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The relationship between the sense of belonging, mental wellbeing and stress in students of law and psychology in an English University

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Abstract

This paper explores how sense of belonging impacts mental wellbeing and stress in students of law and psychology in an English University. A questionnaire exploring undergraduate students' sense of belonging, stress and wellbeing was conducted between December and February of the academic year with Year 2 and 3 students. The questionnaire was made available to all undergraduate cohorts studying law or psychology. A total of 95 undergraduate students across both subject schools responded, with a split of 46 law students and 49 psychology students. The results of the questionnaire suggested that a sense of belonging predicted higher levels of mental wellbeing and lower levels of stress. Law students had a lower sense of belonging and wellbeing than psychology students, but both showed similar levels of stress. The results suggest that community-based approaches at school level may be a good way to promote positive mental wellbeing in students and that this approach may need to be tailored towards different academic schools.

Keywords: mental wellbeing, stress, students, community, belonging

Introduction

There is rising concern about the mental health of university students who are experiencing ever-greater levels of psychological distress.[1] One in four

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[1] Strevens, C, & Wilson, C (2018). *Law student wellbeing in the UK: a call for curriculum intervention.* Association of Law Teachers Conference paper.

students experiences poor mental health during their degree.[2] The typical age of entry to University is around 18-25 years and this age is the peak age for the onset of mental health problems.[3] Furthermore, the 2018 Higher Education Policy Institute study of more than 14,000 students indicated that undergraduates were more likely to have poorer mental health than other young people aged between 20-24.[4] Concerningly, only 17 per cent of undergraduates felt that their life was 'highly worthwhile', and considered themselves 'very happy'. It is therefore vital to increase our understanding of students' mental health and how we can support and improve it. This is recognised by the *University Mental Health Charter*, a United Kingdom (UK) wide scheme to 'make student and staff mental health a university-wide priority and deliver improved mental health and wellbeing outcomes'.[5] The current study explores the impact that sense of belonging can have on mental wellbeing and stress, and provides a foundation for the development of community-based mental wellbeing interventions.

A wealth of terminology is used in the field of mental health and wellbeing. In the current 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'.[6] Wellbeing has been found to predict successful life transitions and is linked to successful careers.[7] Wellbeing is considered to be distinct from some conceptualisations of mental health which are linked to diagnosable mental health conditions. This distinction is evidenced as correlations between mental illness and mental wellbeing are around 0.53, indicating that only one quarter of the variance between measures of mental

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[2] YouGov, (2016). 'One in four students suffer from mental health problems'. https://yougov.co.uk/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2016/08/09/quarter-britains-students-are-afflicted-mental-hea (accessed 19th August 2022).

[3] Kessler, RC, Amminger, P et al 'Age of onset of mental disorders: A review of recent literature' (2007) 20 (4) *Current Opinions in Psychiatry*, 359–364.

[4] Neves, J, & Hillman, N (2018) *Student Academic Experience Survey,* Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute.

[5] Student Minds (2019) UK University Mental Health Charter: https://www.studentminds.org.uk/charter.html (accessed 19th August 2022).

[6] 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) 8.

[7] Haase, CM, Heckhausen, J, Silbersen, R, 'The Interplay of Occupational Motivation and Well-Being During the Transition From University to Work' (2011) 48(6) *Developmental Psychology* 1739-1751.

illness and mental wellbeing is shared.[8] Thus, it is possible for an individual to suffer with mental health difficulties but to have good mental wellbeing. This paper explores mental wellbeing as it is something which all students experience and can be supported without medical or clinical intervention.

Stress is defined as a 'feeling of being overwhelmed or unable to cope with mental or emotional pressure'[9] and is a key predictor of poor mental wellbeing. Students at university may experience heightened stress as going to university is an important transition. University students often move away from family and friends who have provided support for many years and need to form new networks for support. They also have greater autonomy and need to develop healthy routines and self-directed learning skills independently.[10] These pressures may lead to heightened levels of stress. This can negatively impact all students, bur particularly those who already have poor mental health and wellbeing or those who may have had difficulties which were masked by family support.[11] For students, academic pressure is often seen as the main source of stress. Six in ten students experience levels of stress in their degree that interfere with their daily lives.[12] Students may also experience financial stress and career uncertainty in job markets which are becoming more competitive.[13] The effects of pressure and stress can be severe; it 'can reduce academic performance; interfere with a student's ability to participate in and contribute to campus life; and increase the likelihood of substance abuse and other potentially damaging behaviours'.[14] Academic pressure is also a common theme in suicide among under 20s.[15] Concerningly, a longitudinal

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[8] Keyes, CLM, 'Mental illness and/or mental health? Investigating axioms of the complete state model of health' (2005) 73 *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology,* 539–548.

[9] Mental Health Foundation (2021) https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/stress (accessed 19th August 2022).

[10] Auerbach, RP, et al 'WHO World Mental Health Surveys International College Student Project: Prevalence and distribution of mental disorder' (2018) 127(7) *Journal of Abnormal Psychology,* 623–638.

[11] Hill, M, Farrelly, N, Clarke, C, & Cannon, M (2020) 'Student mental health and well-being: Overview and Future Directions' *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 1-8.

[12] YouGov, n2 above.

[13] Bewick, B, Koutsopoulou, G, Miles, J, Slaa, E, Barkham, M 'Changes in undergraduate students' psychological well-being as they progress through university' (2010) 35 *Studies in Higher Education,* 633–645.

[14] Richlin-Klonsky, J, & Hoe, R 'Sources and Levels of Stress among UCLA Students' (2003) *Student Affairs Briefing*, 2.

[15] People with Mental Illness, National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Homicide: Annual Report 2017, University of Manchester.

study found that distress of students increased upon entering University and did not return to pre-university levels during their course.[16] Thus, it is important to learn more about how we can reduce stress in students and one way to do this is to explore student communities and sense of belonging.

Community, Mental Wellbeing and Stress

As Kelk, Luscombe, Medlow, and Hickie highlight, it is important to recognise that mental wellbeing is not simply a problem for individuals.[17] On the contrary, it is a problem for communities. According to Social Identity Theory (SIT) a sense of identity is derived from immediate group membership.[18] Groups give us a social, as well as an individual identity, and foster a sense of belonging. Literature demonstrates how having a strong social identity can improve mental wellbeing as it supports positive and adaptive responses to stress and makes people less likely to blame negative life events on internal causes such as personal shortcomings.[19] As well as providing a sense of identity, group membership is also likely to lead people to feel able to access support. Group membership can therefore lead to more adaptive responses to stressful events, such as exams. However, lack of group membership and feelings of belonging is a problem among young people. The 2018 Office for National Statistics survey highlights that young people who report symptoms of poor mental wellbeing are less likely to feel they have someone to rely on or a sense of belonging.[20] As feelings of group support are likely to lead to more positive mental wellbeing and more adaptive responses to stress, a lack

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[16] Berwick, n13 above.

[17] Kelk, N, Luscombe, G, Medlow, S & Hickie, I, *Courting the Blues: Attitudes towards depression in Australian law students and legal practitioners* (Brain and Mind Research Institute: University of Sydney: 2009)

[18] Tajfel, H, & Turner, JC, 'An integrative theory of intergroup conflict' in W G Austin, & S Worchel (eds) *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979) 33-37.

[19] Cruwys, T, Haslam, SA, Dingle, GA, Haslam, GA & Dingle, C, 'Depression and Social Identity: An Integrative Review' (2015) 18(3) *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 215-238. See also: Jetten, J, Haslam, SA & Haslam, C, *The social cure: Identity, health, and well-being* (New York: Psychology Press, 2012), and Tajfel, H, & Turner, JC, 'The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior' in: S. Worchel and WG Austin (eds) *Psychology of Intergroup Relation* (Chicago: Hall Publishers1986), 7-24.

[20] Office for National Statistics, Measuring National Well-being: Quality of Life in the UK, 2018 (London: ONS, 2018) https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/measuringnationalwellbeing/qualityoflifeintheuk2018 (accessed 19th August 2022).

of feelings of support during stressful circumstances – such as the transition from further education to higher education, or university exams – may lead to poorer mental wellbeing and poorer responses to stress.[21] Many undergraduate students will find their pre-existing group memberships, and the associated support, disrupted as they transition to higher education. New group memberships are therefore important in shaping a student's responses to stress, and one such group is the academic school of study.

According to Bronfenbrenner, the individual is nested within a series of systems all of which interact with each other to influence that person's experiences.[22] The microsystem is comprised of people they have regular contact with, for example, their peers and tutors. They are influenced by these people, but can also influence them, and this is the most influential level of the system.[23] Those within the microsystem interact with each other in the mesosystem, for example, peers may interact with each other, and tutors may interact with other tutors. The ecosystem includes other structures which do not contain the individual, but which may impact them. The macrosystem includes formal and informal structures including the ideologies, norms and values. Lastly, the chronosystem refers to changes and continuities over time which may impact an individual. This work was focused on how the microsystem of tutors and peers and their academic School create a culture which can either support or reduce wellbeing and how students are shaped by this culture.

Group membership can enhance both mental and physical wellbeing, providing a 'social cure'.[24] The sense of togetherness derived from being a member of a social group[25] is associated with a vast array of both physical and psychological

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[21] Royal College of Psychiatrists, Mental Health of Students in Higher Education: College report CR166 (London: RCP, 2011).
[22] Bronfenbrenner, U, 'Toward an experimental ecology of human development' (1977) 32(7) *American Psychologist,* 513–531; Bronfenbrenner, U (ed) *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development* (Sage Publications Ltd, 2005).
[23] Bronfenbrenner, U, 'Ecological models of human development' in *International Encyclopedia of Education*, Vol. 3, 2nd ed (Oxford: Elsevier, 1994); Bronfenbrenner, 2005, ibid.
[24] Jetten, J, Haslam, SA & Haslam, C, *The social cure: Identity, health, and well-being* (New York: Psychology Press, 2012).
[25] Hornsey, MJ, 'Social Identify Theory and Self-Categorization Theory: A Historical Review' (2008) 2 *Social and Personality Psychology Compass,* 204-222.

wellbeing outcomes.[26] For example, social groups can impact perceptions of stress. When an individual encounters a potentially stressful situation they engage in *primary appraisal* to decide if the stimulus is threatening and, if it is perceived to be, they then engage in *secondary appraisal* to decide whether they will be able to cope with the threat.[27] Group membership impacts individual's primary appraisals of stress. Haslam, Jetten, O'Brien and Jacobs found that when other members of a group (in-group members) perceived a task as either stressful or enjoyable, participants with a shared social identity tended to mirror these in-group ratings.[28] However, the views of people outside the group (out-group members) did not impact perceptions. Thus, the views of a group of peers with whom a person identifies can alter that individual's perceptions of a stressful situation. This means that the views of other students on a particular degree programme may alter students' perceptions of a how stressful a task or assessment is, whereas the views of lecturers, or students on a different degree programme, might not.

Group memberships also impact an individual's secondary appraisals of stress, in that people are more likely to provide social support to in-group than out-group members[29] and are more likely to accept help from in-group members.[30] Participants experiencing stressful life events who strongly identified with an important social group, rated their life/job satisfaction higher and their stress levels lower than those who did not identify strongly with a group.[31] This effect

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[26] Wakefield, J R, Hopkins, N, Cockburn, C et al, 'The impact of adopting ethnic or civic conceptions of national belonging for others' treatment'. (2011) 37(12) *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin,* 1599–1610.

[27] Lazarus, RS, & Folkman, S, *Stress, Appraisal, and Coping*, (Springer Publishing Company, 1984).

[28] Haslam, SA, Jetten, J, O'Brien, A, & Jacobs, E, 'Social identity, social influence and reactions to potentially stressful tasks: Support for the self-categorization model of stress' (2004) 20(1) *Stress and Health: Journal of the International Society for the Investigation of Stress,* 3-9.

[29] Levine, M, Prosser, A, Evans, D, Reicher, S, 'Identity and emergency intervention: how social group membership and inclusiveness of group boundaries shape helping behaviour' (2005) 31(4) *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin,* 443-53; see also Wakefield, n26 above.

[30] Haslam, SA, Jetten, J, Postmes, T & Haslam, C, 'Social Identity, Health and Well-Being: An Emerging Agenda for Applied Psychology' (2009) 58(1) *Applied Psychology-An International Review*, 1-23.

[31] Haslam, SA, O'Brien, A, Jetten, J, Vormedal, K, & Penna, S, 'Taking the strain: social identity, social support, and the experience of stress' (2005) 44(3) *British Journal of Social Psychology,* 355-70.

was mediated by perception of social support, again illustrating the importance of community. In addition, strong in-group ties are negatively associated with ruminative coping strategies, which is in turn negatively associated with stress.[32] This evidence suggests that group membership and sense of belonging can have a strong impact on perceptions of stress and ability to cope with stress and this, in turn, can impact wellbeing. Taken together, this literature leads us to predict that a higher sense of belonging will be associated with higher levels of mental wellbeing and lower levels of stress.

Differences between subject areas

Law

This is not to say that all students experience sense of community, stress and mental wellbeing in a similar way. This study focuses on how these may be experienced differently in students of different subject areas that have similarities in course delivery, such as a focus on lectures and seminar delivery as opposed to lab work. This allows for a closer scrutiny of the distinction between students' experiences by subject school and not predominant teaching methods. The study focussed on law and psychology due to the overlap in teaching delivery methods but differences in style, content, and career aspirations of students. Duffy, Field and Shirley found that 35.2 per cent of law students experienced high levels of psychological distress.[33] This is higher than medical students (17.8 per cent) and the general population (13.3 per cent). There are several possible reasons for this. O'Brien, Tang and Hall suggest that the way in which law is taught may play a role. They asked students to discuss the impact that studying law had on them.[34] Several themes emerged from these discussions, namely: law school made them more rational, objectifying, analytical and logical; more competitive, adversarial, arrogant and elitist; and made them feel isolated, disconnected and intolerant. Therefore, it appears that the way that law students are trained to think, in general and

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[32] Ysseldyk, R, McQuaid, RJ, McInnis, OA, Anisman, H, & Matheson, K, 'The ties that bind: Ingroup ties are linked with diminished inflammatory immune responses and fewer mental health symptoms through less rumination' (2018) 13(4) *PLoS ONE*, e0195237.
[33] Duffy A, Saunders KEA, Malhi GS, Patten S, Cipriani A, McNevin SH, MacDonald E, Geddes J, 'Mental health care for university students: a way forward?' (2019) 6 *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 885–887.
[34] O'Brien, MT, Tang, S, & Hall, K, ,Changing our thinking: Empirical research on law student wellbeing, thinking styles and the law curriculum' (2011) 21 *Legal Education Review,* 149.

through specific courses such as Thinking Like a Lawyer,[35] may negatively impact their sense of belonging, and lead to ways of thinking which lead to poorer wellbeing.

The environment within the school can impact student wellbeing. For example, Bleasdale and Humphreys found that law students were more likely than students in other subjects to compare themselves to other students in their cohorts.[36] Typically, these comparisons led them to feel more negative about themselves as they saw other students as, for example, more competent than themselves. In addition, law students become immersed in an adversarial environment, where legal issues are presented as problems; whether it be Crime, Tort, Contract or Property, students are required to argue their viewpoint. O'Brien, Tang and Hall suggest that law students are more competitive and adversarial than students of other subjects. Social activities such as mooting and client interviews may enhance this feeling of competition.[37] This competitive environment may also reduce feelings of community and wellbeing, encouraging a lack of collaboration between students and leading to individuals developing negative perceptions of other students' relative performance.[38]

Moreover, many students who study law aspire to a narrow range of careers, e.g. barrister or solicitor. This also leads to high levels of competition.[39] Law students are likely to believe that future employers are concerned more with their grades than with other personal or social characteristics.[40] This may lead

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[35] See Jones, E, 'Transforming legal education through emotions' (2018) 38 *Legal Studies,* 450-479

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

[37] Skead, NK, & Rogers, SL, 'Do law students stand apart from other university students in their quest for mental health: A comparative study on wellbeing and associated behaviours in law and psychology students; (2014) 42 *International journal of law and psychiatry,* 81-90.

[38] O'Brien et al, n34 above. See also Fay, M, & Skipper, Y, '"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' (2022) 56(1) *The Law Teacher*, 20-36.

[39] Bleasdale & Humphreys, n46 above.

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

students to feel more of a sense of competition with their peers than those in other subjects. Furthermore, law students have been found to be more likely than medical students to view and assess friendships in terms of networking and career advancement.[41]   They are therefore likely to experience low levels of social connectedness which may negatively impact mental wellbeing and increase stress. Taken together it appears that law students may experience poor mental wellbeing, which may in part be due to teaching styles in the subject, school environment and feelings of competition in the cohort, which are likely to increase stress and reduce feelings of belonging and wellbeing.

Psychology

In contrast, students who study psychology may have a different experience. Although there is a wealth of research exploring experiences of law students, there is much less literature devoted to students of other subjects like psychology. However, like law students, psychology students also often experience poor mental wellbeing. A 2009 study by the American Psychological Association found that 87 per cent of psychology graduate students reported experiencing anxiety, and 68 per cent reported symptoms of depression.[42]

The first factor may be the reason why students choose to study psychology. Psychology research is sometimes 'me-search', that is, researching topics relevant to oneself and one's own experiences.[43] Thus, those who experience poor mental health and wellbeing may be drawn to study psychology in an effort to understand these experiences. Furthermore, many students who choose to study psychology are motivated to support and help others. This can be seen in typical career paths, e.g. counselling and teaching.[44] A qualitative study by Bromnick and Horowitz found that psychology students had a

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[41] Ibid.

[42] Bridgeman, D, & Galper, D, *APA Practice Survey* (American Psychological Association, 2010); see also, 'American Psychological Association Survey findings emphasize the importance of self-care for psychologists' (2010, American Psychological Association), retrieved October 5, 2022 from http://www.apapracticecentral.org/update/2010/08-31/survey.aspx.

[43] Giuliano, TA, Skorinko, JLM & Fallon, M, *Engaging Undergraduates in Publishable Research: Best Practices* (Frontiers Media, 2019).

[44] Coulthard, L, *BPS Careers Destinations (Phase 3) Survey 2016 Report* (British Psychological Society, 2017).

strongly other-orientated focus, with 'helping others' as their dominant value.[45] This may create a positive learning community. This makes psychology students an interesting group to compare to law students as their reasons for choosing the subject may mean they enter their course with the aim to understand themselves and others, this may lead them to have more of a positive community focus with a less competitive environment than law students.

Furthermore, psychology courses typically involve the development of knowledge which may promote positive interpersonal interactions. For example, the QAA suggests that psychologists will have the skills to, among other things, 'solve problems by clarifying questions, considering alternative solutions and evaluating outcomes and be sensitive to, and take account of, contextual and interpersonal factors in groups and teams'.[46] This may mean that psychology students learn knowledge and skills during their course which help them to form a supportive community. In addition, as psychology is the scientific study of the mind and how it dictates and influences our behaviour, students explicitly cover topics such as mental health, stress, social identity, empathy and helping behaviours. Most psychology courses also include elements of psychological literacy, which involves applying psychological principles to issues in work, relationships and the community.[47] Taken together these skills and this focus may lead students to be better placed to understand and support each other, and therefore lead to better wellbeing. Again, psychology students differ from law students as psychology courses teach skills which allow them to better support each other, while law courses teach skills which may lead to higher feelings of competition.[48]

Finally, unlike law, psychology students typically aspire to a wide range of careers at the point of entry. According to the QAA,[49] 80 per cent of

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[45] Bromnick, R & Horowitz, A, 'Reframing employability: Exploring career-related values in psychology undergraduates' paper presented at the HEA STEM Annual Learning and Teaching Conference, University of Birmingham, April 2013.

[46] Quality Assurance Agency, Subject Benchmark Statement Psychology (2016): https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/subject-benchmark-statements/sbs-psychology-16.pdf?sfvrsn=af95f781_8 (accessed 19th August 2022).

[47] Cranney, J, Botwood, L & Morris, S , National standards for psychological literacy and global citizenship: Outcomes of undergraduate psychology education. (Sydney: Office for Learning and Teaching, 2012).

[48] Skead & Rogers, n37 above.

[49] QAA, n46 above.

psychology students do not become professional psychologists. In 2016, 35 per cent of psychology graduates were in careers linked to human health, 22 per cent in education, seven per cent in scientific research and four per cent in office work.[50] Even when a student aspires to be a 'psychologist', there is a breadth of specialism ranging from sport and exercise to education and forensic. This diversity might lead to lower levels of competition as few people are likely to be aiming for an identical career path. This may lead students to feel a greater sense of community. In contrast, at the beginning of their studies, law students may be aiming for a narrower set of careers – statistics of success entry into the legal profession often being shared in the first months of the degree – and this can also lead to greater feelings of competition within the cohort.

The current study

In this research we were interested in exploring how sense of belonging impacted mental wellbeing and stress in students of law and psychology. Although existing research explores how belonging impacts wellbeing and stress this has not yet been explored in students from different subject areas such as law and psychology. Based on the aforementioned literature, it is possible that students from these different subject areas will experience wellbeing and stress differently. To build on the current literature, we used a forced choice questionnaire to explore this and predicted that:

H1: a higher sense of belonging would be associated with higher levels of mental wellbeing

H2: a higher sense of belonging would be associated with lower levels of stress.

H3: law students would experience lower levels of belonging and mental wellbeing, but higher levels of stress than psychology students.

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[50] Coulthard, n44 above. In 2023, 41.9% of law graduates entered legal, social and welfare professions, while 7.9% of psychology graduates became health professionals: ACGAS, *What do Graduates do?* (2023, Prospects: London).

Method

Participants

Participants were 95 students aged 17-27. The sample consisted of 49 psychology students and 46 law students from a single university who were in Year 2 and 3 of their degree. Demographics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic variables of participants organised by subject

	Law		Psychology	
Gender	16 male	30 female	11 male	38 female
Home or international	43 home	3 international	32 home	17 international
Disability	8 disability	38 no disability	5 disability	44 no disability
Ethnicity	29 White	8 Asian	28 White	17 Asian
	3 Black	1 Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	0 Black	3 Mixed or multiple ethnic groups

Materials

To test our research questions, we asked students of Law and Psychology to complete measures of belonging, wellbeing and stress which have previously been validated in the broader literature. Scales were presented in the following order as it was thought that asking about belonging first may have impacted participants' feelings of wellbeing.

Mental wellbeing was measured using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS), which explores well-being and psychological functioning.[51] The scale consists of 14-items, answered on a 5-point scale

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[51] Huppert, FA, & Johnson, DM 'A Controlled Trial of Mindfulness Training in Schools: The Importance of Practice for an Impact on Well-Being' (2010) 5 *The Journal of Positive Psychology,* 264-274.

ranging from 'none of the time' to 'all of the time'. An example item is 'I've been feeling optimistic about the future.'

Levels of stress were measured using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS).[52] This scale measures participant's feelings and thoughts during the past month. It consists of 10 items answered on a 5-point scale from 'never' to 'very often'. An example item is 'In the past month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?'

Academic belonging was measured using a scale developed by Ingram.[53] This scale consisted of 20-items measured on a 5-point agreement scale. An example item is 'I felt that I am a member of my school.'

Procedure

Ethical approval was sought and received from the Keele University Ethics Board. Participants were recruited via an email shared with the full cohort and data collection took place from December to February of the academic year. Each cohort comprised circa 300 students. The email gave brief information about the study and directed participants to the online survey but made it clear that participation was optional and that all data collected would be anonymous. No incentives for participation were offered. The online survey began by showing a detailed information sheet and consent form. Once participants had read and completed this, they progressed onto the survey which began by asking for demographic information, including subject. The survey then showed the WEMWBS, PSS and Belonging scales. Once participants had completed the survey, they were fully debriefed and were given information about support services they could contact if they felt that they needed extra support.

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[52] Cohen, S, Kamarck, T, & Mermelstein, R 'A global measure of perceived stress' (1983) 24(4) *Journal of Health and Social Behavior,* 385-396.

[53] Ingram, DC, *College students' sense of belonging: Dimensions and correlates* (2012). Accessed 12th September 2022 from:
https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:rd771tq2209/Dabney%20Ingram%20dissertation_sub mitted%20to%20Stanford_060512-augmented.pdf

Analysis

The online questionnaire was set up so that participants needed to answer all questions before moving on to the next section, so there was no missing data. To begin, each scale was tested for internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha. WEMWBS had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.94, PSS had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81 and Belonging of 0.88, suggesting all had a very good level of internal consistency. The items were therefore combined to create a scale by taking the mean. Data were analysed using Regression and MANOVA in SPSS.

Results

To test H1, a higher sense of belonging would be associated with higher levels of mental wellbeing, a regression was conducted with belonging as the predictor and mental wellbeing as the outcome. Sense of belonging significantly predicted higher mental wellbeing $F(1,93)=53.91$, $p<.001$ and accounted for 36 per cent of the variation in mental wellbeing with adjusted R2 $=.360$, a medium effect size according to Cohen.[54]

Relationship between mental wellbeing and belonging by subject
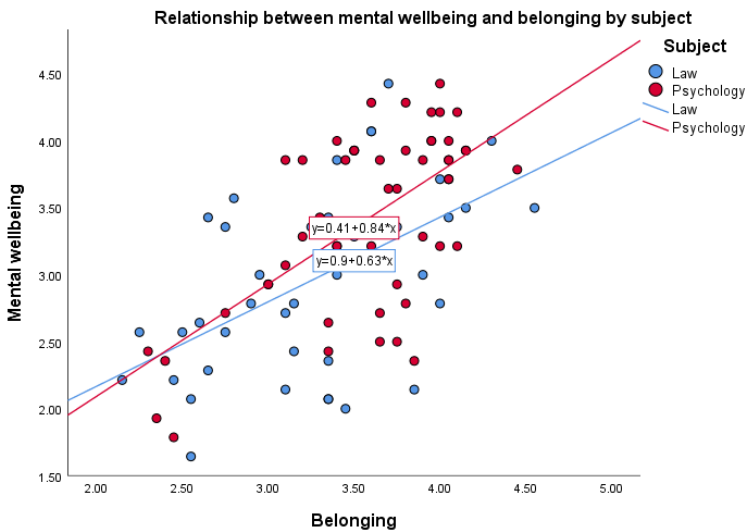
To test H2, a regression was also conducted with belonging as the predictor and stress as the outcome. Sense of belonging significantly predicted lower

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[54] Cohen, J, *Statistical Power Analysis for the Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd ed (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: Hillsdale, NJ, 1988).

levels of stress $F(1,93)=38.54$, $p<.001$ and accounted for 29 per cent of the variation in mental wellbeing with adjusted R2 =.285, a medium effect size according to Cohen.[55]
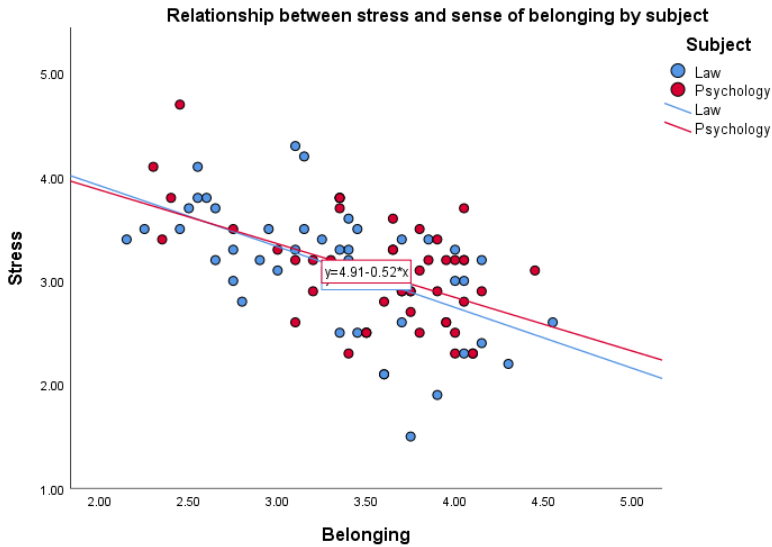
In order to test H3, that law students would experience lower levels of belonging and mental wellbeing, but higher levels of stress than psychology students, MANOVA was used with subject as the IV and belonging, wellbeing and stress as DVs. Results suggested that there was a significant difference in belonging and mental wellbeing, but that the difference in levels of stress was not significant. Descriptive and inferential statistics can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive and inferential statistics comparing law and psychology students.

	Psychology		Law		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	
Mental wellbeing	3.41	.68	3.00	.67	$F(1,93)=-8.86$, $p=.004$ $\eta^2=087$
Belonging	3.57	.50	3.31	.58	$F(1,93)=-5.40$, $p=.022$, $\eta^2=055$

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[55] Ibid.

Stress	3.06	.50	3.15	.62	$F(1,93)=-.54$, $p=.463$, $\eta^{2=}006$

The results from the study suggest that a stronger sense of belonging predicted lower levels of stress and higher levels of mental wellbeing. Additionally, law students experienced lower levels of belonging and mental wellbeing than psychology students but both experienced similar levels of stress.

Discussion

Summary of results

Our results supported our predictions as in line with H1 and H2, a stronger sense of belonging predicted lower levels of stress and higher levels of mental wellbeing. Furthermore, we found that, as predicted in H3, law students experienced lower levels of belonging and mental wellbeing than psychology students. However, we did not predict that law and psychology students would experience similar levels of stress. This suggests that Bronfenbrenner's theory,[56] which highlights the importance of exploring the social context around a person, can be used to better understand student wellbeing in different Schools. This provides support for the use of community-based interventions to promote positive mental wellbeing in students,[57] which could be used in the development of the UK *University Mental Health Charter.*

The finding that law students experienced lower levels of belonging and mental wellbeing than psychology students is not unexpected. It supports previous literature which has shown that law students experience high levels of psychological distress.[58] It has previously been suggested that this may be caused by the way in which law is taught, as law is often presented through opposing narratives such as claimant/defendant and winning and losing are inherent within such frameworks. The law degree leads students to become

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[56] Bronfenbrenner, 2005, n23 above.
[57] For example, Haslam, C, Cruwys, T, Haslam, SA, Dingle, G, & Chang, MX, 'Groups 4 Health: Evidence that a social-identity intervention that builds and strengthens social group membership improves mental health' (2016) 194 *Journal of Affective Disorders,* 188-95.
[58] Duffy, J, Field, R & Shirley, M 'Engaging Law Students to Promote Psychological Health' (2011) 36(4) *Alternative Law Journal*, 250-4.

more rational, competitive, adversarial, arrogant and elitist and can make them feel isolated, disconnected and intolerant.[59] These feelings may lead to a lowered sense of community in the law school and lower wellbeing by fracturing cohorts into smaller groups and reducing the availability of wider peer support. Furthermore, law students have been found to be more likely to compare themselves to other students in a way that made them feel more negative about themselves and their performance (Bleasdale & Humphreys, 2018).[60] Even more concerningly, law students often see themselves as being in competition with their peers, which in turn is likely to lead to further challenges in developing a sense of community and in turn lower wellbeing.[61] Psychology students generally experienced a stronger sense of belonging and more positive mental wellbeing. This may in part be because psychology students aspire to a range of careers,[62] which may reduce feelings of competition between students.[63] Psychology students are also trained in skills and content during their course which help create a positive community, for example, listening skills and empathy, and they also cover topics such as mental health and wellbeing as part of their course.[64] Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that psychology students showed higher wellbeing and a stronger sense of belonging than law students. In this paper, we suggest several possible explanations for differences between law and psychology including: reasons for choosing the subject, skills developed during the course and content knowledge in the degree, feelings of competition between peers within the cohort and competition for future jobs. However, these were not measured in this study, thus the reasons for the differences found are not known and future research should explore this explicitly.[65]

The finding that both law and psychology students experienced similar and relatively high levels of stress was unexpected. Previous research by Leahy et

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[59] O'Brien, Tang & Hall, n34 above.
[60] Bleasdale & Humphreys, n47 above.
[61] O'Brien, Tang & Hall, n34 above.
[62] QAA, n46 above.
[63] Cruwys, T, Greenaway, KH and Haslam, SA, 'Stress and educational bottlenecks' (2015) 50 *Australian Psychologist,* 372-381.
[64] Landrum, RE & Harrold, R, 'What employers want from psychology graduates' (2003) 30(2) *Teaching of Psychology,* 131-133.
[65] Fay & Skipper, n38 above.

al[66] and Skead & Rogers[67] suggests that law students experience greater anxiety than other students. Our findings may have been due to the timing of the study. The study was conducted from December until February of the academic year with Year 2 and 3 students. During this period, students were preparing for the January exams, sitting them or waiting to receive results. As students were in second and third years, their marks would have counted towards their degree. This may have led to higher levels of stress than at other times of the year. Key times of stress during the degree have been identified by Bleasdale and Humphreys; these include assessment periods.[68] As both groups of students were experiencing exams at this time, this may explain why they were equally stressed. However, psychology students still exhibited more positive wellbeing than law students. This may have been because they were better able to seek support to help them to cope with this challenging period. Conley et al explored wellbeing at the beginning, middle and end of first year and found that wellbeing decreased from the start to the middle of the year and did not much improve by the end of the year.[69] Future research could explore levels of stress and wellbeing at different periods across the academic year and indeed, over the course of a degree. Students' reasons for experiencing peaks and troughs in stress and wellbeing could also be explored through questionnaires or in-depth interviews. This would allow us to better understand whether law students are entering university with poorer wellbeing than psychology students or whether wellbeing is impacted by different styles of teaching and courses. Better understanding of patterns of wellbeing would allow us to take a proactive approach to supporting mental wellbeing in our teaching topics and styles and help us to and reduce stress and support wellbeing during particularly challenging periods.

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[66] Leahy, CM, Peterson, RF, Wilson, IG, Newbury, JW, Tonkin, AL, & Turnbull, D, 'Distress levels and self-reported treatment rates for medicine, law, psychology and mechanical engineering students: Cross-sectional study' (2010) 44(7) *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 608-615.

[67] Skead, NK, & Rogers, SL, 'Stress, anxiety and depression in law students: How student behaviors affect student wellbeing' (2015) 4 *Monash UL Rev.,* 565.

[68] Bleasdale & Humphreys, n47 above.

[69] Conley, CS, Shapiro, JB, Huguenel, BM, & Kirsch, AC, 'Navigating the College Years: Developmental Trajectories and Gender Differences in Psychological Functioning, Cognitive-Affective Strategies, and Social Well-Being' (2020) 8(2) *Emerging Adulthood*, 103-117.

The current research provides support for Social Identity Theory (SIT)[70] and a community-based approach to mental wellbeing. Students who experienced a strong sense of belonging in their school were more likely to report positive mental wellbeing and lower stress. According to SIT, the first stage in developing a social identity is categorization, or creating groups. In the second stage, identification, we use information about the norms of our groups to guide our behaviour. Thus, SIT suggests that we can use group identification to change behaviour and literature supports this.[71] This means that groups can enhance our wellbeing if they are supportive and have norms around help seeking, but they can also reduce wellbeing if they do not. However, it is argued by Hoddinott, Allan, Avenell & Britten[72] that it is important to consider the framework of group-based interventions to discover which conditions are more likely to lead to positive change. For example, characteristics of participants, how members join groups, and intended outcomes may impact identification. Simply grouping students together in a School is unlikely to lead to a high level of identification. Similarly, feeling a strong sense of identity with a group which has norms which negatively impact mental wellbeing, for example, high levels of competition is likely to adversely affect wellbeing. Therefore, Schools need to consider how they can increase student identification with the group, for example by hosting events to bring staff and students together to create a shared identity. They also need to try to develop norms around behaviours which are linked to positive wellbeing, for example, by having students from higher year groups or staff sharing their experiences of seeking and receiving support.

Students typically express a strong desire for belonging and often want this sense of belonging to be tied to their discipline rather than the university.[73] In terms of implications, Schools may be able to achieve this by working to create a less competitive, adversarial environment between students and focusing on creating positive learning communities. For example, Kelk et al[74] argues that law schools should recognise the competitive elements of the course and make

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[70] Tajfel & Turner, n18 above.
[71] For example, Haslam et al, n57 above.
[72] Hoddinott, P, Allan, K, Avenell, A, & Britten, J, 'Group interventions to improve health outcomes: A framework for their design and delivery' (2010) 10(1) *BMC Public Health,* 800.
[73] MacKay, JRD, Hughes, K, Marzetti, H, Lent, N, & Rhind, S, 'Using National Student Survey (NSS) Qualitative Data and social identity theory to explore students' experiences of assessment and feedback' (2019) 4(1) *Higher Education Pedagogies*, 315-330.
[74] Kelk et al, n17 above.

support mechanisms available. It should be made clear to students that the competitive and rational nature of legal debate does not need to be taken into the personal aspects of their lives. Similarly, McInnis advocates harnessing the curriculum as the academic and social organising device to enhance a sense of community and feelings of belonging.[75] When students feel a sense of belonging, they are likely to act in line with group norms. It is therefore important to create norms within schools of discussing mental wellbeing and engaging in positive help seeking behaviours in order to create lasting change. Group level interventions such as this are likely to lead to a greater level of systemic change, as they can reach all students and create positive norms within the group which will likely lead to improvements in wellbeing across the community.

Future research

A next step in the research is to explore the link between belonging, wellbeing and stress with a larger and more representative sample and to collect more demographic data. For example, it may be that students from non-traditional groups such as those with lower socio-economic status may be less likely to feel like they belong at university,[76] this in turn could increase stress and reduce wellbeing. Furthermore, exploring a broader range of subjects would enhance our understanding of reasons for differences. For example, students of medicine aspire to a narrow range of careers but also express the desire to 'help' as a key motivator for their subject choice.[77] Those who study subjects like social work learn about mental health and communication skills, but will also be entering a narrow field of careers. Exploring experiences in different subjects will allow us to understand which elements have the greatest impact on belonging, stress and mental wellbeing and may help us better understand which elements to target with interventions.

The current research explores relationships between variables at a single point in time. Future research could be conducted longitudinally. Psychology research is often understood as 'me-search' and students may choose to study

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[75] McInnis, C, 'Researching the First Year Experience: Where to from here?' (2001) 20(2) *Higher Education Research & Development,* 105-114.

[76] Jury, M, Aelenei, C, Chen, C, Damon, C, & Elliot, AJ 'Examining the role of perceived prestige in the link between students' subjective socioeconomic status and sense of belonging' (2019) 22 *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 356-370.

[77] Bleasdale & Humphreys, n47 above.

psychology to better understand themselves.   This may be why many psychology students enter university with existing mental health issues. In contrast, it has been suggested that the teaching methods in law, and high levels of competition may lead students to develop poorer mental wellbeing across their degree.[78] Therefore, it would be interesting to follow students through their degree from the beginning to the end, exploring how teaching, communities and pinch points such as assessment periods impact mental wellbeing, how schools are shaping this and what they could do better. Initial evidence of this from Cruwys, Greenaway and Haslam[79] suggests that psychology students experience lower wellbeing and high level of psychological distress at the time of dissertation submission, but that wellbeing improves substantially one month later except among students who received a disappointing grade. However, it is still unclear how these patterns may shift over a full degree programme, from entry to exit and the reasons behind this, therefore, further work is needed in this area.   It would be interesting to conduct this research with a larger number of universities in a broader range of contexts. While the psychology curriculum in the UK is governed by the British Psychological Society, the law curriculum is no longer validated by the Solicitors Regulation Authority or Bar Standards Board, although the Bar Standards Board maintains certain academic requirements for entry into vocational training. Despite the requirements of professional bodies, there are likely to be differences between institutions in the methods of teaching and presentation of topics. These may help to enhance or reduce wellbeing. Therefore, a greater understanding of these different contexts may help us to design teaching which has the most positive impact on learners.

In the current study, we focused on sense of belonging within an academic setting, however, both academic and social engagement impact belonging.[80] Students may derive a sense of community in their school but may also experience this in other communities to which they belong. Literature on 'third

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[78] O'Brien, Tang & Hall, n34 above.

[79] Cruwys, T, South, EI, Greenaway, KH, & Haslam, SA, 'Social identity reduces depression by fostering positive attributions' (2015) 6(1) *Social Psychological and Personality Science,* 65-74.

[80] Thomas, L, *Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change.* (2011) What Works? Student Retention and Success programme. See also, Vallerand, R 'Toward a hierarchical model of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation' in Zanna MP (ed) *Advances in experimental social psychology,* vol 27 (Academic Press: New York, 1997).

space' suggests that we have three spaces: work, home and, ideally, a third space for recreation and relaxation. This may be derived in community organisations, hobbies, church groups etc., where we can feel a sense of belonging.[81] Sani, Madhok, Norbury, Dugard, and Wakefield have shown that belonging to multiple groups can have a positive impact on stress and wellbeing, as different groups can serve different roles.[82] For example, peers in the same school can provide academic support while peers in social clubs may provide social support. Thus, future research could explore the impact of belonging to a variety of different communities and the positive and additive impact that each has. Belonging to a 'third space' community may be important for relaxing and relieving stress, but a strong academic identity may be important to promote engagement in learning and developing a professional identity (e.g. lawyer). Therefore, understanding the role of these different communities is an important area for future research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while mental wellbeing is often seen as an individual issue, this research suggests that a strong sense of belonging can reduce stress levels and increase mental wellbeing. In addition, students in different schools can experience this differently, with law students feeling a lower sense of belonging and lower mental wellbeing than psychology students. Thus, we propose that targeting mental wellbeing interventions at the School group level, focussing on increasing sense of belonging and positive norms, has the potential to improve the mental wellbeing of all students.

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[81] Skerrett, A, '"There's going to be community. There's going to be knowledge": Designs for learning in a standardised age' (2010) 26(3) *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 648-655.

[82] Sani, F, Madhok, V, Norbury, M, Dugard, P, & Wakefield, JRH, 'Greater number of group identifications is associated with lower odds of being depressed: Evidence from a Scottish community sample' (2015) 50(9) *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 1389–1397.