for growth, it also generates layered demands that require continuous negotiation of time, energy, and psychological resources.

National statistics indicate steady growth in female participation across educational levels, with enrollment rates in several age groups reaching parity with or surpassing those of males (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2023). Greater access to higher education has also contributed to increased representation of women in professional sectors. However, structural participation does not automatically eliminate entrenched sociocultural

expectations. In many Asian contexts, traditional gender norms continue to position women as primary bearers of domestic and relational responsibilities. As a result, women who pursue simultaneous academic and professional roles often navigate implicit social expectations alongside institutional demands.

Research on dual-role engagement consistently highlights the psychological strain associated with work–study conflict. Simultaneous commitment to occupational and academic responsibilities may lead to role overload, emotional exhaustion, and diminished well-being (Horta, Feng, & Santos, 2022). Most empirical investigations frame this condition primarily as a source of stress or risk, emphasizing negative outcomes such as burnout or performance decline. While these findings are important, they provide only a partial understanding of the phenomenon. Less attention has been given to how women interpret, construct, and integrate these demanding experiences into their broader sense of self and personal growth.

From a humanistic psychological perspective, the pursuit of growth and fulfillment is often conceptualized through the notion of self-actualization. Maslow (1943) described self-actualization as the realization of personal potential, situated at the highest level of a hierarchical model of needs. Similarly, Rogers (1963) proposed the concept of the actualizing tendency, emphasizing an inherent motivation toward growth and psychological integration. However, classical humanistic formulations have been criticized for their individualistic orientation and limited sensitivity to sociocultural structures. In contemporary contexts, self-actualization cannot be fully understood as a static or purely hierarchical achievement. Rather, it may be more accurately conceptualized as a dynamic, contextually embedded process shaped by social expectations, institutional constraints, and identity negotiations.

Recent developments in identity theory and social psychology suggest that individuals actively construct and negotiate their identities within multiple role systems. Role theory posits that occupying multiple roles may generate both strain and enrichment, depending on how individuals interpret and manage role expectations. Identity negotiation perspectives further emphasize that individuals continuously reconcile internal aspirations with external social validation in order to maintain a coherent sense of self. Within this framework, working women who pursue higher education are not merely striving to “achieve” self-actualization; they are actively constructing narratives that integrate professional ambition, academic commitment, and personal meaning.

Psychological resources such as self-efficacy also play a critical role in this process. Bandura (1977) conceptualized self-efficacy as a belief in one’s capability to organize and execute actions required to manage prospective situations. In dual-role contexts, self-efficacy influences persistence, emotional regulation, and the interpretation of challenges. Individuals with strong efficacy beliefs are more likely to frame demanding circumstances as opportunities for mastery rather than as insurmountable threats. Thus, self-actualization in the context of work–study engagement may emerge not solely from objective achievement but from the subjective interpretation of effort, struggle, and growth.

Despite the growing body of research on women's career development and work-study dynamics, most prior studies rely on quantitative designs that examine relationships between predefined variables. While such approaches are valuable for identifying generalizable patterns, they often overlook the nuanced and lived dimensions of personal meaning. Specifically, limited research has explored how women subjectively experience and interpret the process of pursuing self-development while simultaneously managing professional and academic responsibilities. The experiential dimension of how self-actualization is negotiated under conditions of role multiplicity remains underexplored, particularly within sociocultural contexts where gendered expectations continue to shape life trajectories.

A phenomenological approach offers a valuable framework for addressing this gap. By focusing on lived experience, phenomenology seeks to uncover how individuals perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their realities. Rather than treating self-actualization as a measurable endpoint, this approach allows for an exploration of how it is constructed through reflection, adaptation, and interaction within complex social environments. Understanding the lived experiences of working women who pursue higher education may therefore illuminate how growth, strain, and identity integration coexist within the same developmental trajectory.

Accordingly, the present study aims to explore the meaning of self-actualization among women who simultaneously engage in professional work and higher education through a phenomenological lens. By centering participants' narratives, this research seeks to contribute to contemporary discussions on self-actualization as a socially embedded and dynamically negotiated process. Furthermore, it aims to enrich scholarship in women's psychology and early adult identity development by highlighting how dual-role engagement functions not merely as a source of strain, but also as a context for reflective growth and identity construction in modern society.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, and seeks to explore how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Unlike descriptive phenomenology, IPA emphasizes the interpretative process through which researchers engage in a double hermeneutic: participants attempt to make sense of their experiences, while the researcher interprets that meaning-making process.

The choice of IPA was considered appropriate given the study's objective to understand how working women pursuing higher education construct and negotiate the meaning of self-actualization within the context of dual roles. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of subjective experiences rather than generalizable patterns.

Participants

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research objectives. Inclusion criteria were as follows:

1. women in early adulthood;
2. actively employed for a minimum of two years;
3. currently enrolled in or having recently completed higher education while working simultaneously.

Early adulthood was selected as the developmental stage of focus because it represents a critical period for identity formation, autonomy development, and long-term career orientation (Erikson, 1968). Four participants met the criteria and voluntarily agreed to participate. IPA prioritizes depth over breadth; therefore, a small, homogeneous sample is considered methodologically appropriate.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Age	Dual Roles	City
IN	27 Tahun	IT Consultant & Master's Student	Yogyakarta
HK	24 Tahun	Internal Auditor & Professional Accounting Student	Jakarta
SI	33 Tahun	School Academic Coordinator & Master's Student	Yogyakarta
EJ	26 Tahun	Private Sector Employee & Master's Student	Jakarta

Source: Primary data, processed by the authors (2025)

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted individually with each participant. The semi-structured format enabled flexibility while ensuring alignment with the study's focus on experiences of dual roles, perceived challenges, personal growth, and meaning-making processes.

Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Field notes were taken to capture contextual observations and non-verbal cues that enriched interpretative analysis. All recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participants' narratives.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed following the systematic steps of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009):

1. Reading and Re-reading: The researcher immersed themselves in each transcript to gain familiarity with the participant's narrative.
2. Initial Noting: Exploratory comments were made, focusing on descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual aspects of the text.
3. Developing Emergent Themes: Emergent themes were identified by condensing detailed notes into concise statements capturing essential psychological meanings.

4. Searching for Connections Across Themes: Themes were clustered based on conceptual similarity and organized into superordinate themes.
5. Moving to the Next Case: Each case was analyzed individually to preserve idiographic commitment before cross-case analysis.
6. Looking for Patterns Across Cases: Finally, patterns and divergences across participants were examined to construct shared thematic structures while respecting individual nuances.

This analytic process enabled the identification of core themes reflecting how self-actualization was interpreted and negotiated within dual-role contexts.

Trustworthiness

To enhance credibility and rigor, several strategies were implemented. First, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary thematic interpretations with participants to confirm resonance with their lived experiences. Second, reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the research process to acknowledge and bracket the researcher's assumptions, in line with phenomenological principles. Third, an audit trail documenting analytic decisions was preserved to ensure transparency and dependability.

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and informed consent was secured from all participants. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were emphasized throughout the study.

Result and Discussion

Reframing Self-Actualization in the Context of Dual Roles

This study aimed to explore how women who simultaneously occupy professional and academic roles construct and experience self-actualization. The phenomenological analysis revealed that self-actualization in this context is not a static endpoint in a hierarchical progression of needs, but rather a dynamic, negotiated, and contextually embedded developmental process. Three integrative themes emerged: (1) Existentially Anchored Motivation, (2) Paradoxical Resilience Under Role Strain, and (3) Self-Regulatory Agency as a Mediating Structure of Role Integration.

Rather than treating findings as isolated narratives, the discussion below situates participants' lived experiences within broader theoretical and empirical frameworks, particularly humanistic psychology, role theory, self-determination theory, and contemporary research on women's career development.

Existentially Anchored Motivation: Beyond Instrumental Achievement

Maslow (1943; 1970) conceptualized self-actualization as the realization of one's fullest potential. However, subsequent critiques argue that Maslow's hierarchy is often misinterpreted as rigidly sequential, whereas growth needs can co-exist with deficiency pressures (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976). The present findings support this dynamic interpretation.

For IN, initial motivation to pursue a master's degree was instrumental-professional legitimacy to support organizational restructuring. Yet over time, her narrative shifted toward intrinsic intellectual curiosity. This mirrors Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which distinguishes between controlled motivation and autonomous motivation. IN's transition suggests internalization, where external demands gradually align with intrinsic interests, reinforcing sustained engagement.

HK's aspiration to establish an independent audit firm reflects future-oriented identity construction. Markus and Nurius' (1986) "possible selves" framework helps explain this phenomenon: individuals regulate present behavior in accordance with envisioned future identities. HK's education functions as an anticipatory investment in her professional self-concept. Notably, she emphasized the value of striving itself, even if the ultimate goal is not fully achieved. This resonates with existential psychology, particularly Frankl's (1963) proposition that meaning is found in commitment to purpose rather than guaranteed outcomes.

SI's motivation was framed as self-challenge. Her insistence on completing academic responsibilities during pregnancy complicates simplistic readings of role overload. Instead of perceiving maternal identity and academic identity as mutually exclusive, she integrated them. This reflects identity accumulation theory (Sieber, 1974), which argues that multiple roles may enhance rather than diminish self-worth by expanding identity resources.

EJ articulated a strong growth orientation. Her commitment to continuous development aligns with Dweck's (2006) growth mindset theory, where ability is perceived as malleable rather than fixed. For EJ, higher education is not merely credential acquisition but a strategy to maintain adaptive competence in a competitive environment.

Across participants, education was not experienced as mere status attainment. It became an existential platform for identity consolidation, autonomy, and competence. This suggests that self-actualization here operates less as a hierarchical endpoint and more as a meaning-making trajectory.

Paradoxical Resilience: Integrating Strain into Growth

Classical role strain theory (Goode, 1960) predicts that occupying multiple demanding roles leads to overload and psychological depletion. Empirical research often confirms elevated stress levels among working students (Butler, 2007). However, the present findings complicate this narrative.

Participants reported significant stressors:

1. Time and resource limitations (IN)
2. Emotional fluctuation (HK)
3. Physical exhaustion during pregnancy (SI)
4. Strategic failure and emotional breakdown (EJ)

Yet these stressors were not framed as deterrents. Instead, they were incorporated into a developmental narrative. This reflects Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive

appraisal theory: stress outcomes depend on whether individuals interpret demands as threats or challenges. Participants predominantly adopted challenge appraisals.

HK's emotional regulation strategy-acknowledging negative feelings without abandoning long-term goals-demonstrates adaptive emotion regulation consistent with Gross's (1998) process model. Rather than suppressing affect, she engaged in reflective validation.

EJ's coping pattern-allowing herself to cry before cognitively restructuring failure-illustrates emotional processing followed by problem-focused coping. This dual strategy aligns with Carver and Connor-Smith's (2010) framework suggesting that flexible coping predicts better adjustment than rigid coping styles.

SI's perception of pregnancy-related fatigue as a physiological process rather than a structural barrier reveals reframing capacity. Such reframing is associated with psychological resilience (Masten, 2001). However, an important critical point arises: resilience here may mask structural inequalities. The ability to reframe does not eliminate systemic constraints faced by women balancing reproductive and professional roles. Thus, while resilience is evident, it should not obscure gendered labor expectations.

This dynamic-where strain coexists with growth-may be conceptualized as paradoxical resilience. Emotional and physical stress do not disappear; they become integrated into identity development. This challenges binary assumptions that stress either destroys well-being or must be eliminated for growth to occur.

Role Conflict Versus Role Enrichment

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) conceptualized work-family conflict as incompatible role pressures. However, Greenhaus and Powell (2006) later introduced work-family enrichment theory, proposing that experiences in one domain can improve quality of life in another.

Findings from this study align more closely with enrichment than conflict, although both processes coexist.

1. IN's academic insights informed her professional practice in training product development.
2. HK perceived professional experience as enhancing classroom engagement.
3. SI benefited from curricular alignment with her institutional responsibilities.
4. EJ used academic exposure to broaden strategic thinking.

This bidirectional enrichment reflects resource gain cycles described in Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989). When individuals acquire new skills or knowledge, they accumulate resources that buffer stress and enhance competence.

However, enrichment did not fully eliminate exhaustion. This suggests a dialectical process: conflict and enrichment operate simultaneously. The determining variable appears to be regulatory agency and contextual support.

SI's case illustrates the importance of institutional flexibility. Her workplace communication reduced structural time conflict. This supports findings by Horta et al.

(2022) that institutional support significantly moderates academic stress among working students.

Self-Regulatory Agency and Self-Efficacy

Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory posits that belief in one's capability to execute actions influences persistence under difficulty. Although not explicitly measured, high self-efficacy was evident across participants.

Participants displayed: Strategic planning (EJ), Goal persistence (HK), Environmental negotiation (SI), Adaptive time allocation (IN).

These behaviors indicate strong self-regulatory systems. Zimmerman's (2000) model of self-regulated learning describes cyclical processes of forethought, performance monitoring, and self-reflection. EJ's pattern of emotional release followed by strategic recalibration exemplifies this cycle.

Importantly, self-regulation functioned as the integrative mechanism transforming potential role conflict into structured growth. Without such agency, dual roles might plausibly generate burnout rather than development.

Gendered Identity and Existential Agency

The narratives reflect subtle negotiation of gender norms. Women are often socially positioned as primary caregivers, potentially constraining professional ambition (Eagly & Wood, 2012). SI's academic persistence during pregnancy symbolically challenges assumptions of incompatibility between maternal and intellectual roles.

HK's vision of independent practice asserts financial and epistemic autonomy. IN's doctoral aspiration signals long-term academic presence in a field traditionally male-dominated (technology). These examples illustrate agentic identity reconstruction within structural boundaries.

However, a critical lens is necessary. The sample consists of women with relatively stable employment and educational access. Structural privilege may partially enable their agency. Thus, findings should not be generalized across socioeconomic strata.

Self-Actualization as Continuous Growth Rather Than Completion

None of the participants described graduation as an endpoint. Instead, education was framed as part of lifelong growth. This resonates with Rogers' (1961) concept of the fully functioning person, characterized by openness to experience and ongoing self-expansion.

Contemporary positive psychology also conceptualizes well-being as eudaimonic-centered on meaning and self-realization (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The participants' emphasis on competence, autonomy, and contribution reflects core components of eudaimonic functioning. Importantly, growth was internally evaluated. External validation (titles,

degrees) was secondary to internal coherence and self-respect. This suggests a shift from external locus of evaluation toward internal locus, aligning with humanistic principles.

This study is limited by its small, purposively selected sample, which aligns with phenomenological depth but restricts broader generalization. The participants shared relatively stable professional and educational access, potentially shaping more adaptive role integration experiences than might be found in structurally disadvantaged contexts. Additionally, reliance on retrospective self-narratives and a cross-sectional design limits the ability to observe developmental shifts in self-actualization over time.

The findings offer important theoretical implications by reframing self-actualization as a dynamic and socially embedded process rather than a static hierarchical endpoint. They also extend role theory by illustrating that role conflict and role enrichment coexist and are mediated by self-regulatory agency and contextual support. Practically, higher education institutions and workplaces should recognize working female students as a distinct population requiring structural flexibility, institutional acknowledgment, and psychosocial support mechanisms.

Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs to capture how self-actualization evolves across life transitions and academic milestones. Comparative gender studies and cross-socioeconomic sampling would help clarify the structural and cultural dimensions influencing dual-role integration. Integrating qualitative exploration with quantitative measures of well-being, burnout, and self-efficacy may further strengthen empirical robustness and theoretical refinement.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that self-actualization among women who simultaneously pursue professional careers and higher education is not a fixed achievement but a dynamic and contextually negotiated process. Rather than representing the final stage in a hierarchical model such as that proposed by Abraham Maslow, self-actualization emerges through continuous identity construction shaped by existential motivation, adaptive self-regulation, and strategic role integration. The findings indicate that dual roles do not inherently produce fragmentation or psychological decline; instead, when supported by strong self-efficacy, flexible coping strategies, and contextual alignment between professional and academic environments, these roles can cultivate growth, competence, and autonomy. Although emotional strain, physical fatigue, and temporal pressures were evident, participants integrated these challenges into developmental narratives rather than perceiving them as insurmountable barriers. Education was experienced not merely as credential accumulation but as an intentional expansion of intellectual agency and future-oriented identity, positioning participants as active architects of their trajectories. Future research should consider longitudinal designs to examine how self-actualization evolves across life stages and institutional contexts, incorporate cross-cultural comparisons to assess structural influences, and explore intersectional dimensions such as marital status or organizational support systems. Practically, institutions and employers are encouraged to develop flexible policies, mentorship structures, and psychosocial support mechanisms that

recognize dual-role women as growth-oriented individuals whose developmental trajectories benefit from structural enablement rather than role reduction.

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