Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Conceptualising Students as Stressed and Anxious

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Research Domain: International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract: The mental wellbeing of higher education (HE) students has become of increasing interest to policymakers and HE practitioners over recent years. There has been concern at the high prevalence of stress, and anxiety and mental ill health amongst HE students as well as at the rate of increase of such problems.

In an attempt to explain these patterns, some researchers have made use of the concept of 'cognitive availability' – asserting that the increased disclosure of mental health concerns is due to increased societal openness about such issues and the 'availability' of these frameworks for understanding particular experiences. In this paper we examine these claims, drawing on data from a five-year cross-national project intended to explore understandings of the HE student – conducted in Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain.

Paper:

Students as stressed and anxious

Introduction

The mental wellbeing of higher education (HE) students has become of increasing interest to policymakers and HE practitioners over recent years. There has been concern at the high prevalence of stress, and anxiety and mental ill health amongst HE students as well as at the rate of increase of such problems (Duffy et al., 2020). Indeed, concern about the prevalence of mental health conditions has resulted in a wide variety of university-led interventions intended to build resilience and reduce susceptibility to stress, anxiety and the like (Holdsworth et al., 2018).

In explaining the relatively high levels of stress, anxiety and mental ill health reported by students, some researchers have made use of the concept of 'cognitive availability', asserting that the increased disclosure of such problems is due to increased societal openness about such issues and the 'availability' of these frameworks for understanding particular experiences (Bristow et al., 2020). To examine these claims, we draw on data from a five-year cross-national project intended to explore understandings of the HE student – with data collection (from 2017-20) in Denmark, England, Germany, Ireland, Poland and Spain. In total, we analysed: 92 policy texts; 1159 newspaper articles; seven films and TV shows; and 180 higher education institution websites. We also conducted: 26 interviews with policymakers; 72 interviews with HE staff members; and 54 student focus groups. While we did not ask about stress, anxiety or mental health specifically, they were themes that were

often raised spontaneously, and which came to constitute an important focus of our analysis.

Evidence of cognitive availability?

Our data provide some evidence to support the 'cognitive availability' thesis – in that there is a good match between the views of students and those of other social actors in Denmark, England and Ireland – where mental health constitutes a strong societal discourse – and in Poland – where there is no mention of stress or anxiety by any actor. Moreover, there is also some explicit consideration of mental health as a new cultural trope by students themselves, as the following quotations from a German focus group illustrates:

I get the feeling that stress is a term that is really overused and it crops up everywhere … I think that in our generation and in our society here in Germany, it's on everyone's lips … but I don't get the feeling that our stress levels are higher compared to people who only work or who are only doing an apprenticeship ….

Furthermore, one participant in an Irish focus group went as far as to say that they believed claiming that you were stressed was an important part of a student identity, irrespective of what you actually felt. They asserted that 'You tell them, "Oh, like I'm so stressed", but secretly you've done your assignments and things'.

However, our data also highlight some exceptions, which raise questions about the cognitive availability thesis. Most prominently, in Spain, although stress was mentioned frequently by the students in our sample, there appeared to be no strong societal discourse. It was mentioned very rarely by staff members, by only one policy interviewee and not at all by the Spanish newspapers (despite a strong emphasis on the material concerns of students).

The apparent lack of societal discourse can perhaps be explained by the enduring importance of the family in the Spanish context. Family care remains important in the treatment of mental ill health in Spain, in common with other countries with a Mediterranean welfare model (Stein et al., 2015), while the family is also seen as a crucial means of support for higher education students more generally (Lainio and Brooks, 2021). In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that stress, anxiety and other mental health issues are not individualised nor (implicitly) positioned as the responsibility of students themselves as they often are in Denmark, England, Germany and Ireland. This explanation does not, however, explain why the students who participated in the study spoke so readily, and in such stark terms, about the stress they were experiencing.

Conclusion

Taken together, the Spanish data suggests that, while 'cognitive availability' may influence student perspectives in some nations, it is not, of itself, an adequate explanation for all the stress described by students. Instead, it appeared that, for Spanish students, a high degree of pessimism about their future employment and the pressure of having to juggle paid work alongside study in order to survive financially, provoked severe feelings of stress, irrespective of wider discourses and cultural tropes.

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