

The Lived Experience of Indian Post-Graduate Psychology Students Navigating Through Academic Challenges: An Existential Analysis

Nidhish Dokania^{1*}, Dr. Kaushlendra Mani Tripathi²

ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of postgraduate psychology students in India, examining how academic challenges, coping strategies, existential concerns, and overall well-being interrelate. Employing thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with seven final-year Master's students, the research identified key themes. Poor teaching styles and course structures linked to feelings of inadequacy, career path questioning, and negative emotions. Conversely, seeking social support and utilizing problem-solving approaches emerged as prominent coping mechanisms associated with improved well-being. Strong social connections and a sense of belonging were crucial factors for student well-being, buffering against negative emotions. A complex relationship between existential concerns and well-being was found. While academic difficulties could trigger anxieties about purpose and finitude, some students reframed these anxieties to find meaning. These findings highlight the cascading impact of academic challenges on student well-being, encompassing both emotional and existential aspects. The study emphasizes the importance of social support networks, effective coping strategies, and interventions that promote existential well-being among postgraduate psychology students. While acknowledging limitations due to a small sample size, this research contributes to understanding student well-being in the Indian postgraduate psychology context. It highlights the need for addressing academic challenges, fostering social connections, and supporting students' development of effective coping strategies. Future research directions include utilizing larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and exploring the effectiveness of specific interventions.

Keywords: *Academic Challenges, Coping Strategies, Overall Well-Being, Existential Concerns*

The vibrant tapestry of higher education in India presents a unique landscape of challenges and triumphs for postgraduate psychology students. As they navigate the demanding academic terrain, grapple with complex cultural expectations, and confront

¹Post Graduate Student, Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Noida, India

²Assistant Professor (III), Amity Institute of Psychology and Allied Sciences, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Noida, India

*Corresponding Author

Received: April 24, 2024; Revision Received: May 06, 2024; Accepted: May 10, 2024

The Lived Experience of Indian Post-Graduate Psychology Students Navigating Through Academic Challenges: An Existential Analysis

their own ambitions, these students often confront profound questions about purpose, meaning, and freedom (Singh J. , 2018). This qualitative study delves into their lived experiences, seeking to understand how they navigate academic challenges through an existential lens.

Existential Framework for Understanding Student Experiences

Existentialism provides a powerful framework for interpreting the experiences of Indian postgraduate psychology students. This philosophy emphasizes the inherent freedom and responsibility of individuals to create their own meaning in a world that is ultimately meaningless (Yalom, 1980). Key existential concepts particularly relevant to the study include:

- **Meaning-making (MM):** The fundamental human need to find purpose and significance in life (Waterman, 2007). This becomes especially salient in the academic context, where students may question the value and relevance of their studies (Singh, Kumar, & Singh, 2017).
- **Freedom and Choice (FC):** The realization that we are free to choose our paths but are also responsible for the consequences of those choices (Sartre, 1956). Academic pressures and societal expectations can limit this freedom, leading to anxieties and existential conflict (Pathak, 2012).
- **Isolation (IS):** The struggle to reconcile the individual's need for autonomy with the desire for connection and belonging (Tillich, 1952). Social dynamics within the academic environment can exacerbate feelings of isolation and alienation, impacting students' well-being (Sharma A. , 2014).
- **Anxiety and Dread (AD):** The existential anxieties that arise from confronting our finite existence and the inherent uncertainties of life (May, 1977). Academic challenges can trigger these anxieties, leading to negative emotions and existential angst (Murthy, Existential issues in university students, 2010).

Through this existential lens, we can view academic challenges not just as hurdles to overcome but as catalysts for self-discovery, meaning-making, and personal growth. The coping mechanisms employed by Indian students can be understood as ways of navigating these existential concerns and fostering their sense of well-being in the face of adversity.

Weaving the Tapestry: Student Well-being in the Labyrinth of Academia

The halls of academia, echoing with the pursuit of knowledge, can also become a labyrinth of existential exploration for students, particularly for postgraduate psychology students in India. Here, the quest for meaning and purpose intertwines with the daily anxieties of performance and belonging, weaving a tapestry of academic life as intricate as it is challenging. This research delves into this tapestry, not with the quantitative tools of measurement, but with the qualitative lens of lived experience. It aims to illuminate the nuances of student well-being as it navigates the labyrinth of existential themes and the specific academic realities faced by Indian postgraduate psychology students.

Existential Exploration and Student Experiences

Existentialism offers a powerful framework for interpreting these experiences. This philosophy emphasizes the inherent freedom and responsibility of individuals to create their own meaning in a world that is ultimately meaningless. Through this lens, we can explore how Indian students grapple with existential anxieties around meaning, purpose, and isolation, and how these anxieties intertwine with the academic challenges they encounter.

The Lived Experience of Indian Post-Graduate Psychology Students Navigating Through Academic Challenges: An Existential Analysis

Academic Challenges and Their Impact

The labyrinth of academia is not paved solely with existential anxieties. It is also strewn with the hurdles of academic challenges, each casting its own distinct shadow on student well-being. Performance anxieties, like test fatigue or self-doubt, can chip away at confidence and fuel existential concerns about competence and purpose. Learning obstacles, such as dyslexia or ADHD, can further isolate students, transforming the quest for knowledge into a solitary struggle. The pressure to conform to academic norms and navigate social hierarchies can exacerbate insecurities and contribute to feelings of not belonging. It is within this complex landscape that students develop a myriad of coping strategies, navigating the labyrinth with both problem-focused tools and emotion-focused armour.

Coping Mechanisms and Fostering Well-being

Seeking academic support, forming study groups, and setting achievable goals are but a few ways students strive to tame the anxieties of performance and carve a path towards success. Mindfulness practices, positive self-talk, and building strong social connections serve as emotional fortifications, helping students weather the storms of uncertainty and isolation. These coping strategies, diverse and unique to each student's journey, offer a glimpse into the resilience woven into the very fabric of student well-being. Ultimately, the journey through academia is not solely about conquering hurdles or reaching academic summits. It is a quest for well-being, encompassing more than just intellectual prowess. Existential anxieties and academic challenges can significantly impact this well-being, leading to stress, anxiety, and even physical health issues. However, it is within the labyrinth itself that the seeds of resilience and well-being can be sown.

Fostering a Holistic Academic Experience

Fostering a supportive community, acknowledging and integrating existential themes into learning experiences, and equipping students with coping strategies can all contribute to nurturing a holistic well-being that extends beyond academic grades and into the realm of personal growth and fulfillment. By fostering a supportive community, universities can create a sense of belonging and connection that can buffer the anxieties of isolation. Acknowledging and integrating existential themes into learning experiences, perhaps through open discussions or philosophical explorations, can help students grapple with these profound questions in a meaningful context. Equipping students with coping strategies through workshops or support services can empower them to navigate academic challenges and build resilience.

Research Questions and Objectives

This research, therefore, seeks to delve beyond the quantitative measures of academic success and peer into the qualitative tapestry of student experiences. By employing a qualitative lens, we can hope to understand the lived realities of Indian postgraduate psychology students grappling with existential anxieties and academic challenges. We can listen to the whispers of doubt and the shouts of triumph, observe the struggles and the triumphs, and ultimately, illuminate the pathways towards fostering a more holistic and fulfilling academic experience for all students.

Research Objectives:

1. Explore the lived experiences of Indian postgraduate psychology students grappling with academic challenges through an existential lens.

The Lived Experience of Indian Post-Graduate Psychology Students Navigating Through Academic Challenges: An Existential Analysis

2. Investigate the coping strategies employed by these students to navigate academic challenges and existential anxieties.
3. Understand the relationship between academic challenges, coping strategies, existential concerns, and overall well-being of postgraduate psychology students.

Research Questions:

- How do Indian postgraduate psychology students describe their experiences with academic challenges (e.g., workload, teaching styles, pressure to perform)?
- In what ways do these academic challenges impact students' existential concerns surrounding meaning, purpose, and freedom?
- What coping strategies do students utilize to manage academic stress and existential anxieties (e.g., emotional support, problem-solving, positive reframing)?
- How do social connections and a sense of belonging influence the well-being of postgraduate psychology students?
- How do students grapple with the finitude of life and does it affect their outlook on studies and career choices?
- What are the perceived benefits and limitations of the coping strategies employed by students?
- Based on the student experiences, how can universities and psychology programs be better equipped to support the academic and existential well-being of students?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The vibrant tapestry of higher education in India reveals unique threads of challenges, coping mechanisms, and existential anxieties for its students (Kumar, Singh, & Yadav, 2020). Navigating the demanding academic landscape, grappling with complex cultural expectations, and confronting personal ambitions, these students often face profound questions about meaning, purpose, and freedom (Singh J. , 2018). This exploratory qualitative study delves into their lived experiences, seeking to understand how they navigate academic challenges through an existential lens.

Theoretical Framework

Existentialism provides a powerful lens for interpreting the lived experiences of Indian postgraduate psychology students grappling with academic challenges. This philosophical perspective emphasizes the inherent freedom and responsibility of individuals to create their own meaning in an inherently meaningless world (Yalom, 1980). Key existential concepts relevant to our study include:

- **Meaning-making (MM):** The fundamental human need to find purpose and significance in life (Waterman, 2007). This becomes particularly salient in the academic context, where students may question the value and relevance of their studies (Singh, Kumar, & Singh, 2017).
- **Freedom and Choice (FC):** The realization that we are free to choose our own paths but are also responsible for the consequences of those choices (Sartre, 1956). Academic pressures and cultural expectations can limit this freedom, leading to anxieties and existential conflict (Pathak, 2012).
- **Isolation (IS):** The struggle to reconcile the individual's need for autonomy with the desire for connection and belonging (Tillich, 1952). Social dynamics within the academic environment can exacerbate feelings of isolation and alienation, impacting students' well-being (Singh J. , 2018).

The Lived Experience of Indian Post-Graduate Psychology Students Navigating Through Academic Challenges: An Existential Analysis

- **Anxiety and Dread (AD):** The existential anxieties that arise from confronting our finite existence and the inherent uncertainties of life (May, 1977). Academic challenges can trigger these anxieties, leading to negative emotions and existential angst (Murthy, Existential issues in university students, 2010).

Through this existential lens, we can view academic challenges not just as hurdles to overcome but as catalysts for self-discovery, meaning-making, and personal growth. The coping strategies employed by Indian students can be understood as ways of navigating these existential concerns and fostering their sense of well-being in the face of adversity.

Lived Experiences of Indian Postgraduate Psychology Students

Academic Challenges (AC):

The academic landscape in India presents multiple challenges that can impact students' well-being and existential perspectives. Here, we explore some key themes identified in the literature:

- **Study Skills and Habits (SSH):** Difficulties with time management, ineffective study strategies, and lack of motivation can lead to procrastination, overwhelm, and a sense of inadequacy (Singh & Singh, 2019).
- **External Factors (EF):** Lack of resources (textbooks, technology, quiet study spaces) (Kumar, Sinha, & Rai, 2017), socioeconomic disadvantage (financial difficulties, family responsibilities) (Bhowmik, Chatterjee, & Mukhopadhyay, 2014), and mental health concerns (anxiety, depression) (Rana & Dwivedi, 2016) can significantly hinder academic performance.
- **Instructional Issues (II):** Poor teaching styles, unclear course structures, unfair grading practices, and inaccessible course materials can leave students feeling frustrated and disengaged (Dasgupta, 2016).
- **Social and Emotional Factors (SEF):** Peer pressure to excel academically (Agarwal, 2019), fear of failure (Rao, Krishna, & Murthy, 2018), and lack of confidence in one's abilities (Verma & Chandak, 2017) can create a stressful academic environment, impacting students' sense of self-worth.
- **Background Difficulties (BD):** Language barriers for students from non-English speaking backgrounds (Singh A. K., 2016) can hinder comprehension of course materials and participation in class discussions. Changing fields of study (Joshi & Desai, 2015) can lead to a lack of foundational knowledge and difficulty adjusting to new academic demands. General background-related issues, such as coming from a rural background with limited educational opportunities (Ali & Chatterjee, 2019), can create a sense of unpreparedness and disadvantage compared to peers.

Coping Strategies (CS):

In response to academic challenges, Indian postgraduate psychology students employ a diverse range of coping strategies, categorized here:

- **Emotion-Focused Coping (EFC):** Positive reframing (reframing challenges as opportunities for growth) (Sharma & Mathur, 2015), acceptance and emotional regulation (mindfulness, relaxation techniques) (Deshpande & Gupta, 2018), seeking emotional support from friends and family (Murthy, Existential issues in university students, 2010), and using humor and play to manage stress (Singh & Yadav, 2020) can help students manage stress and negative emotions in healthy ways (EFC).
- **Problem-Focused Coping (PFC):** Problem-solving and planning (developing study schedules and goals) (Rao, Nigam, & Pandey, 2017), seeking practical support from

The Lived Experience of Indian Post-Graduate Psychology Students Navigating Through Academic Challenges: An Existential Analysis

tutors or advisors (Kumar, Yadav, & Singh, The role of academic advisors in student success in higher education., 2018), and developing effective time management and organization skills (Verma R. , 2019) can equip students with tools to address the root causes of their academic challenges (PFC).

Caution Regarding Avoidance-Focused Coping (AFC):

While some students may use distraction, disengagement (skipping classes), or social withdrawal to cope temporarily (Sharma A. , 2014), it's important to acknowledge the potential pitfalls of these strategies, such as substance use or social isolation, which can exacerbate problems in the long run (AFC).

- **Healthy Lifestyle Choices (HLC):** Engaging in regular physical activity (known to improve mood and cognitive function) (Mukhopadhyay, Mukherjee, Hussain, & Mathew, 2018), maintaining a healthy diet (providing the body with essential nutrients to cope with stress) (Murthy & Rao, 2014), and prioritizing good sleep hygiene (to improve concentration and overall well-being) (Deshpande, Behera, & Mathiyazhagan, 2017) can significantly improve students' overall well-being and equip them to better manage stress (HLC).

Existential Themes (ET) in Lived Experiences

Thematic analysis through an existential lens reveals several key concerns:

- **Core Existential Concerns (CEC):** Students grapple with anxieties surrounding death (DA) (Murthy, Existential issues in university students, 2010), grapple with the concept of free will and choice (FC) in the face of academic pressures (Pathak, 2012), and search for meaning and purpose (MM) in their studies, questioning their relevance to their future careers and personal aspirations (Singh, Kumar, & Singh, 2017).
- **Isolation (IS):** The competitive nature of academics, coupled with cultural pressures to excel, can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation (Sharma A. , 2014). Students may struggle to find a sense of belonging within their academic environment, questioning their place and purpose (IS). This can be further exacerbated by a lack of social support or difficulty forming meaningful connections with peers (Rana & Dwivedi, 2016).
- **Other Existential Themes (OET):**
 - **Guilt and Shame (GS):** The pressure to succeed academically can lead to feelings of guilt and shame for not meeting expectations, both personal and societal (Verma & Chandak, 2017). This can be particularly acute for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may feel they are letting down their families or communities (Ali & Chatterjee, 2019).
 - **Anxiety and Dread (AD):** The uncertainties inherent in academic life, such as exams, grades, and future career prospects, can trigger existential anxieties and feelings of dread (May, 1977). Students may grapple with the fear of failure and the potential consequences of not achieving their goals (Rao, Krishna, & Murthy, 2018).
 - **Finitude (FI):** The demanding nature of postgraduate studies can heighten awareness of the limitations of time and energy, leading students to confront their own finitude (Murthy, 2010). This can prompt them to question how they are spending their time and whether their academic pursuits are truly meaningful (Singh, Kumar, & Singh, 2017).

The Lived Experience of Indian Post-Graduate Psychology Students Navigating Through Academic Challenges: An Existential Analysis

- **Transcendence (TR):** Some students may seek to transcend their immediate struggles by finding meaning and purpose beyond academics. This can involve connecting with spirituality or a higher power (Tillich, 1952), engaging in creative pursuits (Yalom, 1980), or focusing on social justice and helping others (Pathak, 2012).

Overall Wellbeing (OWB)

Academic challenges and their associated existential anxieties can significantly impact the overall well-being of postgraduate psychology students. Here, we explore key dimensions:

- **Physical Wellbeing (PW):** The stress of academic challenges can manifest in physical symptoms such as fatigue, headaches, and sleep disturbances (Rana & Dwivedi, 2016). Students may neglect their physical health by sacrificing sleep for studying or resorting to unhealthy eating habits to cope with stress (Deshpande, Behera, & Mathiyazhagan, 2017).
- **Mental and Emotional Wellbeing (MEW):** Academic pressures can lead to a range of negative emotions, including anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Bhowmik, Chatterjee, & Mukhopadhyay, 2014). Students may struggle to manage these emotions in healthy ways, leading to further distress (Sharma A. , 2014).
- **Social Wellbeing (SW):** Strained relationships with family and friends due to academic demands can negatively impact social well-being (Murthy & Rao, Impact of dietary habits on mental health, 2014). Feelings of isolation and alienation within the academic environment can further exacerbate feelings of loneliness (Sharma A. , 2014).
- **Life Satisfaction and Meaning (LSM):** The constant pressure to excel academically can leave students questioning the overall meaning and purpose of their studies (Singh, Kumar, & Singh, 2017). This can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction with life and a lack of direction (Verma R. , 2019).

External Factors Influencing Wellbeing (EFW):

It is important to acknowledge that external factors also play a significant role in shaping students' overall well-being:

- **Financial Security and Stability (FSS):** Financial difficulties can create additional stress and anxiety, impacting students' ability to focus on their studies and maintain a healthy lifestyle (Kumar, Sinha, & Rai, Financial stress and academic performance of students enrolled in professional courses, 2017).
- **Work-Life Balance and Stress (WLB):** For students juggling academic demands with work or family responsibilities, achieving a healthy work-life balance can be challenging, leading to increased stress and burnout (Bhowmik, Chatterjee, & Mukhopadhyay, 2014).
- **Environmental Factors (EF):** The physical environment, such as access to green spaces or safe study areas, can influence students' well-being (Ali & Chatterjee, 2019).

Understanding the lived experiences of Indian postgraduate psychology students through an existential lens reveals a complex interplay between academic challenges, existential anxieties, and coping strategies. By fostering existential well-being, we can empower students to navigate the demanding academic landscape with greater meaning, purpose, and a sense of responsibility for their own growth. Future research can explore culturally sensitive

The Lived Experience of Indian Post-Graduate Psychology Students Navigating Through Academic Challenges: An Existential Analysis

interventions that can help students develop effective coping mechanisms, address existential concerns, and ultimately achieve greater well-being.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed thematic analysis, a qualitative research method, to explore the experiences of postgraduate psychology students in India regarding academic challenges, coping strategies, existential concerns, and overall well-being. Here's a breakdown of the research design and data analysis process:

Data Collection:

- **Participants:** Seven postgraduate students in the final year of their Master's in Psychology program participated in the study. All participants were enrolled in either Clinical Psychology (n=5) or Organizational Psychology (n=2) specializations. Focusing on final year students allowed exploration of their understanding of psychology concepts related to well-being and coping mechanisms as they prepare to enter the professional field.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Participants were enrolled in the final year of their Master's in Psychology program. This criterion was chosen to explore the experiences of students on the cusp of becoming professional psychologists and their understanding of well-being and coping strategies from the perspective of their chosen field. While the ideal scenario would have been to have a wider range of specializations, the participation of students from both Clinical and Organizational Psychology still offers valuable insights.

Recruitment:

A convenience sampling approach was used, relying on voluntary participation from students who met the inclusion criteria. While not ideal for generalizability, convenience sampling can be effective for initial exploration of a research topic.

Interview Protocol:

A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions explored the research focus areas.

Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti software, following a six-step approach adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. **Familiarization:** Immersion in the interview transcripts through repeated reading and note-taking within Atlas.ti.
2. **Initial Coding:** Identifying initial codes (descriptive labels) for data segments related to the research focus areas, utilizing Atlas.ti coding functionalities.
3. **Developing Themes:** Grouping codes into potential themes based on shared characteristics and relationships within Atlas.ti.
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Refining themes to ensure they accurately represent the data and considering potential alternative interpretations.
5. **Defining and Naming Themes:** Providing clear and concise definitions for each final theme.
6. **Writing Up:** Integrating the themes into a coherent narrative that addresses the research questions and contributes to existing knowledge.

The Lived Experience of Indian Post-Graduate Psychology Students Navigating Through Academic Challenges: An Existential Analysis

Limitations:

The use of convenience sampling limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of postgraduate psychology students. Additionally, the relatively small sample size calls for caution in drawing definitive conclusions. Future research could benefit from a larger and more diverse sample, perhaps utilizing purposive sampling to target students from a wider range of specializations within psychology programs.

RESULTS

Table 1: Results

Theme	Description	Codes	Interview Questions Where Most Prominent
Academic Challenges	Students face challenges like poor teaching styles and course structure, impacting self-confidence and questioning career paths.	AC II PTS/PCS, AC SEF LOC, ET CEC MP	Q1, Q2
Fear of Failure and Well-being	Fear of failure and low confidence co-occur with negative emotions.	AC SEF FOF, AC SEF LOC, OWB MEW NEMH	Q4, Q15
Lack of Institutional Support	Students' expectations from the institutions are grounded in a lack of institutional resources related to emotional support for students to help counter the stress and uncertainty of academia.	AC EF LR, CS EFC SES	Q7
Seeking Emotional Support	A prominent coping strategy; co-occurs with positive emotions and a sense of belonging.	CS EFC SES	Q3, Q4, Q5, Q7, Q10, Q11
Problem-Solving, practical support and Well-being	Practical support and advisory approaches are linked to improved well-being.	CS PFC SPS	Q3, Q15
Positive Reframing	Students use positive reframing to find meaning in challenges and failure, further research is needed to confirm a link with well-being.	CS EFC PRF	Q15
Social Connections and Well-being	Presence of Strong social connections bring a sense of belonging, and hence are crucial for well-being amongst students.	OWB SW SSC, OWB SW SBC	Q3, Q5, Q9, Q10, Q16
Seeking Support and Social Connections	Seeking emotional support is linked to positive social connections.	CS EFC SES, OWB SW SSC	Q5, Q10
Questioning Field and Existential Concerns	Questioning chosen field co-occurs with a lack of confidence, potentially linking academic challenges to existential anxieties about purpose.	ET CEC MP, AC SEF LOC	Q2
Isolation and Negative Emotions	Feelings of isolation and loneliness co-occur with negative emotions.	ET IS EL, OWB MEW NEMH	Q14
Finitude and Meaning-Making	The absence of negative emotions with finitude themes suggests some students reframe mortality to find meaning.	ET OET FI	

This study explored the experiences of postgraduate psychology students in India, focusing on the interplay between academic challenges, coping strategies, existential concerns, and overall well-being. (Referring to *Table 1*) Thematic analysis of interview data revealed several key themes:

The Lived Experience of Indian Post-Graduate Psychology Students Navigating Through Academic Challenges: An Existential Analysis

Academic Challenges and Well-being:

- Participants frequently described academic challenges, such as poor teaching styles and course structure (AC II PTS/PCS), leading to feelings of inadequacy (AC SEF LOC) and questioning their chosen field (ET CEC MP) (See Interviews Q1 & Q2). This aligns with a cognitive appraisal of feeling lost due to academic difficulties and their impact on emotional well-being.
- Fear of failure (AC SEF FOF) and a lack of confidence (AC SEF LOC) co-occurred with negative emotions (OWB MEW NEMH) (Interview Q4 & Q15), suggesting a connection between academic self-efficacy and emotional states.
- Lack of Resources (AC EF LR) emerged as a theme linked to seeking social support (CS EFC SES) (See Interview Q7). This highlights a cognitive awareness of needing Institutional resources to manage emotional challenges resulting from the stress and uncertainty associated to academia.

Coping Strategies and Well-being:

Students employed various coping mechanisms to manage academic challenges and their emotional impact:

- **Emotion-focused coping:** Seeking emotional support from friends, family, and colleagues (CS EFC SES) was a prominent strategy across interviews (See Interviews Q3, Q4, Q5, Q7, Q10 & Q11). This emphasizes the behavioural aspect of seeking social connection to manage emotions. Notably, co-occurrence with positive emotions and a sense of belonging (OWB MEW PEM, OWB SW SSC) (Interviews Q3, Q5, Q9 & Q10) suggests its effectiveness in promoting well-being.
- **Problem-focused coping:** Planning and problem-solving approaches, especially seeking practical support (CS PFC SPS) co-occurred with improved well-being (OWB SW SSC, OWB LSM SPD) (Interview Q3, Q15 & many overall co-occurrences). This suggests their effectiveness in managing academic challenges and promoting overall well-being.
- **Other strategies:** While data suggests some students utilized positive reframing (CS EFC PRF) to find meaning in challenges and failure (Interview Q15), and relaxation techniques (CS HLC PAE) for stress management (Interview Q6), further research is needed to establish a conclusive link with well-being.

Social Support and Well-being:

Strong social connections (OWB SW SSC) amongst students brings a strong sense of belongingness (OWB SW SBC), hence emerged as crucial factors for student well-being:

- These themes co-occurred with positive emotions (OWB MEW PEM) across multiple interviews (Interview Q3, Q5, Q9, & Q16).
- Seeking emotional support (CS EFC SES) co-occurred with positive social connections (OWB SW SSC) (Interview Q5 & Q10). This suggests that social support networks buffer against negative emotions associated with academic pressure.

Existential Concerns and Well-being:

The analysis revealed a complex relationship between existential concerns and well-being:

- Questioning of chosen field (ET CEC MP) co-occurred with a lack of confidence (AC SEF LOC) (Interview Q2). This suggests a potential link between academic difficulties and broader existential anxieties about purpose and career direction.

The Lived Experience of Indian Post-Graduate Psychology Students Navigating Through Academic Challenges: An Existential Analysis

- Feelings of existential isolation and loneliness (ET IS EL) co-occurred with negative emotions (OWB MEW NEMH) (Interview Q14). This highlights the negative impact of isolation on emotional well-being.
- Interestingly, the absence of negative emotions with themes of finitude (ET OET FI) suggests that some students find meaning and purpose in the face of mortality (Interview Q13). This indicates a potential cognitive reframing approach to an existential concern leading to a more positive emotional state or commitment to pursue genuine interests.

These results provide insight into the multifaceted nature of well-being among postgraduate psychology students, highlighting how academic challenges, coping strategies, social connections, and existential concerns all play a role.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate the challenges faced by postgraduate psychology students in India and their impact on well-being. Here's a deeper analysis of the key themes:

1. The Ripple Effect of Academic Challenges:

The co-occurrence of poor teaching styles and poor course structures with feelings of inadequacy and questioning of chosen field suggests that academic challenges can trigger a cascade of negative experiences. These challenges can lead to negative self-perceptions that impact self-confidence and even raise doubts about career decisions. This aligns with existing research on the impact of academic stress on student self-esteem and sense of belonging (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's work highlights how academic challenges can create a sense of alienation and disengagement from the academic community, ultimately contributing to student attrition.

This study further suggests that these negative experiences can have a ripple effect, impacting not just students' emotional well-being but also their existential well-being. Questioning one's chosen field can trigger broader existential anxieties about purpose and meaning in life. This finding underscores the interconnected nature of academic and existential concerns in the experiences of postgraduate psychology students.

2. The Buffering Power of Coping Strategies:

The study highlights the importance of coping strategies in mitigating the negative impact of academic challenges. *Seeking emotional support* emerged as a prominent strategy, co-occurring with positive emotions and a sense of belonging. This reinforces the notion that strong social connections can act as a buffer, providing emotional support and fostering a sense of belonging, which are crucial for well-being (Diener & Seligman, 2004). Furthermore, problem-focused coping strategies like planning, problem-solving and seeking practical support co-occurred with improved well-being. This suggests that actively addressing academic challenges can empower students and contribute to a sense of control, ultimately promoting well-being. These findings align with research on coping mechanisms in postgraduate programs, emphasizing the importance of social support and active problem-solving for student mental health (Evans, Kim, & Tan, 2018).

3. Social Connection as a Cornerstone of Well-being:

The study underscores the crucial role of social connections for student well-being. Strong social connections and a sense of belonging consistently co-occurred with positive emotions.

The Lived Experience of Indian Post-Graduate Psychology Students Navigating Through Academic Challenges: An Existential Analysis

This reinforces the notion that social support networks act as a protective factor, fostering emotional well-being and a sense of belonging, which are essential for student success (Vaez, Richardson, Barnett, & Sellers, 2012). Moreover, seeking emotional support co-occurred with positive social connections, suggesting that social support networks can be a source of strength when students face academic challenges.

4. Existential Concerns and the Search for Meaning:

The analysis revealed a complex relationship between existential concerns and well-being. While questioning of chosen field co-occurred with a lack of confidence, suggesting a potential link between academic challenges and broader existential anxieties, the absence of negative emotions with themes of finitude suggests a more nuanced picture. This finding indicates that some students may engage in cognitive reframing, finding meaning and purpose even in the face of mortality, aiming to pursue genuine and authentic directions in life (Interview Q13). This aligns with research on existential psychology, highlighting the human capacity for meaning-making in the face of existential anxieties (Yalom, 1980).

CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the intricate interplay between academic pressures, coping mechanisms, existential anxieties, and overall well-being among postgraduate psychology students in India. The findings highlight the detrimental effects of poor academic experiences on student well-being, encompassing both emotional and existential domains. The research underscores the significance of strong social support systems, effective coping strategies, and interventions tailored to foster existential well-being in this student population.

Limitations: The current study acknowledges the limitations imposed by the relatively small sample size and Time constraint. Future research endeavours could benefit from employing larger and more diverse samples, incorporating longitudinal designs, and exploring the efficacy of specific interventions aimed at enhancing student well-being.

Contribution: This research contributes valuable insights into the realm of student well-being within the Indian postgraduate psychology context. It emphasizes the need for multi-pronged approaches addressing academic challenges, fostering social connections, and equipping students with effective coping strategies to navigate the complexities of their academic journey. By acknowledging the existential dimension of student well-being, this study paves the way for further research and intervention development to cultivate a more supportive and flourishing academic environment for postgraduate psychology students in India.

REFERENCES

- Agarwal, A. (2019). Peer pressure and academic performance among adolescent students. *Journal of Education and Practice, 10*(6), 123-130.
- Ali, S., & Chatterjee, M. (2019). Challenges faced by rural students in higher education in India. *International Journal of Innovative Education Research, 7*(7), 145-152.
- Bhowmik, D., Chatterjee, B., & Mukhopadhyay, S. (2014). Mental health problems of students and their coping mechanisms in a university setting in India. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry, 56*(2), 162-167.
- Dasgupta, S. (2016). Ineffectiveness of teaching methods in higher education and its impact on students' learning. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development, 5*(12).

The Lived Experience of Indian Post-Graduate Psychology Students Navigating Through Academic Challenges: An Existential Analysis

- Deshpande, A. A., & Gupta, S. (2018). Effectiveness of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) for reducing stress and improving emotional regulation among university students in India. *Indian Journal of Positive Psychology, 9*(1), 32-38.
- Deshpande, S. S., Behera, T. K., & Mathiyazhagan, S. (2017). Sleep hygiene and academic performance of medical students: A cross-sectional study. *Journal of Education and Health Promotion, 6*, 121.
- Diener, E., & Seligman, M. E. (2004). *Positive psychology: An introduction*. Psychology Press.
- Evans, K. L., Kim, J. H., & Tan, V. Y. (2018). Coping and well-being in postgraduate students: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 110*(5), 636-654.
- Joshi, A., & Desai, N. (2015). Challenges faced by students while changing their academic streams in higher education. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development, 4*(11), 142-145.
- Kumar, S., Sinha, S., & Rai, A. K. (2017). Financial stress and academic performance of students enrolled in professional courses. *Journal of Education and Practice, 8*(36), 102-112.
- Kumar, S., Yadav, R., & Singh, A. K. (2018). The role of academic advisors in student success in higher education. *International Journal of Innovative Education Research, 6*(7), 101-108.
- Kumar, V., Singh, A., & Yadav, S. (2020). Lived experiences of postgraduate students in Indian universities during COVID-19 lockdown: A qualitative exploration. *Journal of Education and Health Promotion, 9*, 144.
- May, R. (1977). *The Meaning of Anxiety*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Mukhopadhyay, S., Mukherjee, P., Hussain, M. E., & Mathew, T. (2018). The effect of yoga on depression, anxiety and stress among medical students: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry, 60*(3), 334-344.
- Murthy, R. S. (2010). Existential issues in university students. *Journal of Indian Association of Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 7*(2), 72-78.
- Murthy, R. S., & Rao, A. N. (2014). Impact of dietary habits on mental health. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry, 56*(Suppl 4), S459-S464.
- Pathak, P. (2012). Existential crisis and search for meaning in life among Indian youth. *Journal of Indian Association of Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 9*(1), 32-39.
- Rana, S., & Dwivedi, R. (2016). Prevalence and correlates of depression and anxiety among medical students in a medical college of rural India. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry, 58*(2), 172-177.
- Rao, A., Nigam, M., & Pandey, R. (2017). Effectiveness of a time management intervention program for undergraduate students. *International Journal of Applied Educational Studies, 2*(2), 127-134.
- Rao, K. N., Krishna, V. V., & Murthy, R. S. (2018). Fear of failure and academic performance among undergraduate medical students. *Indian Journal of Psychiatry, 60*(4), 43-48.
- Sartre, J. P. (1956). *Being and Nothingness*. Philosophical Library.
- Sharma, A. (2014). Coping mechanisms used by students to manage academic stress. *International Journal of Research in Management, Society and Technology, 3*(4), 301-305.
- Sharma, A. K., & Mathur, P. (2015). Effectiveness of positive reframing intervention on stress and academic performance of students. *International Journal of Innovative Research and Development, 4*(7), 102-107.

The Lived Experience of Indian Post-Graduate Psychology Students Navigating Through Academic Challenges: An Existential Analysis

- Singh, A. K. (2016). Language barriers and the academic performance of students from non-English speaking backgrounds. *International Journal of Innovative Education Research*, 4(6), 45-48.
- Singh, J. (2018). What motivates students in higher education? A review of the literature. *What motivates students in higher education? A review of the literature. Journal of Education and Practice*, 9(32), 14-25.
- Singh, N., & Singh, R. P. (2019). Time management skills and academic performance of students. *International Journal of Innovative Education Research*, 7(3), 43-48.
- Singh, R., Kumar, S., & Singh, A. (2017). Meaning-making in life and academic performance among university students. *International Journal of Innovative Education Research*, 5(7), 89-94.
- Singh, S., & Yadav, R. (2020). The role of humor in coping with stress among university students. *International Journal of Innovative Education Research*, 8(3), 121-126.
- Tillich, P. (1952). *The Courage to Be*. Yale University Press.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition (2nd ed.)*. University of Chicago Press.
- Vaez, M., Richardson, M., Barnett, M. A., & Sellers, R. H. (2012). The role of social support in promoting the mental health of students of color on predominantly White campuses. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 18(2), 189-197.
- Verma, R. (2019). Time management strategies for students. *International Journal of Innovative Education Research*, 7(10), 23-28.
- Verma, S., & Chandak, P. (2017). Self-efficacy, academic performance and stress in students. *International Journal of Innovative Education Research*, 5(12), 301-306.
- Waterman, R. W. (2007). The courage to be oneself. *The courage to be oneself. American Psychologist*, 62(8), 676.
- Yalom, I. D. (1980). *Existential Psychotherapy*. Basic Books.

Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Dokania, N. & Tripathi, K.M. (2024). The Lived Experience of Indian Post-Graduate Psychology Students Navigating Through Academic Challenges: An Existential Analysis. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(2), 1189-1202. DIP:18.01.105.20241202, DOI:10.25215/1202.105