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'I was able to ask for help when I became stressed rather than sitting alone and struggling':
Psychology and Law Students' views of the impact of Identity and Community on Mental
Wellbeing

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People derive a sense of self from membership in social groups. Universities are an ecosystem of different communities and represent a significant opportunity to explore how group memberships can impact mental wellbeing. A key university group is students' school of study, membership of which enables individuals to develop an academic identity. We argue that a strong sense of belonging and thus academic identity, within the school community can lead to positive mental wellbeing. We focus on sense of belonging within academic schools because the positive impact of group membership is likely to exist to a greater degree in an academic school than in other university communities.

We conducted online focus groups with 21 undergraduate students studying either law or psychology at a research intensive university. Our aim was to explore their academic identity and sense of belonging within their academic school of study, and how these variables impacted their mental wellbeing. Our thematic analysis indicates that students with strong identities, who feel a sense of belonging in their school community – particularly where the basis of that community is peer-to-peer engagement – display greater help-seeking behaviours in times of difficulty. If peers are viewed negatively, students are less forthcoming when in need of support. Our results have important implications for Schools who can promote peer support as a way of improving student mental wellbeing.

Keywords: Mental Health, Wellbeing, Community, Identity, Higher Education

Introduction

Mental wellbeing challenges appear endemic among the UK undergraduate population. One in four undergraduates suffer poor mental wellbeing during their degree.¹ Only 17% of students believe their life is ‘highly worthwhile’,² 50.3% report thoughts of self-harm, 42.8% display high levels of anxiety, and 33.9% experience serious psychological issues requiring professional help.³ An increasing number of students are disclosing mental wellbeing problems to their institutions, with mental health accounting for 17% of all disabilities disclosed by first-year students in 2015/16 and 27.2% in 2019/2020, compared to 5% in 2006/07.⁴ Typically, institutional responses to poor mental wellbeing ‘encourage people to medicalize their emotional suffering’ and a majority of people ‘think that their emotions are profoundly individual’;⁵ therefore interventions are typically offered at the individual level (i.e. counselling, medication)⁶. However, our communities and cultural beliefs shape our thoughts, feelings and behaviours⁷ and we therefore argue that mental wellbeing is more properly seen as a community issue. Research has shown that psychologically meaningful group memberships have a positive impact on mental wellbeing,⁸ and community-based interventions may be a way for universities ‘to address the high levels of psychological

¹ YouGov. 2016. “One in four students suffer from mental health problems.” Retrieved 14/01/21: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2016/08/09/quarter-britains-students-are-afflicted-mental-health>

² Neves, J., & Hillman, N. 2018. *Student Academic Experience Survey*. Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute.

³ Pereira, S., Reay, K., Bottell, J., Walker, L., & Dziki, C., 2018. *University Student Mental Health Survey 2018*, The Insight Network.

⁴ Thorley, C. *Not by degrees: Improving student mental health in the UK's universities*. (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2017); UCAS, *Starting the Conversation: UCAS report on Student Mental Health* (Cheltenham: UCAS, 2021).

⁵ Horwitz, A.V., ‘An Overview of Sociological Perspectives on the Definitions, Causes, and Responses to Mental Health and Illness’ in Scheid, T.L., & Brown, T.N., *A Handbook for the Study of Mental Health Social Contexts, Theories, and Systems*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), 19.

⁶ An example of this focus is highlighted by the Institute for Public Policy Research, which reports 94% of UK universities saw demand for counselling by students increase between 2012 and 2017, with 61% reporting an increase of over 25%: Thorley, C. *Not By Degrees: Not by degrees: Improving student mental health in the UK's universities* (London: IPPR, 2017). In 2019/2020, 42% of students accessed counselling support: Ranstand, *A Degree of Uncertainty: Student Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education* (Luton: Ranstand N.V., 2020).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Haslam, S.A., Reicher, S.D., & Levine, M. ‘When other people are heaven, when other people are hell: How social identity determines the nature and impact of social support’ in J. Jetten, C. Haslam, & S.A. Haslam (eds.) *The social cure: Identity, health and well-being* (Hove: Psychology Press, 2012), 157–174; Haslam, C., Jetten, J., Cruwys, T., Dingle, G., & Haslam, A. *The new psychology of health: Unlocking the social cure* (London: Routledge, 2018).

distress being experienced' by community members.⁹ Developing an understanding of how community, belonging and identity influence students' mental wellbeing is an important contribution to the literature. A 'whole university approach' is a core pillar of the University Mental Health Charter, creating an increasing role for proactive, community-based interventions instead of relying solely on reactive services. The Charter marks an important step towards making student and staff mental health a university-wide priority and delivering improved mental health and wellbeing outcomes.¹⁰

We argue that a strong academic identity and sense of belonging within the academic community can lead to positive mental wellbeing. We focus on sense of belonging within academic schools as every student will be a member of at least one school, whereas they may choose not to engage with extra-curricular groups like sports clubs. **The positive impact of group membership may exist to a greater degree within academic schools than in other communities. This is because the academic school community is a bounded group,¹¹ its members share experiences and values,¹² can effectively empathise with each other and offer support,¹³ and are looking to join similar professional communities, which may create a sense of solidarity.¹⁴** We suggest that when students have a strong academic identity and supportive peers they are likely to feel able to turn to them for help, which is likely to encourage help-seeking behaviours earlier rather than at the point of crisis. As peer support is a significant influence on remaining in HE, creating successful peer-to-

⁹ Duffy, J., Field, R. & Shirley, M. "Engaging Law Students to Promote Psychological Health." (2011) *Association of Law Teachers Journal*, 36(4), 250-4.

¹⁰ Hughes, G., & Spanner, L. (2019). *The University Mental Health Charter*. Leeds: Student Minds.

¹¹ See Cobigo, V., Martin, L., & Mcheimech, E., Bettez, S. C., "Understanding Community" (2016) *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 5.4; Bettez, S. C., "Community Building in Social Justice Work: A Critical Approach." (2013) *Educational Studies* 49, 45-66; Lehavot, K., Balsam, K. F., & Ibrahim-Wells, G. D., "Redefining the American quilt: definitions and experiences of community among ethnically diverse lesbian and bisexual women." (2009) *Journal of Community Psychology*, 37(4), 439-458.

¹² See Capece, G., & Costa, R., "The new neighbourhood in the internet era: network communities serving local communities." (2013) *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 32(5), 438-448.

¹³ See Rothblum, E., "Where is the 'Women's Community?' Voices of Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Women and Heterosexual Sisters." (2010) *Feminism & Psychology*, 20(4), 454-472.

¹⁴ Vogl, G., "Work as Community: Narratives of Solidarity and Teamwork in the Contemporary Workplace, Who Owns Them?" (2008) *Sociological Research Online*, 14(4), 4.

peer communities is an important aspect of supporting positive mental health.¹⁵ Indeed, a higher sense of belonging can reduce stress and improve wellbeing.¹⁶

In this paper, we use the term mental wellbeing to mean the extent to which an individual is able ‘to develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others, and contribute to their community’.¹⁷ [This definition highlights how positive mental wellbeing is linked with being productive rather than a state of happiness.](#) We consider this to be distinct from conceptualisations of mental health linked to diagnosable mental health conditions. It is possible for an individual to have mental health difficulties but also have good mental wellbeing. For example, a student may have a diagnosis of depression, but receive appropriate treatment and have a strong support network of friends and family. Although their diagnosis suggests they may have poor mental health, they may still experience positive mental wellbeing because of the support they can rely on. Likewise, an individual with no diagnosable mental illness may have poor mental wellbeing due to loneliness, isolation or stress. This paper focuses on mental wellbeing as it is something all students experience and can be supported without medical or clinical intervention.

Social Identity

According to Social Identity Theory (SIT) we derive a sense of identity from our group memberships.¹⁸ Being part of a group provides us with a social sense of identity and fosters a sense of belonging. Meaningful group memberships also influence our wellbeing and are ‘associated with a vast array of both physical and psychological health outcomes’.¹⁹ However, membership of social groups can also be linked to negative health outcomes such as ‘stigma, discrimination and inequality’.²⁰ Wellbeing is affected by the state and circumstances of the group with which people

¹⁵ Thomas, L. *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change*. What Works? Student Retention and Success programme (London, 2012).

¹⁶ Skipper and Fay, forthcoming.

¹⁷ Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, *Mental Capital and Wellbeing: Making the most of ourselves in the 21st century. Final Project report*. (London: Government Office for Science, 2008).

¹⁸ Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. “An integrative theory of intergroup conflict.” in W. G. Austin, & S. Worchel (Eds.) *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979).

¹⁹ Wakefield, J.R.H., Bowe, M., Kellezi, B., McNamara, N., & Stevenson, C. “When groups help and when groups harm: origins, developments, and future directions of the ‘social cure’ perspective of group dynamics.” (2019) 13(3) *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, e12440.

²⁰ Ibid.

identify,²¹ thus ‘wellbeing will be boosted or dampened to the extent that the group ... does well or badly’.²² The collective success or poor performance of a group will increase or reduce wellbeing.²³ So too will others’ value (or lack thereof) of that social identity.²⁴ When individuals have strong, positive social identities, they are likely to experience higher self-esteem, higher life satisfaction and less psychological distress.

Self-categorization theory explains that when we define ourselves in terms of a specific social identity, we generally try to live up to the norms and values associated with that group.²⁵ People with a strong social identity are more likely to act in line with group norms.²⁶ Although some of these norms may be linked to healthy behaviours, some may lead to ill health or increase an individual’s vulnerability to stress. For example, students may develop stronger drinking intentions²⁷ or engage in more binge drinking²⁸ if consumption of alcohol is a norm. Groups may also have anti-help-seeking norms because support is perceived as stigmatising within their community.²⁹ This suggests that groups can enhance or harm wellbeing dependent on their membership norms.

²¹ n8.

²² Ibid, 250.

²³ Branscombe, N., & Wann, D. 1994. “Collective self-esteem consequences of out-group derogation when a valued social identity is on trial.” (1994) 24 *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 641-657; Wann, D., & Branscombe, N. “Die-Hard and Fair-Weather Fans: Effects of Identification on BIRGing and CORFing Tendencies.” (1990) 14 *Journal of Sport & Social Issues*, 103-117.

²⁴ Ethier, K.A., & Deaux, K. “Negotiating social identity when contexts change: Maintaining identification and responding to threat.” (1994) 67(2) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 243-251

²⁵ Turner, J.C. “Towards a cognitive definition of the social group.” In H. Tajfel (ed.) *Social identity and intergroup relations*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Turner, J.C., *Social influence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

²⁶ Turner, J.C. “Social categorization and the self-concept: a social cognitive theory of group behaviour.” In E.J. Lawler (ed.) *Advances in group processes*, Vol. 2, (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1985).

²⁷ Livingstone, A.G., Young, H., & Manstead, A.S. “‘We drink, therefore we are’: The role of group identification and norms in sustaining and challenging heavy drinking culture.” (2011) 14(5) *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 637–649.

²⁸ Howell, J.L., Koudenburg, N., Loschelder, D.D., Weston, D., Fransen, K., De Dominicis, S., & Haslam, S. A. “Happy but unhealthy: The relationship between social ties and health in an emerging network.” (2014) 44(6) *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 612–621.

²⁹ Kearns, M., Muldoon, O.T., Msetfia, R.M., & Surgenor, P.W.G. “Understanding help-seeking amongst university students: the role of group identity, stigma, and exposure to suicide and help-seeking.” (2015) 6 *Frontiers in Psychology*, 1462-1470.

As well as providing a sense of identity and providing behavioural norms, feeling part of a group may lead people to feel able to access support, which can lead to more positive mental wellbeing. We are more likely to provide social support to people who share our social identity³⁰ and more likely to accept help from our communities.³¹ However, while groups ‘can be an important source of strength when members are able to band together and work effectively at solving/reframing stressors’, they ‘can exacerbate (and even create) stress if such processes fail to occur’, leaving members feeling ‘distressed and incapable’.³²

Law students’ identity

Law students – and younger lawyers – have a higher rate of distress than their non-law peers, and experience barriers to recognising and seeking help for their distress; **for example, in Australia, 35% of law students experience high levels of psychological distress compared with 18% of medicine students and 13% of people aged between 18 and 34 in the general population.**³³

One possible reason for this higher rate of distress is the way law students are trained to think. A law degree seeks to develop students’ logical, analytical and rational capabilities. It tends to emphasise doctrinal content and linear thinking, while de-emphasising ‘creativity, personal values, reflexivity and interdisciplinary factors such as justice and social policy’; it also ‘promotes personality traits such as defensiveness, perfectionism and pessimism which can lead to unhappiness’.³⁴ Law students are less likely to find their course intrinsically interesting and to say they are at university to learn, and are more likely to study law for external reasons (i.e. parental pressure); to believe future employers were concerned more with their grades than other personal or social characteristics; to view grades as the crucial indicator of their success; to view and assess friendships in terms of networking and career advancement; to dislike group work; and to be more

³⁰ Levine, M., Prosser, A., Evans, D., & Reicher, S. “Identity and emergency intervention: How social group membership and inclusiveness of group boundaries shape helping behavior.” (2005) 31(4) *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 443–453.; Wakefield, J. R., Hopkins, N., Cockburn, C., Shek, K. M., Muirhead, A., Reicher, S., & van Rijswijk, W. “The impact of adopting ethnic or civic conceptions of national belonging for others’ treatment.” (2011) 37(12) *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 1599–1610

³¹ Haslam, S. A., Jetten, J., Postmes, T., & Haslam, C. “Social identity, health and well-being: An emerging agenda for applied psychology.” (2009) 58(1) *Applied Psychology*, 1–23.

³² n19.

³³ n8, 250.

³⁴ Ibid.

concerned with their university's reputation.³⁵ These characteristics may significantly impact law students' likelihood of developing depression, particularly as they 'may have ... less social connectedness than may be optimal for mental health'.³⁶ Social connectedness can help to prevent depression,³⁷ but law students' competitiveness can interfere with their capacity and willingness to connect with peers beyond a merely instrumental level. These traits 'may help to explain the disproportionate rate of depression in law students'.³⁸

During their first year of undergraduate study, law students move away from intrinsic values, like community service, and towards extrinsic values, like appearance and image. Sheldon and Krieger highlight this shift among US law students.³⁹ Although in the US law is studied at postgraduate level, the literature suggests that similar changes may occur in UK undergraduate law students. Law students feel less self-determined in their goals during undergraduate study and are more concerned with impressing others and less with their own interest and enjoyment.⁴⁰ Law school 'may bring about some negative changes in student motivations and values', and there are 'significant correlations' between such changes and the changes in student wellbeing.⁴¹

Psychology students' identity

Although a wealth of research has explored the experiences of law students, considerably less literature is devoted to subjects like psychology. Psychology students also often experience poor mental health. A study by the American Psychological Association found 87% of psychology

³⁵ Tani, M., & Vines, P. 2009. "Law Students' Attitudes to Legal Education: Pointers to Depression in the Legal Academy and the Profession?" (2009) 19(1) *Legal Education Review*, Article 2.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Williams, K.L., Galliher, R.V. "Predicting Depression and Self-Esteem from Social Connectedness, Support, and Competence." (2006) 25(8) *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 855-874

³⁸ n35.

³⁹ Sheldon, K.M., & Krieger, L.S. "Does Legal Education have Undermining Effects on Law Students? Evaluating Changes in Motivation, Values and Well-Being." (2004) 22 *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, 261-286.

⁴⁰ n35. See also Stevens, C., & Wilson C. "Law student wellbeing in the UK: a call for curriculum intervention" (2016) 11(1) *Journal of Commonwealth Law and Legal Education*, 44-56; Bleasdale, L., & Humphreys, S. 'Identity, well-being and law students' in C. Stevens & R. Field *Educating for Wellbeing in Law* (London: Routledge, 2019).

⁴¹ Ibid.

graduate students experienced anxiety and 68% symptoms of depression.⁴² One reason for this may be that psychology students generally score higher for neuroticism as a personality trait.⁴³ They also score highly for openness, potentially indicating their degree choice is a reflection of a desire to better understand the self. This is consistent with the perception of psychology as ‘me search’ – research that is reflective of the researcher and their experiences.⁴⁴

Psychology students aspire to join a broad range of careers. Only 20% of psychology students become professional psychologists.⁴⁵ In 2016, psychology graduates embarked on careers in human health (35%), education (22%), scientific research (7%) and office work (4%).⁴⁶ When a student aspires to become a ‘psychologist’, there is a broad range of specialisms covering sport and exercise to education and forensics. This diversity might lead students to develop a more permeable social identity and feel a weaker sense of community as group members have different aspirations and trajectories. However, it is also possible that this diversity might lead to lower levels of career competition and lead students to feel a greater sense of community.

Psychology students may also have a strongly ‘other’ orientated focus, with ‘helping others’ as their dominant value.⁴⁷ This suggests psychology students are less likely to seek prestige or financial gain from prospective careers but to improve the lives of others. The finding is consistent with psychology students’ lower scores for extraversion and higher scores for agreeableness.⁴⁸ Attributing a lower value to personal gain and prestige may help reduce conflict and create a more positive ‘learning together’ environment, **such as group based projects and development of listening skills.**⁴⁹ Furthermore, psychology courses typically involve the development of skills to

⁴² Willyard, C., “Need to Heal Thyself.” *Grad Psych Magazine*, vol. 10(1), January 2012; see also Rummell, C. M., “An exploratory study of psychology graduate student workload, health, and program satisfaction.” (2015) *Professional Psychology, Research and Practice* 46(6), 391–399.

⁴³ Vedel, A. 2016. “Big Five personality group differences across academic majors: A systematic review.” (2016) 92(1) *Personality and Individual Differences*, 1-10.

⁴⁴ I.e. Bolte Taylor, J. *My Stroke of Insight* (New York: Viking, 2008).

⁴⁵ Quality Assurance Agency, *Subject Benchmark Statement Psychology* (London: QAA, 2016).

⁴⁶ Coulthard, L. *BPS Careers Destinations (Phase 3) Survey 2016 Report*. (London: British Psychological Society, 2017).

⁴⁷ Bromnick, R., & Horowitz, A, 17 April. *Reframing employability: Exploring career-related values in psychology undergraduates*. Paper presented at the 2013 HEA STEM Annual Learning and Teaching Conference, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK.

⁴⁸ n43.

⁴⁹ n45.

promote positive interpersonal interactions.⁵⁰ The three top skills employers desire in psychologists are listening skills, an ability to work with others, and getting along well with others.⁵¹

In addition, as psychology is the scientific study of the mind and how it dictates and influences behaviour, students explicitly cover topics such as mental health, stress, social identity, empathy and helping behaviours. **As part of their course, they are likely to learn more about mental health and how it can be improved. Furthermore, many psychology degrees involve first and second years participating in research studies conducted by third year students, to help them better understand the research process. This also supports the third-year students to obtain larger samples for their projects, making the work more impactful. This may help students to feel a stronger sense of community with students in other year groups.** Furthermore, most psychology courses also include elements of psychological literacy, which involves applying psychological principles to issues in work, relationships and the community.⁵² These skills may lead students to be better placed to support each other and therefore lead to better mental wellbeing.

Current research

The literature suggests that law students experience a student community that is competitive. Their developing academic identity also increases students' focus on external measure of success, such as image. This prevalence of competitiveness may create a less positive community. In contrast, psychology students may experience a more collegiate, positive community with less competition, and may be orientated towards helping others rather than personal gain.

We conducted online focus groups with 21 undergraduate students studying either law or psychology. Our aim was to explore their academic identity and sense of belonging within their academic school of study. **The literature indicates that the development of these variables has a significant impact on student mental wellbeing,⁵³ therefore we sought to develop our**

⁵⁰ n45.

⁵¹ Landrum, R.E., & Harrold, R. "What employers want from psychology graduates." (2003) 30(2) *Teaching of Psychology*, 131-133.

⁵² Hulme, J.A. & Cranney, J. "Psychological literacy and learning for life" in J. Zumbach, D. Bernstein, S. Narciss, P. Marsico (eds.) *International handbook of psychology learning and teaching* (New York: Springer, 2020); Cranney, J., Botwood, L. & Morris, S., *National standards for psychological literacy and global citizenship: Outcomes of undergraduate psychology education*. (Sydney, NSW: Office for Learning and Teaching, 2012).

⁵³ Osterman, K.F. 'Students' Need for Belonging in the School Community' (2000) 70(3) *Review of Education Research*, 323-367; Goodenow, C. 'The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates' (1993) 30(1) *Psychology in the Schools* 79-90.

understanding of students' perceptions of the building of communities and belonging within their school of study.

Method

Participants

Participants were 17 psychology students and 4 law students from one research-led university. The reason for the disparity in numbers is that we were able to offer credits to psychology students for participating in the study, but this option was not open to law students. Three participants were male, and 13 participants were female; 20 were home students and 1 was an international student. There were 5 focus groups in total; the make-up of focus groups is presented in table 1. One group contained a mix of participants to explore whether responses from students on one course influenced responses by the other. There was no discernible effect on responses.

Table 1: Focus Group Make-up by Gender and Degree Subject

Focus Group	Participants' Gender		Degree Subject
Group A	1 Male	5 Female	All Psychology
Group B	0 Male	4 Female	All Psychology
Group C	0 Male	3 Female	All Law
Group D	1 Male	3 Female	All Psychology
Group E	1 Male	3 Female	1 Law 3 Psychology

Materials and procedure

Participants were sent an open invitation via email to participate in one of five asynchronous online focus groups. This approach was chosen as it maximised opportunities for participation and discussion. The groups were organised and hosted by a neutral researcher to ensure participants did not feel pressured to participate and to allow for honest responses. Students registered by email and were allocated a group and provided the dates and times the group would be open. Groups were accessible to participants for a week. When the groups went live, participants read an information sheet, gave consent, created an anonymous username and logged in. They answered a series of questions and could return throughout the week to add any further thoughts and respond to comments from other participants. However, the majority of students logged in to

complete the questions and did not engage in discussion. The questions participants were asked were organised around 3 main topic areas:

Academic identity:

1. Do you have a strong identity as a psychology/law student? Why/why not?
2. How did your identity as a law/psychology student develop over time? Are there any key things/times/activities which helped you develop this identity?

Sense of community

3. Do you personally feel a strong sense of community with the law/psychology school? Why/Why not?
4. Do you feel that other people experience the law/psychology community in the same way you do? Why?
5. What have staff in your school done to support or hinder a sense of community?
6. Do you feel like the other students in your school are supportive and help create a sense of community or not? How?
7. What important times or events during your degree have helped or hindered you in feeling a part of the law/psychology community?
8. Do you feel part of the broader community of law/psychology professionals? How does your school currently facilitate this and how could they do this better?

Mental Wellbeing

9. How stressed and overloaded have you felt during your course?
10. What have been some of the toughest times for you in terms of high stress or poor mental health, for example, first assessment results released? First exams etc.?
11. How did your school/tutors support your mental health during this time? How could your school/tutors do this better?
12. Did your academic identity or sense of community effect your response to stressful times?

When the group closed, participants were sent a debrief which included links to sources of support.

Analytic Method

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted to identify and analyse and report themes within the data.⁵⁴ Transcripts were read thoroughly by both researchers and the data coded and organised

⁵⁴ Braun V., & Clarke, V. 2006. "Using thematic analysis in psychology." (2006) 3(2) *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 77-101.

into themes or ‘coherent and meaningful pattern(s) in the data’.⁵⁵ The transcripts were continually consulted to make sure all themes were fully explored, and our understandings were data-driven. Themes were continually reviewed by both researchers and refined to ensure the most accurate representation of the data.

Limitations

A key limitation of this study is the limited number of participants. Due to the credit-bearing nature of participation for psychology students, we were able to recruit more strongly from that cohort than from law. A larger number of law students would deepen our understanding of the cohorts’ experiences and lessen potential bias. A second limitation is the use of a random sample of students and more targeted recruitment of a representative sample would deepen our understanding of diverse students’ experience.

Analysis

Results

Three main themes were identified across the five focus groups: *relationships*, *subject culture* and *sources of support*.

Relationships.

The relationships between members of subject communities was important and recurring across the focus groups. Relationships with both staff and peers were central to the participants’ perception of community. *Peer connections* and *staff connections* were identified as important sub-themes.

Peer Connections. Participants expressed differing views of peer-to-peer relationships. There was a strong sense of a peer community for psychology participants:

‘I can sense a strong community within the psychology school, everyone is very friendly for example in the psychology society and the large online psychology group chat ... I

⁵⁵ Clarke, V., & Braun, V. *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. (London: Sage, 2013), 120.

have met nice people just in practical classes/seminar groups and or just asking for directions in the building.’ (P3, Group E)

Psychology participants discussed how this community was developed from a shared interest in their subject: ‘everyone who took psychology obviously were interested in similar things as most other students so are able to support each other with work and so on.’ (P4, Group A). Participation in classes and extra-curricular activities also helped to develop community:

‘I feel that in classes in psychology such as seminars and lab classes there is encouragement to engage with people around you during activities rather than staying alone and working on tasks alone. Staff encourage this often and this therefore creates a sense of community because you are able to engage with the class as a community.’ (P4, Group E)

‘I find that seminar groups and practical classes are important times that help me feel involved and part of the psychology community. Also being part of the psychology society is a big help as then you are part of a group and get involved with activities outside classes.’ (P3, Group E)

The community’s intellectual diversity was also a factor, as it made psychology ‘more interesting to learn and debate’ because ‘everyone has different ideas and opinions’ (P3, Group A). Assessments and group work were also important factors in developing peer-to-peer relationships and a sense of community: ‘assessments are good at creating a sense of community as students will help each other out’ (P1, Group A); ‘I feel that working on tasks in groups is what helps to create a community’ (P4, Group E).

Students who did not experience a sense of community in Psychology appeared to be self-excluded: ‘I don’t take part in psychology activities, really ... I just see this undergraduate degree as a gateway to what I want to do in the future’ (P5, Group A), or felt that there was exclusion (e.g. cliques and closed society meetings): ‘I feel like it is classically clique-like. The psychology society holds meetings that aren’t publicised so psychology students don’t know about them and therefore cannot attend’ (P4, Group D).

Law participants typically expressed a negative view of peer relationships. Although some students were described as helpful, participants felt a lack of community with their peers. There was

concern about being in competition with each other: 'I do feel that some students are extremely competitive' (P1, Group E); 'I don't feel as close with my fellow students because at the end of the day we compete against each other for jobs and placements' (P3, Group C); 'it'd be a lie to say if we all didn't feel like we were in competition with each other' (P2, Group C). Participants spoke of a need to ignore others' feelings in order to succeed:

'While some students are really kind and helpful, many students I have come into contact with are usually focused on themselves ... I feel the attitude of most students does make it very hard. It seems as though the message is that you have to disregard the feelings of others if you wish to succeed.' (P1, Group C)

Responses demonstrated an adversarial and negative feeling about peer-to-peer engagements among law participants.

Staff Connections. While psychology participants focused on relationships with peers in their responses, relationships with staff were also viewed positively: 'I feel comfortable to approach my personal tutor, seminar tutor and practical class teachers.' (P3, Group E). Approachability and active facilitation in teaching sessions were highlighted as positive staff contributions towards developing community:

'I feel that in classes in psychology such as seminars and lab classes there is encouragement to engage with people around you during activities rather than staying alone and working on tasks alone. Staff encourage this often and this therefore creates a sense of community because you are able to engage with the class as a community.' (P4, Group E)

Law participants focused strongly on positive relationships with staff and high levels of support: 'The lecturers do nothing but support every student they come in contact with which will obviously help with a sense of community' (P3, Group C); 'the staff have been very helpful' (P1, Group C). Law students appeared to experience a greater sense of community with staff while psychology students appeared to experience positive relationships with staff and peers.

Culture

The culture of the academic school community was also a strong, recurring theme. Community culture was seen as influencing participants' academic identities. This theme can be broken down into the sub-themes *collaborative vs competitive participation* and *professional membership*.

Collaborative vs competitive participation. Psychology participants' developing academic identity was connected to a culture of collaborative participation. Deciding to go to university was an important milestone in the process: 'I think making the choice to come to University really developed my identity as a psychology student' (P3, Group E). Time as a part of the community – including A-level study – enjoying the subject, taking an active role in the community (attending classes, extra-curricular activities) and developing peer-to-peer relationships also played a significant role:

'I believe that it [my identity] is growing as my time at University continues. I'm being to see things from a psychological point of view and everything that I see I am seeing and analysing as a psychologist. As I've been learning about new topics, I'm being to see more clearly which route I want to take as a career and looking into volunteering to explore this more.' (P1, Group A)

'I used to study psychology at A-level so it built up from there. I am really interested in mental health and I have friends and family who have struggled with it so that's when I became really sure psychology was something I wanted to study. I think an identity developed when I got to Keele, and all my flatmates in the first year were studying psychology as well. Also, I am a student ambassador and I talk a lot to prospective students about studying psychology so that helped as well.' (P2, Group A)

Psychology participants explained how their identity had developed over time due to participation in the learning community. Broader experiences (e.g. volunteering) and deeper immersion in the subject community (e.g. taking part in psychological research) were also highlighted as contributing to the development of participants' academic identity. Responses demonstrated intrinsic motivation as students were interested and enjoyed studying the subject, as opposed to seeing it as a means to an end.

Law participants highlighted how networking with other law students with a strong academic identity helped develop their own identity: 'after socialising more with students who definitely did

have a strong identity as a law student, I would say my identity as a law student grew'. (P1, Group E) Academic identity also developed when participants started thinking like a lawyer: 'I have started to develop my thinking and have started to adapt to the processes of being involved in the legal world' (P1, Group C). However, law participants generally developed their academic identity through complying with the competitive norms of being a law student, rather than through collaborative participation in the learning community. Competition and success (both academic and personal, e.g. election to a society committee) were important elements of the community culture and in law participants' developing identities: 'I believe I have a strong identity in law. This is because I have taken part in all competitions available from the school. I am on a first name basis with most staff and students. This is shown in my getting voted for the law society committee.' (P3, Group C); 'after the first set of exams I started my identity as a law student started to grow. Doing well in the first set of exams increased my drive'. (P1, Group E)

Taking part in extra-curricular activities involving competition or aspects of legal practice were also important: 'I feel this [my identity] all began when my personal tutor kept giving me extracurricular activities to do such as being a client for the client interview' (P3, Group C); 'I started to get more involved in the extra-curricular activities the law school offered.' (P1, Group E); 'having to apply techniques learned in class to real circumstances has helped me to bridge the gap between merely learning the subject and using it in a practical way.' (P1, Group C)

Professional Membership. Both groups of participants felt they were 'students' and had not yet developed an identity as part of the broader 'professional' community of psychologists/lawyers. While participants recognised that there were some opportunities to begin developing connections, there was clearly felt to be a gap between 'student' identity and community membership and 'professional' identity and community membership: 'I always feel there is a barrier between those who are students and professionals which is why the sense of broader community is hindered.' (P4, Group E); 'I feel there is a gap to be bridged between being a law student and being taken seriously as a legal professional.' (P1, Group C)

Sources of Support.

A third theme was the sources of support participants described as available to them during challenging times. Understanding of stressors differed by subject and participants also articulated different sources of available support based on the types of relationships that existed within the

learning community. This theme can be broken down into three sub-themes: *coping with challenging times*, *peer support* and *staff support*.

Coping with challenging times. Both groups of participants described experiencing stress during their time at university. Psychology participants discussed experiencing variable levels of stress and were generally reflective, self-aware and knew the root cause of their stress and when it was likely to happen. They identified specific periods of stress at particular times throughout their degree, such as when settling in to university. Assessments were seen as a significant source of stress: 'I feel stressed when it comes to assignments, especially if they're all due at similar times because you finally finish one then have another to do straight after' (P1, Group A); 'Exam time is definitely the most stressful for me' (P1, Group A); 'Stressful times are usually around deadline period' (P2, Group A); 'when exams have come round and big assignments I have become very stressed and overloaded'. (P4, Group B)

The day assessment results are released was also recognised as being stressful: 'Results day is also stressful as I find myself constantly checking my phone to see if they've been released' (P1, Group A); 'my mental health suffered during the waiting times for exam results' (P3, Group B); 'During exams and the release of results my mental health tends to be at an all time low'. (P4, Group B)

Assessments were also identified as challenging by law participants. Participants explained that 'achieving good grades' often meant ignoring their mental health, either by not practicing self-care or feeling unable to access support: 'I tend to disregard my own health needs because I am too concerned about achieving good grades' (P1, Group C); 'I knew who to go to in times of stress but very often didn't because I didn't feel like I had the time to.' (P3, Group C). However, law participants generally described themselves as being 'extremely' stressed and did not display as nuanced reflections on the times and experiences they found stressful beyond assessment.

Peer Support. Psychology participants were generally very positive about the support received from their peers. Belonging to a community of peers sharing their experiences made an important contribution to positive mental wellbeing. Being able to seek empathetic support from others on the course – either in person or via social media – was seen as a key way to cope with stressful experiences: 'during stressful times I felt comfortable to ask questions in the online group chat or to friends I met in classes which was helpful and nice to hear that other people felt the same' (P3, Group E); 'I actually think the students are very supportive! Any time I've asked for help I've

always been given it (via the psychology group chat, and in person in lectures and labs).’ (P2, Group E)

There was significant focus on how social media ‘group chats’ brought people together and provided an important source of support: ‘we have a large group chat that involves most people on the course I think and people are always willing to help each other on there’ (P2, Group A).

Law participants expressed fears of being judged or treated differently by others on the degree course if they sought peer support:

‘sometimes I would feel ashamed to admit weakness and reach out for help ... It feels as though your peers view you differently knowing you have struggled during your legal study.’ (P1, Group C)

Participants’ identity as law students also inhibited mental wellbeing, as group norms like competition appeared to undermine the potential for peer-to-peer support: ‘the message is that you have to disregard the feelings of others if you wish to succeed’ (P1, Group C). Participants were wary of peer-to-peer support because other law students were not perceived as being forthcoming: ‘students do help but clearly hold things back to prevent you knowing everything they do. Keeping their edge’ (P3, Group C). Furthermore, because of a perception that studying a law degree is ‘stressful’, participants felt they were ‘just expected ... to be able to deal with it’ (P2, Group C).

Staff Support. Staff also played a supportive role in the community by answering questions students had, delivering good quality teaching and by giving workshops on how to handle anxiety and stress. Psychology participants highlighted it was ‘really nice and reassuring knowing I have my tutor there for extra support and that I can go to them whenever I need’ (P1, Group A).

For law participants, it seemed that belonging to a staff-student community that contributed to positive mental wellbeing. There was a strong emphasis on staff support. Participants spoke very highly of the support they had received from their lecturers during stressful times: ‘My lecturers continually do everything they can to make the course less stressful’ (P3, Group C); ‘[lecturers] are really wonderful and I haven’t felt too burdensome when asking for help. Their open office hours are something to make the most of.’ (P1, Group C)

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore how academic identity and a sense of belonging to a learning community can positively impact students' mental wellbeing, and potential areas in which this impact may be improved.

Peer-to-peer relationships appeared to be an important indicator of positive mental health among participants. As identified in the themes *peer connections* and *staff connections*, there appeared to be a difference between the relationships developed by participants studying psychology and those studying law. Psychology participants appeared to benefit from a collegiate and supportive peer-to-peer community and spoke positively about their relationships with other psychology students. This appeared to positively impact their mental wellbeing. The norms of law participants' academic identity, which focused on competition and success,⁵⁶ did not appear to aid in the development of a supportive peer-to-peer community. As identified in the theme *staff connections*, law participants spoke more positively about staff-student relations than about relationships with their peers, whom they viewed as competitors. This had a negative influence on mental wellbeing. This finding is in line with Social Identity Theory and social cures⁵⁷ as students' group memberships appeared to affect their attitudes towards peers and staff. The two academic in-groups were different in their attitudes towards peers, and members reported different behaviours in line with their group norms.

The 'Social Cure' perspective highlights the potentially transformative nature of the social support we receive from group members and how such support helps us cope with stress'.⁵⁸ Building on this view, the results of our focus groups suggest that academic identity and community are important factors when undergraduate students are coping with challenging times. This is seen in the themes *coping with challenging times*, *peer support* and *staff support*. Psychology participants displayed a nuanced awareness of the times and reasons they may experience stress while law participants described themselves as being 'extremely stressed'. Psychology participants also drew notably more support from peers than was reported by law participants. Positive peer-to-peer relationships created an empathetic peer support network that psychology participants felt able to access

⁵⁶ n28; n33.

⁵⁷ E.g. n5, n11.

⁵⁸ n12

through social media or in person. A strong academic identity and sense of belonging to the learning community appeared to be related to help-seeking behaviours likely to contribute to positive mental wellbeing, such as reaching out on group chats. However, groups ‘can be an important source of strength’ when members feel ‘supported and capable’, but ‘can exacerbate (and even create) stress’ if they ‘feel distressed and incapable’, and very different outcomes can occur if support is actively withheld.⁵⁹ This is similarly indicated in the apparent distinction between psychology and law participants’ experience of peer relationships and support (see *peer connections* and *peer support*); law participants expressed a concern that even helpful peers would hold back so as to retain a competitive edge. This may suggest that students’ membership of a school of study can be influential on mental wellbeing, in both positive and negative ways, and may discourage help seeking when perceptions of other group members are negative.

Academic identity continually developed throughout participants’ degrees and participants indicated this was linked with greater immersion and understanding of the subject and its applications, as well as adopting the norms expected of the subject groups’ members (see *participation* and *competition*). A participant with a strong sense of identity was more likely to label themselves as a psychology or law student and, in turn, as part of the learning community. However, participants’ academic identity and sense of community were not always linked in expected ways. While a strong social identity may lead to in-group favouritism, even when people do not know each other,⁶⁰ this does not automatically lead to a sense of community between in-group members if group norms are competitive and adversarial, despite members having a strong academic identity (see *collaborative vs competitive participation*). Law participants with a strong identity as a lawyer appeared to behave in line with competitive and adversarial norms, which may lead to decreased wellbeing as it may diminish peer support opportunities (see *competition* and *peer support*). This is consistent with literature on the ‘social curse’, which indicates that not all group memberships are healthy for us.⁶¹ Literature on the mental health and wellbeing of law students supports this point.⁶² Work by Bleasdale and Humphreys identified a comparable trend: music

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ n11.

⁶¹ Kellezi, B., & Reicher, S. “Social cure or social curse? The psychological impact of extreme events during the Kosovo conflict” In J. Jetten, C. Haslam, & S.A. Haslam, *The social cure: Identity, health and wellbeing*, (Hove: Psychology Press, 2012)

⁶² n28.

students worked collaboratively and medicine students provided each other with a ‘safety net’, but law students were typically seen as competitive.⁶³ This is significant because a strong sense of community is an important contributor to positive mental wellbeing, as it can help to reduce stress by up to thirty percent.⁶⁴

Among our participants, psychology students who reported good peer relationships and a strong sense of community reported greater help-seeking behaviours than law students, whose sense of community appeared orientated towards university staff (see *peer connections* and *staff connections*). As peer support is a significant influence on young people remaining in HE,⁶⁵ it would appear that group norms that are orientated towards competition are disadvantageous. When peers are supportive and participants felt able to turn to their peer community for help, it appeared to encourage help-seeking behaviours earlier in periods of difficulty rather than at the point a participant reached crisis. When negative views about other students exist, this may lead to reduced peer-to-peer support and students may instead rely on staff. Psychology participants could generally reach out via social media to a large number of peers when experiencing difficulties with an assessment (see *peer support*), but law participants turned to staff whose time is finite and typically accessible during office hours (see *staff support*).

While academic identity appeared to influence participants’ mental wellbeing, their developing professional identity as either a ‘lawyer’ or ‘psychologist’ was not reported as being significant. One reason participants gave for this is that their professional identity had not developed to a point where they identified as in-group members of the legal or psychological professions (see membership (see *professional membership*)). **Another reason may be that not all participants sought to become members of these professional communities and were instead pursuing other career paths, therefore a sense of professional identity as a lawyer or psychologist would be contingent on students following traditional career trajectories.** University is a site of identity negotiation and transition for future professionals⁶⁶ and an academic setting creates opportunities to develop new

⁶³ Bleasdale, L., & Humphreys, S. *Undergraduate resilience research project: Project Report* (Leeds Institute for Teaching Excellence: University of Leeds, 2018).

⁶⁴ n9.

⁶⁵ n15.

⁶⁶ Larson, M.S. *The rise of professionalism: A sociological analysis* (California: University of California Press, 1977).

cultural capitals.⁶⁷ Networking events are important spaces for students to ‘try on’ professional identities,⁶⁸ assessing their compatibility and sense of belonging. However, it is students’ own social and cultural capital that allows them to feel at ease within a professional environment.⁶⁹ As participants perceived a gap between ‘student’ and ‘professional’ identity (see *professional membership*), it is likely that participants did not yet possess sufficient capital to identify as in-group members of a profession. Thus, even if students aspire to join specific professions post degree, professional identity may not significantly influence wellbeing.

Conclusion

Consistent with Social Identity Theory, students’ academic identity and sense of community belonging may play an important role in their mental wellbeing. Strong identities, positive peer relationships and a sense of belonging to the learning community appeared to positively influence mental wellbeing and help-seeking behaviours. When peers were viewed as competitors or with suspicion, peer-to-peer support appeared less forthcoming, and this affected help-seeking behaviours. Trying to cope with challenges without support is likely to impact negatively on mental wellbeing, whereas seeking and receiving support is likely to improve wellbeing.⁷⁰ If students are able to access support – and are encouraged to communicate and share their difficulties with each other and with staff – this may bolster their resilience and wellbeing. Belonging to a community of students and staff appeared to provide participants with access to a wide network of support during their degree.

Future Research Directions

We recruited participants from two academic schools in a research-intensive university in the Midlands. The region is traditionally associated with the coal and pottery industry; the student body will likely differ from rural or inner-city institutions. Student cohorts at Russell Group or Post-92 institutions may also differ. A national study could be conducted across a range of

⁶⁷ Bourdieu, P. “The forms of capital” in J. Richardson, *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986), 241–58; Baxter, A. & Britton, C. “Risk, identity and change: becoming a mature student.” (2001) 11(1) *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 87-104.

⁶⁸ Manderson, D. & Turner, S. “Coffee house: Habitus and performance among law students.” (2006) 31(3) *Law & Social Inquiry*, 649-676, 665.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Royal College of Psychiatrists, *Mental Health of Students in Higher Education: College report CR166* (London: RCP, 2011).

institutions to better understand how students' identity and sense of community influences mental health. This study should also include a wider range of academic schools with both large and small cohorts, and subjects with links to professions (i.e. medicine, nursing, law) and those without. A future study should also explore how identity and sense of community develops over time, as this study was only able to provide a snapshot in time during the autumn semester. For example, law students may develop a stronger professional identity towards the end of their third year of study as they approach vocational learning. Another future direction for research is to explore how we can create positive communities within academic schools of study that facilitate help-seeking behaviours and support mental health and wellbeing. This may involve challenging the culture in subjects based on competition and adversarialism by introducing a collaborative ethos and more group-based activities. To reduce competition and increase belonging, Law schools could introduce greater opportunity for peer collaboration both in seminars and, more broadly, across the syllabus, such as joint research projects. These opportunities would need to be embedded into teaching from Year 1 and the value of collaboration would also need to be clearly and effectively communicated to students. Staff could act as collaborative role models by showcasing how collaboration adds value to their own research. Law schools might further aid such initiatives by implementing consistent membership of seminar groups across 'core' modules to foster a sense of community and familiarity between students. To reduce the competitive elements of a law degree we must reflect on our own practices, how they may encourage or reduce competition, and be creative in how we deliver an effective and robust curriculum while developing a community to which students feel they belong, regardless of background or future aspirations.