

Title: A Discussion on Mental Health and Academia

Abstract: The recent JME special issue on mental health and well-being brought focus to the challenges for professors, Ph.D. candidates, and students to maintain good mental health. Our roundtable will focus on discussing these challenges in academia and in particular business schools. We will discuss personal experiences and research informed potential solutions to these challenges. We want to provide a highly interactive discussion to foster a dialogue, help normalize these conversations and to find support within MOBTS.

Keywords: Mental Health, Wellbeing, Social Support

A Discussion on Mental Health and Academia

Introduction

Mental Health issues are an increasing in incidence in the general population (Richter et al., 2019), currently they are present in 19.1% of the population (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, 2018). There is evidence that the percentage is even higher among academics (Kinman, 2016; Kinman & Wray, 2016; Winefield et al., 2008) and Ph. D. students (Evans et al., 2018; Levecque et al., 2017, Pervez et a., 2021).

In our session we would like to discuss what are some of the contributing factors to the higher incidence of mental health issues among academics and discuss some potential research-informed solutions. We want to normalize these conversations and provide an opportunity for participants to not feel alone or isolated in their experiences. While we will address some of the benefits of discussing our stories, including from a teaching perspective, we will also explore some of the challenges associated with sharing our experiences.

Theoretical Foundation

Research shows how the incidence of mental health issues in academics and Ph.D. students to be higher than in the general population (Evans et al., 2018; Kinman, 2016; Kinman & Wray, 2016; Levecque et al., 2017, Pervez et a., 2021; Winefield et al., 2008). There are certain characteristics about the work of academics that make it more likely to create mental health issues. Research shows that academics find their jobs stressful more often than other highly demanding professions (Catano et al., 2010; Kinman et al, 2006). Time constraints (tenure clock) and workload contributed to the stress experience (Kinman, 2001). The levels of depression and anxiety in academics are higher than in other professions (Kinman, 2016; Kinman & Wray, 2016; Winefield et al., 2008). There is increased pressure to serve the student-

customer in tuition-dependent universities (Reeley, 2016). There are intense demands to publish articles in top journals (Miller et al., 2011).

Fleming (2019) describes the environment in business schools as one that leads to alienation and unhappiness. Bochner (1997) describes academia as institutionally depressed, where there is a pattern of anxiety, hopelessness, and isolation that circulates throughout university life. Fleming (2019) also points out that the despair felt is not easy to verbalize because discontent and melancholy are framed as personal failings, as opposed to opportunities to transform untenable organizational structures that foster dissatisfaction. Academia becomes then a place where we hide our personal selves (Bochner, 1997). It is important to point out, however, that there are some positive elements of academic work; in particular, many researchers have pointed out that it is often intellectually challenging and collegial (Miller et al., 2011; Sabwarhal & Corley, 2009; Zabarauskaite, 2010).

For our Ph. D. students, the picture is not much better. Job insecurity, low pay, uncertainty about the future, difficult advisor relationships, pressure to publish, isolation, lack of support systems, and lack of work-life balance create a life filled with stressors (Lau and Pretorius, 2019). In particular, management doctoral students are indoctrinated early to a “publish or perish” paradigm where what is valued is productivity and output (De Rond & Miller, 2005). Putting this pressure to publish early in their careers is difficult for students and especially for those in management since they do not have the support of a lab group or direct participation in an established research stream, requiring more autonomy and self-direction.

A common element for Ph. D. students and academics is the experience of impostor syndrome, which contributes to a feeling of isolation. Impostor syndrome is a mental state characterized by a pursuit of excellence coupled with a crippling belief that our efforts are

inadequate and fraudulent (Clance & Imes, 1978). Bothello and Roulet (2019) describe how impostor syndrome includes a belief that our accomplishments are due to luck, charm, connections, or external factors and not attributable to merit and skill. Furthermore, they suggested that the prevalence of the syndrome in academia relates to the single-minded focus on theory, rendering the faculty's status fully contingent on research output. They described how our preparation for the work does not consider all the facets of the actual work of an academic, which exacerbates the feeling of inadequacy and questioning whether our status, legitimacy, and rewards are truly deserved.

Another common element is the experience of stigma. People with mental illness experience significant stigma from the general population (Stuart, 2008; Sandhu et al., 2019) and even from themselves. It is still acceptable to explicitly stereotype people with mental illness (Martinez & Hinshaw, 2016). Stigma can be even worse for those with depression because it is often perceived as a failure of character (Thornicroft et al., 2016). The intensity of the negative stigma has even been shown to be increasing (Rüsch et al., 2005). People with mental illness are thought of as dangerous and are to blame for it (Schomerus, et al., 2012). The challenge is compounded because as stigma becomes more severe, people with mental illness experience higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of self-efficacy (Sickel et al., 2019).

Overall, in line with findings from the other academic disciplines, there is evidence that students and faculty in business schools often struggle with mental health and well-being (Edwards, Martin & Ashkanasy, 2021). In this session we want to explore why this is the case, provide support for each other, and consider how sharing such experiences can help us.

Research has identified some potential interventions to improve the academic experience and try to lessen the effects that it can have on our mental health. For example, a flexible tenure

clock between four to eight years would give space to people who want to go up for tenure earlier while accommodating those who need more time for a multitude of reasons (Quijada, 2021). De Rond & Miller (2005) propose a clock based on the number and quality of outputs. Ashforth (2005) calls for an extension of the tenure clock to allow faculty to accumulate papers. This is especially important given the increased wait times and high rejection rates of journals (Day, 2011).

Moreover, valuing measurements of performance other than quantity of publications is worth contemplating (Quijada, 2021). Considering elements like how papers contribute to the field, how difficult is to publish unorthodox ideas, etc. can help value the work beyond just the number of publications. In essence, considering the impact of a scholar's research rather than the number of publications.

Furthermore, social support is foundational to success and thriving. Research has shown that social support is beneficial for Ph.D. students (Pervez et al., 2021) and it is also likely to be useful for professors. There are different types of social support that can be helpful to alleviate impostor syndrome and the feelings of inadequacy that come with it (Pervez et al., 2021). Appraisal support is where students get information on how they are performing. Emotional support from various sources has been found to be something that students lack, creating increased vulnerability around their mental health. Informational support on how to teach or conduct research was also found to be important. Instrumental support, which is tangible support such as answering a student's question about statistical analysis, has also been found to be important. If we can find way to encourage faculty and fellow students to provide this kind of support, then Ph. D. students would experience less stress and feelings of inadequacy. This may also be true at the colleague-level with fellow faculty. Overall, we are calling for a kinder

academy that treats people as individuals and values and supports us (Bothello & Roulet, 2019; Cunliffe, 2018).

We envision this forum inviting others illuminating the struggles the academy fosters, and hope the authors' scholarship and experiences create a space to discuss wellbeing. In the same ways that prioritizing our health is a fruitful, yet ongoing, pursuit for us, sharing this scholarship and fostering dialog could illuminate a path forward for others. Many in the academy suffer in silence, but that does not have to be the case. Also, modeling healthy living as faculty should also have a positive spillover effect for both our colleagues and students.

Session Description

We would like to spend the first 5 minutes of the session introducing the topic and what drives us to work in this space.

Then the next 20 minutes would be focused on discussing the experiences of academics and our participants in the session. We will add insights from our research to add context.

The next 20 minutes will focus on Ph.D. students and their experiences and how we can better support them.

The final 15 minutes will be an open forum to wrap up the discussion and encourage any sharing of personal experiences or second-hand stories that highlight what has been discussed.

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