Juggling feeling capable and different: A grounded theory of studying at uni while living with mental ill-health

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Study aim

To generate a **theory**
grounded in the **experience of students** themselves,
about **studying at university**
while living with **mental ill-health** and distress

Study method

Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014)

Participatory approach (Mertens, 2009; Freire, 1970; Reason & Bradbury, 2008)
Participants

21 people
with lived experience of mental ill-health and university study

Critical Reference Group
12 meetings over 2 ½ years

15 in-depth interviews
6 follow-up interviews
3 written responses
15 interview participants

- 21-39 years (mean 26 yrs)
- Bachelor (10)
- Post grad (5)
- Females (10)
- Males (5)

Self-reported diagnoses
- Depression (13)
- Anxiety (6)
- Psychosis (2)
- PTSD (1)
- Bipolar Disorder (1)
- OCD (1)

Additional experiences
- Past trauma (12)
- Parental MI (7)
- Sibling with MI (6)
- Minimal social contacts (2)
- Using supports (6)
Findings

LIFE EXPERIENCES → FEELING CAPABLE → CURRENT SITUATION
Feeling capable
University – the right place for me

An appetite to learn
(Maxwell)

I guess I was just naturally gifted with learning. I had a really good memory in terms of remembering the content and I always did well in my tests. (Kate)

Study is something that I'm good at. I'm good at reading, I have an inquiring mind, I'm curious and I like to write and think. (Betty)
Feeling different University – do I fit?

I really felt like an outsider. I felt like nobody understood me. (Maxwell)

The world expects you to be normal, and I don’t think I live up to that expectation. (Stacey)
My parents separated when I was a baby and my dad is an ex-bikie and my mum has a mental illness and we were always quite poor when I was growing up so I feel like I had all these things that made me feel different from a really young age....I have internalised being different a lot, it’s part of my identity.

(Mackenzie IV2)
Striving to be a ‘regular’ student

Don’t wanna’ be different. Just wanna’ be a regular student. (Nicole IV2)

I just want to be accepted as normal...and not have anyone else know. (Reggie IV2)
FEELING CAPABLE

Striving to be a regular student

LIFE EXPERIENCES

CURRENT SITUATION

FEELING DIFFERENT

RETURNING TO STUDY

Feeling less different

TOLERATING DESPAIR

LETTING GO OF HOPES

FALLING OUT OF STUDY

DRIPPING OUT

Feeling more different

MANAGING DIFFERENCE

RECONCILING DIFFERENCE

WRESTLING WITH DIFFERENCE

HANGING IN WITH DIFFERENCE

NOT MANAGING DIFFERENCE
Not managing difference: Dropping out

- Letting go of hopes
- Falling out of study
- Tolerating despair
  - Giving up on academic dreams
  - Giving up on life
- Returning to study
Hanging in with difference

• Alone

• Identity dominated by difference (where difference is wrong, deficient etc.)

• Limited options/ feeling stuck

• Hard to work out what would help/ who could help

• Living in the moment/ surviving day to day

• Reducing distress, keeping safe, doing what works
Hanging in with difference

- Concealing who I am
- Retreating from the social world
- Numbing distress
- Battling my thoughts
Wrestling with difference

- Dynamic, oscillating
- Relationship with difference is unsettled, being (re)negotiated
- Making and losing ground
- Difference has varying impact on identity
- Greater agency/ choice/ control
- Broader perspective/ space to reinterpret experience
- Increase in future focus
Wrestling with difference

- Coming to know self
  - Acknowledging & revealing difference
  - Allowing vulnerability

I'm just really at the moment fixated with allowing myself to breathe emotionally and maybe take stock of what I have learnt through uni. It's been a real process of self-discovery,....., God, I've come so far from being like every day just suicidal and anxious and unhappy. To actually just be able to go for a walk and just feel at peace, rather than just always in my head, criticising myself, that is huge.
Wrestling with difference

• Accepting limits
  • Adapting expectations of self
  • Knowing limits- keeping death as Plan C

it's always been my Plan C. Plan A - try to do something. Plan B - try again. Plan C – f*!@ it die. It has been the plan for years. I'm not going to accept failure. I'm not - the problem with that is suicide as a motivator. I don't want to be a kitchen hand so I must study. Start to fail in study; well I'm not going to be a kitchen hand again. I'll choose death.
Wrestling with difference

• **Seizing control of what I can**
  • Just doing something
  • Managing environments and demands
  • Connecting with others and using supports

- Being proactive
- Finding a friend
- Talking to teachers
Wrestling with difference

• Coming to know self
  • Acknowledging & revealing difference
  • Allowing vulnerability

• Accepting limits
  • Adapting expectations of self
  • Knowing limits- keeping death as Plan C

• Seizing control of what I can
  • Just doing something
  • Managing environments and demands
  • Connecting with others and using supports
Reconciling difference

- Difference less dominant/ space for other identities to co-exist
- Space to accommodate/ accept/ or celebrate difference (difference has less negative power)
- Less pressure, range of options, reframing impact of influences
- Future orientation
- Activism, pursuit of rights
Reconciling difference

- Embracing wellbeing
- Holding hope
- Positive risk taking
- Watching out for ill-health

You know what? I can still be whatever I want and I can still go out and get a job. I can, not be whatever I want, but I can still have a good life and do these things that everyone can do, and that I'm not limited really at all. All I've got to do is have a plan and just follow it and I'll be okay.
Supporting movement in the vortex

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The experience of study for people living with mental ill-health and distress: *feeling different*
A goal?  Supporting students to realise

“*I am less different* than I thought”

OR

“We are all similar AND different”
Final questions to ponder

How do students come to know about the experiences of other students?
- their struggles, successes, dropping out and coming back, feeling alone, wondering if they are the only one.

Do our current approaches support students to feel more or less different?
References:


