

THE ROLE OF RELIGION ON STUDENT WELLBEING

Students with low levels of resilience, experience long-term negative effects, with many withdrawing from university, struggling with their mental health and completing their degrees with poor grades (McCann & Hicks, 2011; Ayala & Manzano, 2018). Despite efforts by universities to raise awareness, the stigma around mental health is still prominent within the Black student population. Those who manage to access mental health support are still less likely to regain their health, due to the beliefs that they will bring shame upon the family or that their problems are linked to God. Thus, the aim of this study is to explore what factors are implicated in the resilience of Black students within the university, particularly among students who identify as religious/spiritual and whether these factors could be incorporated into therapeutic environments, thus making mental health services more tailored for them.

The objectives are as follows:

- How do Black students respond to challenges in their university lives; are there similarities or differences between the different religion groups?
- How do they feel about accessing mental health services in face of challenge?
- Can the digital storytelling process help students recognise their own attitudes and implicit biases, and empower them to improve their own welfare?

The intended sample is 36 UK university students from the major religious groups (e.g., Christianity and Islam). A qualitative methodology called digital storytelling will be used to explore these research aims. This is because it involves multiple interactions with the students, thus triggering deep reflection and increasing in-depth information obtained at each stage of the study. The first stage of the study consists of story circles - these are discussion groups which tend to begin informally, and as people recognise that they are coming together with similar intentions and will share a common experience, a sense of mutual trust is established. Here, participants will share their opinions and university experiences which will also be shaped through feedback from other members in the workshop. Prompts may be used when necessary to guide discussions, but stories should emerge as they need to, without imposing structures or styles. In the second stage, students will be guided in developing their “digital” story including scanning photographs, using voiceovers, and writing scripts through the WeVideo Software (a user-friendly web-based video editing platform). These workshops will be held individually allowing for one-on-one exploration of the perceived core aspects of each students’ lived experience. Finally, participants will come together to share their final videos, enabling further discussions. There will be one weeks’ time-interval between each workshop. Thematic analysis will be employed on students’ discussions during each workshop and on the final videos. The university is currently investigating ways to reduce mental health inequality for individuals who are less likely to benefit from treatment, thus I hope that the themes that may emerge from this study may be used to generate aspects important to student wellbeing and so guide development of tailored interventions for BME students.

References

- Ayala, J. C., & Manzano, G. (2018). Academic performance of first-year university students: The influence of resilience and engagement. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(7), 1321-1335.
- McCann, A., & Hicks, R. E. (2011). Resilience in university students: Academic success, recollected parental style, and coping strategies. In *Wayfinding through life's challenges: Coping and survival* (pp. 485-500). Nova Science Publishers.