

The psychological well-being manifesting among master's students in Industrial and Organisational Psychology



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Orientation: Psychological well-being among master's students is seen as a contributing factor towards having a meaningful, enjoyable and productive experience as a student.

Research purpose: The purpose of this study was to provide a qualitative description of the psychological well-being experiences of first-year students in a part-time coursework master's degree in Industrial and Organisational Psychology (IOP) in order to foster an empathetic understanding of their experiences.

Motivation for the study: The understanding of their master's students' psychological well-being experiences will assist university IOP departments in facilitating the appropriate psychological containment to students and the optimisation of their resilience towards meaningfully completing their first year and perhaps also their master's degree.

Research design, approach and method: Qualitative research was conducted within a hermeneutic interpretive stance. Data were gathered from a focus group with 10 conveniently chosen participants. Thematic content analysis provided eight themes, which were interpreted and linked to the literature on psychological well-being.

Main findings: Student distress caused by job demands leads to languishing and feeling overwhelmed. In contrast, student eustress resulting from job resources leads to flourishing, consisting of self-efficacy, locus of control and optimism.

Practical implications: University IOP departments can use the information towards understanding their master's students' psychological well-being experiences, which could assist in the students' successful and timely completion of their studies.

Contribution: The study contributes to the literature on master's students' real negative and positive experiences and psychological well-being, which university departments often deny or dismiss as idiosyncratic.

Introduction

Industrial and organisational psychologists often consult to the optimisation of psychological well-being amongst individuals, groups and organisations as their clients. Effective performance in this task requires that psychologists not only know the relevant theory, but also illustrate psychological well-being in their professional roles and personal lives (Lowman, 2002). This research studied the psychological well-being of first-year part-time coursework master's degree students in Industrial and Organisational Psychology (IOP) as the platform for their last formal educational endeavour towards learning to consult on psychological well-being.

IOP is the scientific study of human behaviour in the workplace. It applies psychological theories and principles to organisations, towards the optimisation of individual, group and organisational performance (Cummings & Worley, 2015; Van Tonder & Roodt, 2008). According to South African law, an industrial psychologist requires a bachelor's degree, honours, a coursework master's degree and a 12-month internship in IOP. These degrees are all regularly inspected for approval by the Board for Psychology, a division of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). The successful completion of all the above parts leads to the students' professional registration as an industrial psychologist (HPCSA, 2016).

This research focussed on the first-year part-time coursework master's degree in IOP at a large South African university. The selection criteria included full-time employment in an organisation in an IOP role, previous academic performance, numeracy, literacy, personality and other relevant competencies

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assessed in a structured assessment centre. The degree is presented over three academic years. The first year consists of coursework in five academic modules, namely Career, Organisational and Personnel Psychology, Psychometrics and Psychological Research Methods, as well as a practical module in Personal Growth. In this practical module, students keep track of and process their personal experiences with one another through blogging. Students attend compulsory residential on-campus workshops in all six modules, totalling 18 full days spread over the academic year and presented by 14 staff members who act as facilitators. The students' assignment and examination marks in the modules contribute 50% to the degree mark. The second and third academic years consist of a dissertation of limited scope under the supervision of a designated supervisor and contribute the other 50% to the degree mark.

In the researchers' discussion with the master's programme manager, the following data came to the fore. Whereas most students pass the first year, only 60% complete their dissertation and thus complete the master's degree. This statistic is of concern on many levels. On the macro level, the university authorities are concerned about throughput, especially because of the labour intensity of the degree (a ratio of 14 lecturers to 20 students), which has subsidy implications. On the meso level the lecturing staff, who are also assigned as supervisors for students' dissertations in the first year, do not have the advantage of publishing the research project with the student. On the professional level the university is not able to deliver the desired number of industrial psychologists to take up their roles in practice. To solve this systemic problem of low throughput and loss of research, publications and professional registration opportunities, the discussion turned to the coping behaviours of the first-year part-time coursework students. These students seem to cope well cognitively – their intellectual competence serves as a selection criterion, they rate the coursework content and the facilitator inputs as cognitively challenging, and they have an above-average pass rate. In contrast, in terms of emotional coping, a recent systems psychodynamic study (Cilliers & Harry, 2012) on students in this specific first-year part-time coursework master's degree programme illustrated their high levels of performance anxiety, emotional exhaustion, introjected emotional and relational incompetence, a sense of not being good enough and therefore pretending to be happy, resilient and coping well to impress their lecturers. The above was interpreted as evidence that students experience their first-year part-time coursework as extremely emotionally demanding in terms of their endurance to stay in the programme, self-efficacy to manage the academic matters and resilience to balance their academic, organisational and personal roles. The researchers and the programme manager agreed on the importance of conducting research to study these matters in order to understand the lived emotional coping experiences of the first-year students.

The purpose of the research was to provide a qualitative description of the psychological well-being of first-year

students undertaking a part-time coursework master's degree in IOP, in order to foster an empathetic understanding of their experiences. It is anticipated that the findings may in future serve as an entry into the facilitation of appropriate psychological containment to students and the optimisation of their resilience towards meaningfully completing their first year and eventually their master's degree.

Psychological well-being

The 21st century world of work is known for its increasing levels of stress, caused by the demands of the new economy, continuous change, transformation, globalisation, complexity, uncertainty and alienation (Bennis, 2007; Botha & Mostert, 2014). Non-coping with these demands results in negative stress, or distress, manifesting among employees as negativity, poor decision-making, emotional alienation, ineffective process and people management, and an increase in autocratic and bureaucratic leadership (Worrall & Cooper, 2014; Youssef & Luthans, 2012). Coping with these demands results in positive stress, or eustress, manifesting as employees' psychological well-being (Weinberg & Cooper, 2007), defined as having a proactive stance towards achieving optimal physical, mental and emotional well-being (Rothmann & Cooper, 2015). This field of study is embedded in positive psychology and a number of recently developed positive organisational models.

Positive psychology is described as the scientific paradigm studying what enables individuals and institutions to flourish by focussing on the expression of potential through positive well-being, positive traits, positive emotions, strengths, virtues and values towards optimal human functioning (Linley, Joseph, Harrington & Wood, 2007; Seligman & Csikszmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, Steen, Parks & Peterson, 2005; Snyder & Lopez, 2009). As a focus area within positive psychology, positive organisational psychology is defined as the scientific study of positive subjective experiences and traits in the workplace and positive organisations and its application to improve the effectiveness and quality of life in organisations (Donaldson & Ko, 2010). Additionally, positive organisational scholarship and behaviour (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2003) are defined as the study and application of positively oriented human resource strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed and effectively managed for performance improvement (French & Holden, 2012; Luthans, 2002b).

Various behavioural models of optimal human functioning in the workplace have been developed in the last 15 years (Rothmann & Cooper, 2015) that collectively describe positive institutional functioning on the individual, team and organisational levels. The effort-reward imbalance model states that imminent or delayed rewards significantly reduce the adverse impact of expedition. This means that employees would be prepared to make significant sacrifices if they had a perception of possible future reward (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Siegrist, 1996). The demand and control model states that autonomy over tasks and responsibilities safeguards

employees from excessive work strain, thereby fulfilling a buffering role (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011; Karasek, 1998). The conservation of resources model offers a general approach to coping, stating that employees are primarily concerned with the maintenance, accumulation and conservation of resources (Hobfoll, 2002; Hobfoll, Dunahoo & Monnier, 1995). These resources could be accumulated because they can serve as a gateway to other values or simply because they are inherently and objectively of immense value (Hobfoll, 2001). Positive organisational scholarship focuses on the positive characteristics of an organisation that facilitate its ability and function (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012). Positive organisational behaviour is described as the study and application of positively oriented human resources strengths and psychological capacities that can be measured, developed and effectively managed for performance improvement (Luthans, 2002b). The following three models were assessed to be especially relevant to this research because of their clear explication of relevant behavioural constructs.

Psychological capital

Psychological capital (PsyCap) is defined as the employee's positive psychological state of development focusing on four distinct psychological capacities, namely self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience (Carver & Scheier, 2002; Luthans, Avolio, Avey & Norman, 2007; Luthans & Youssef, 2007; Weick & Quinn, 1999). (1) *Self-efficacy* refers to the employee's ability to mobilise the motivation and cognitive resources of action needed to successfully execute a specific task within a given context (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Research reports that a positive relationship exists between self-efficacy and organisational commitment (Harris & Cameron, 2005). (2) *Optimism* refers to a generalised positive expectancy and an optimistic expectancy style (Carver & Scheier, 2002; Luthans, 2002b). Research reports that a positive relationship exists between optimism and employee engagement and subsequently employee performance (Medlin & Faulk, 2011). (3) *Hope* refers to a positive motivational state based on an interactively derived sense of successful agency (goal-directed energy) and pathways (planning to meet goals) (Snyder, Irving & Anderson, 1991). Research reports that hope predicts job performance and contributes to employee well-being (Peterson, Walumbwa, Byron & Myrowitz, 2009; Weick & Quinn, 1999). (4) *Resilience* refers to the positive psychological capacity to rebound, to bounce back from adversity, uncertainty, conflict, failure and even positive change, progress and increased responsibility (Luthans, 2002b; Wagnild, 2012). Research reports that a strong positive relationship exists between resilience and positive emotions in the face of adverse conditions (Philippe, Lecours & Beaulieu-Pelletier, 2008).

The job-demands-resources model

The job demands-resources (JD-R) model states that every occupation has specific characteristics, described as *job demands* and *job resources* (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). *Job demands* refer to physical, psychological, social or

organisational aspects of the job representing a risk to psychological well-being; job demands require sustained physical and/or psychological effort or skill associated with cost. *Job resources* refer to physical, psychological, social or organisational aspects of the job that may be functional in achieving work goals, reducing job demands and stimulating motivation, personal growth, development and psychological well-being (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011).

Positive institutions

The positive institutions model comprehensively includes many aspects of the above and can be described as the study of organisations and institutions who have a purpose and a vision (of the moral goal of the institution); provide safety against threat, danger and exploitation; ensure fairness in having rules governing reward and punishment and humanity in providing care, concern and dignity; and where individuals, groups, organisations, communities and society are all treated as equals (Rothmann, 2014; Rothmann & Cooper, 2015). The model includes various positive psychology constructs differentiated into four dimensions. (1) *Flourishing* is defined as the appraisals individuals make regarding the quality of their lives as expressed in terms of multidimensional indicators (Keyes & Annas, 2009; Rothmann, 2013; Seligman, 2011). Flourishing consists of two dimensions, namely feeling good and functioning well. Flourishing employees show the following behaviours: hope, efficacy, optimism and resilience (linked to the PsyCap model); engagement in their work – a positive and fulfilling work-related state of mind characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) (linked to the JD-R model); the experience of purpose – having a sense of desired end states to work; the experience of meaning – the perceived significance of the employees' experience of work; an intrinsic motivation based on one's autonomy, competence and relatedness satisfaction; the experience of high levels of work-related emotional well-being, which includes job satisfaction – a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences (Locke, 1976) – and positive emotions such as joy, interest, contentment and happiness. These behaviours facilitate the ability to broaden momentary thought-action repertoires, generativity and behavioural flexibility based on the employee's enduring personal resources (Rothmann, 2014). As the opposite of flourishing, languishing employees do not feel or function well in their work. (2) *Strengths and virtuousness*: *Strengths* refer to pre-existing capacities for a particular way of behaving, thinking or feeling that is authentic and energising (Linley & Joseph, 2004), and *virtuousness* refers to an abundance culture characterised by positive deviance, well-intended virtuous practice and an affirmative bias (Lewis, 2011). (3) *Positive relationships* are defined as short-term connections between employees that are positive, as indicated by the subjective experiences in and between them and the structural features of the connection (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012). This also includes the reciprocity, social exchanges, trust and trustworthiness. (4) Positive institutional and human resources practices include work design, organisational support from management and

leadership, co-worker relationships, positive communication, role clarity, positive leadership, and training, development, performance management and career development.

Related research

Based on the above theoretical explication, Rothmann and Cooper (2015) designed an integrative diagnostic model for psychological well-being for people in the work context. This model describes how negative (distress) and positive (eustress) experiences manifest due to outside forces (social and technological change; family, race, gender, social class and community; environmental factors), organisational forces (job demands and job resources) and moderating forces (perception, experience, self-efficacy, locus of control, optimism and coping). Next, the application of the model for employees in organisations, as well as for students, is illustrated. Both are relevant to this study as the participants here were both (full-time) employees and (part-time) students.

All the above psychological well-being models have been quantitatively researched in many organisational settings internationally (Avey, Reichard, Luthans & Mhatre, 2011; Luthans, 2012; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) and in South Africa (De Beer, 2012; Rothmann & Rothmann, 2010; Rothmann, Strydom & Mostert, 2006). The research indicates that many positive organisational psychological constructs (such as emotional intelligence, engagement and resilience) contribute towards coping with stress, commitment, satisfaction, career adaptability, retention and general mental health amongst employees (Harry, 2015; Mayer & Van Zyl, 2013; Mendes & Stander, 2011; Shelton & Renard, 2015; Simons & Buitendach, 2013). The PsyCap model has been researched in terms of its validity (Görgens-Ekermans & Herbert, 2013) and its statistical relationships with various constructs such as engagement, organisational commitment (Simons & Buitendach, 2013), resistance to change, organisational citizen behaviour (Beal, Stravros & Cole, 2013), reward preference and satisfaction (Shelton & Renard, 2015). Research on the JD-R model has shown that the strengthening of job resources facilitates employee well-being (Tremblay & Messervey, 2011) and that job demands relate to toxic feelings and organisational phenomena such as bullying (Van den Broeck, Baillien & De Witte, 2011). The broad overarching concept of a positive organisation/institution is used increasingly to describe a positive work environment characterised by a positive climate, effective leadership and functioning on high relevant constructs such as engagement, sense of coherence and staff retention (Mayer & Van Zyl, 2013; Mendes & Stander, 2011; Van Zyl & Stander, 2013).

Research on the psychological well-being of students is limited compared to employees and typically focuses on quantitative measures of their experience of course content (Murphy & Coleman, 2004; Popov, 2009; Stiwne & Jungert, 2010) and cognitive learning (Rautenbach, 2007). Positive psychology constructs such as personal growth, emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, resilience, strengths and hope have

shown to relate to academic success and satisfaction amongst, for example, nursing, medical and first-year students (Ahmed, Kameshwari, Mathew, Ashok, Shaikh & Muttappallymyalil, 2011; Görgens-Ekermans, Delpont & Du Preez, 2015; Marcketti, Mhango & Gregoire, 2006; Stander, Diedericks, Mostert & De Beer, 2015; Taylor & Reynes, 2012). Research on master's students in general has shown how they have grown in the subject matter as well as in personal accomplishment during their programmes (Conrad, Duren & Haworth, 2002). A South African longitudinal qualitative study on master's students in Clinical Psychology evidenced how positive psychology coping and resilience contributed towards academic success and how these behaviours increase during the programme (Edwards, Ngcobo & Edwards, 2014). The students' coping related to support from others, time management and study skills, exercise and recreation, spiritual/religious activities and relaxation, while their resilience related to struggle, personal, life management and study experiences. The JD-R model was adapted and tested as the study demands-resources (SD-R) model in two quantitative studies. Mokgele and Rothmann (2014) found that the availability of study resources was positively associated with psychological well-being and engagement. Basson (2015) found that psychological well-being amongst students manifested as liking most parts of one's personality, being good at managing daily responsibilities, having challenging experiences that foster growth, being confident about ideas and opinions and feeling that life has meaning and direction.

Research question, aim and contribution

The research question was framed as, what aspects of psychological well-being as described in the above theoretical explication manifest amongst students undertaking a part-time coursework master's degree in IOP? The aim of the research was to qualitatively describe the psychological well-being of first-year students in this master's degree programme. The contribution of the research consisted of providing this university and other similar IOP departments with qualitative research evidence of students' psychological well-being, which may in future serve as a point of departure towards the understanding of, empathy for and emotional support of the students, even beyond their first year in the programme.

Next, the research design, findings and discussion are presented.

Research design

Research approach

Psychological well-being served as the disciplinary relationship (Rothmann, 2014). Qualitative research within the interpretive paradigm (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006) was chosen in order to describe the lived experiences of the research subjects (Leavy, 2014). Hermeneutics (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009) served as the interpretive stance, defined as the interpretation

of text based on the epistemological assumption that close and empathic listening to the other allows for a deep understanding of shared experiences (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2010; Salkind, 2012). The acknowledgement of the hermeneutic circle between part and whole (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006) implied that the meaning of the parts was considered in relation to the meaning of the whole, which could only be understood with respect to its constituent parts.

Research method

Research setting

The research was set in the first-year part-time coursework master's degree in IOP at a large South African university (as explicated in the introduction), specifically in the module on Psychological Research Methods consisting of workshops in quantitative and qualitative research methods. In the qualitative research workshop, students are exposed to various individual and group data gathering methods. As a group method, a focus group (FG) is used as experiential illustration, with the students taking up various FG roles. There is no written examination in this module. Students may or may not use their learning in their research projects (the second-year dissertation). Thus, the effect of the FG on their performance as students cannot be measured.

Entrée and establishing researcher roles

Both researchers were psychologists and lecturers in this master's degree programme in IOP and were tasked to present the qualitative research workshop. This entailed the academic planning and presentation of the workshop. Apart from this academic role, they were both authorised by the chair of the department and the university's ethical committee to take up the role of researchers in this master's degree workshop. This role entailed the subroles of managers of the research project, convenors of the FG, analysts and interpreters of the research data.

Sampling

Convenient and purposive sampling (Brewerton & Millward, 2004) was used. The sample was the 2013 first-year students in the part-time coursework master's degree in IOP ($N = 20$). Ten students volunteered to take up a role as participants in the FG – eight females, two males; four black, one coloured, two Indian and three white students. Their average age was 28 years.

Data collection

A *focus group* can be defined as a research interview conducted with a group who share a similar type of experience but are not a naturally constituted social group (Litosseliti, 2003). FG preparation concerns the procedure, interaction, content and recording (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006). The FG was structured in terms of space and roles of participant, convenor and scribe. Chairs were placed in two concentric circles. In the inner circle, the 10 volunteering students took up their role as FG participants. They were joined by both researchers in

their role of FG convenors, which was framed as reflecting the content presented by participants using respect (a positive, accepting and non-judgemental orientation) and empathy (providing verbal and non-verbal emotional support, checking for understanding and stimulating self-exploration) (Egan, 1990), while also making field notes consisting of group dynamic and non-verbal behaviour. In the outer circle, the remaining 10 students took up their role as FG scribes, which was framed as recording the data verbatim. The convenors started the FG with an explanation of the procedure and what would be required from the participants (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006). They were also reminded to be honest in their responses on the FG question. Next, the convenors posed the FG question, namely, 'Describe your experiences as a first-year part-time coursework master's degree student in IOP'. The FG lasted 90 minutes. The researchers integrated the two sets (convenor and scribe notes), which were framed as the research data.

Data analysis and interpretation

Thematic content analysis was used (Brewerton & Millward, 2004; Camic, Rhodes & Yardley, 2003) following a five-step procedure, as espoused by Terre Blanche *et al.* (2006), namely (1) familiarisation and immersion, (2) induction of themes, (3) coding, (4) elaboration and (5) interpretation and checking. Categorisation and coding therefore led to elaboration and interpretation, text analysis, possible recategorisation, and finally the development of clusters, which were translated into themes. The themes emerged out of the data and were then interpreted in terms of the comprehensive diagnostic well-being at work factors designed by Rothmann and Cooper (2015).

Strategies employed to ensure quality data

Scientific rigour was ensured through focussing on trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, transferability and ethics (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006). Trustworthiness and the richness of the data could only partially be ensured, mainly because only one FG was used. The researchers compensated for this limitation as follows. (1) Peer reviews were used (Brewerton & Millward, 2004; Camic *et al.*, 2003) – two independent psychologists, to whom the research design was known, were asked to assess the richness of the data and the worthiness of the interpretations. Both agreed that the work showed sufficient trustworthiness for interpretation. (2) Both verbatim data (collected by the scribes) and field notes (made by the convenors) were used – thus verbal, non-verbal and group dynamic data could be integrated for interpretation. Credibility was ensured through the authorised involvement of all parties (Hirschhorn, 1997). Drawing on Appleton's (1995) propositions, credibility was further enhanced by providing a detailed description of the research process and appealing to the reader to confirm the credibility of the study. Dependability was ensured through the scientific rigour applied in the planning and execution of the research project. Transferability referred to ensuring a scientific link between the FG data and the interpretive stance (Denzin & Lincoln,

2005; Eisner, 1998). As psychologists, both researchers are trained in this stance as applied to research and as stipulated by positive psychology scholars (Donaldson & Ko, 2010; Luthans, 2002a; Lyubomirsky, 2013; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As accentuated in the hermeneutic approach, the researchers stayed aware of the insider-outsider tension and dialogue in their own minds (Terre Blanche *et al.*, 2006). They tried to stay true to the voices of the research subjects, while at the same time trying to answer the research question. In terms of ethics, all participants gave their informed consent, their identities were protected, and the researchers adhered to the Belmont ethical principles of beneficence, non-maleficence and justice (Bernhofer, 2011; De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2002). The researchers were granted the necessary ethical clearance according to the academic institution's ethics policy.

Next the findings are presented by theme, followed by a discussion using the well-being diagnostic model and the research hypothesis mentioned.

Findings

Participants spent about one third of the time on their negative experiences of being a first-year part-time coursework master's degree student in IOP. It was as if they used the FG opportunity to offload their stress while having an audience with representatives of the department who were instrumental to their difficulties. Three themes manifested, namely, not coping, doubting own competence and multiple roles.

Not coping

Participants described their experience as 'hard', 'intense', 'like being on a roller coaster', 'isolated from the rest of the world', being on a 'lonely journey', 'my worst nightmare' and 'not coping well' with 'my current stress'.

Doubting own competence

Participants doubted their academic competence, with questions such as 'have I done the right thing', 'will I be able to measure up', and 'will I be good enough to be' and 'stay in the programme', all compared to the other 'clever and intellectual' students.

Multiple roles

Participants expressed how they were overwhelmed being in the different roles of student, employee and family member. They struggled to 'balance my roles' – 'I am a master's student, I am a wife, I am a mom, I recently had another baby' and having 'a very demanding job'. They referred to how their 'different roles make me feel numb', how 'it is difficult to balance all of these', 'I had no feeling ... I felt emotionally drained ... I wanted to quit'. As a *student*, one participant said 'compared to honours and undergrad I am putting a lot more effort into [my] master's'. They referred to how they 'underestimated the work', 'how

colossal the assignments are', 'it ends up being an iceberg' (in the discovery of the unexpected complexity), 'all structure has been lost ... it is difficult for people to thrive without structure', 'your daily planning changes all the time', 'I am going through experiences I never had before', 'what do you do when you see your performance levels are not that good' and 'you have to constantly think on your feet'. They felt out of control when they realised that their 'time and how I manage' and 'usually plan things', 'are all gone'. They realised that 'no-one could provide me with support'. They became 'very critical of my own views'. One participant 'dreamt that I failed the exam', one considered 'to drop out' while another 'asked myself – how is this making me more competent?' They complained about the library, unclear assessment criteria, unhelpful and unmotivated lecturers, lecturers' inconsistent ways of marking, and rude lecturers saying 'you are an M-student, you should be able to deal with it'. They expressed being overwhelmed by the study content – 'the conflicting instructions, multiple theories' and 'putting everything into five pages – all of it with references – I mean come on'. In terms of their student colleagues, they complained about group assignments in terms of the vast geographical distance between students, 'having to change my style to accommodate others' and 'having other students' use of language in my assignments'. With reference to the Personal Growth module, they described their blogging inputs as 'not working', 'time wasted', 'nothing in it for me', 'it is like constipated feelings', and 'so mechanical'. One participant said, 'I blogged 33 times, all sincerely from the bottom of my heart', and another noted, 'people did not comment as promised – I have not received any comments'. As *employees* they expressed a wish 'to be rich enough' to resign and to study full time, 'to have more time to do it properly'. They referred to their job demands in terms of newness, complexity and time consumption – all associated with distress. As *family members*, they referred to how their studies affected their relationships. One participant said, 'My family do not understand what I am doing' and another '... why am I doing this'. This made them feel disconnected from their significant support structures. One female participant mentioned that she 'had to undergo an emergency operation' and another that she 'was supposed to have reconstructive surgery on my leg'. Some of these examples were linked to financial difficulties.

After the offloading of their distress, participants started to share their positive challenges in the programme, or eustress. Five themes manifested, namely, a support system, self-realisation, coping, self-efficacy and/or resilience and hope and/or optimism.

A support system

Participants mentioned using others for emotional support, specifically fellow students ('he became my roller-coaster buddy', 'I felt alone until I found her as a support'), the university department and family members (although for some the families 'often do not understand what I am going

through'). They normalised their difficult experiences ('this is normal, I am not alone' – 'I know that everyone is going through the same thing') through having meaningful emotional connections with others ('it is a relief, learning that we all feel the same'), learning cognitively from others ('in the group assignments, I have learned so much from how others write, their sentence construction') and 'being motivated by others'.

Self-realisation

Participants reported on how they had grown through the experience ('although you are not always aware of it'). They 'appreciate small things', 'love myself more', 'know that this is where I want to be', 'driving my goal' and 'understand my limits so much better'. They learnt to explore their 'own emotions and defences' and started to 'talk to myself'. Several participants mentioned a spiritual awareness of getting 'closer to God', 'the harder it got the more I would ask God to carry this burden for me'.

Coping

Participants mentioned that they coped firstly by using their intellectual ('IQ'), 'critical analysis', 'focussing' and 'reframing' skills. Thus, some learned 'a deeper appreciation' for the complexity of psychology. Emotionally, they coped by working through their frustrations and guilt and trying to 'view it from a different point of view'. Motivationally, they had learned to periodically 'disengage/detach from' and 'step out of the difficult situation', 'gather energy and then re-engage', 'sometimes take a day off', 'prioritise', and 'look at the bigger picture'. This assisted them to 'deal with things as they come', 'otherwise I would be too stressed'; 'plan better and start earlier with an assignment'; and 'self-motivate'. Interpersonally, they had learned to listen to others differently in order to understand their own situation better. Towards the end of the session, a participant said, 'in retrospect, I think that it was actually manageable, it was not that bad – if only you plan wisely and use the inter-relatedness'.

Efficacy and/or resilience

Participants expressed their competence in performing the task effectively ('I am on auto-pilot') when they 'reflect', 'take charge' and keep the goal in mind. They were energised to 'deal with things as they come' and 'bounce back' because 'I do not want to be a coward and pull out'.

Hope and/or optimism

Hope was expressed by four participants – 'when I get my marks, I feel good again', 'knowing that there is hope'. It helped to 'focus on the positive and not let the other stuff slow you down'. Some participants declared that 'I am doing well' when 'I have role models' to 'keep me optimistic'. They referred to some of the lecturers, who engaged with them in a way that they found meaningful, admirable and inspiring.

Discussion

The purpose of the research was to provide a qualitative description of the psychological well-being of first-year students undertaking a part-time coursework master's degree in IOP, in order to foster an empathetic understanding of their experiences. Using the integrative diagnostic model (Rothmann & Cooper, 2015), the following interpretations were made.

Outside forces

The students did not refer to the *rate of social and technological change* as a stressor. Most students experienced distress in having to cope with their *family's* lack of understanding and support in their efforts towards completing this advanced professional degree. They experienced being disengaged from loved ones, which manifested in loneliness and anger. This finding is consistent with research on the absence of a support system during stressful times (Wissing, Potgieter, Guse, Khumalo & Nel, 2014). *Race* was never mentioned as a stressor, perhaps because of the balanced configuration in the selection of the students in the programme as well as in this FG. *Gender* manifested as a differentiator in how female students experienced being overwhelmed in trying to balance their role as student with being a wife and a mother of young children. This links with the existential anxiety manifesting among professional women (Naik, 2015). *Social class, community* and *environmental factors* were experienced as stressors in terms of not having the financial resources to study full time and not neglecting their organisational work in favour of their academic work (see Snyder & Lopez, 2009).

Organisational forces: Job demands

The students experienced distress due to *role demands*, which manifested as conflict, ambiguity and overload (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). Their role conflict related to the experience that their master's student role was much more demanding than their previous academic degree roles, as well as that their roles of employee, spouse, parent and citizen (in their community involvement and hobbies) became unmanageable in terms of time and energy. Their role ambiguity related to their split loyalties between the student role which absorbed their resources of time and energy and limited the same for use in their organisational and family systems. Their role overload related to feeling overwhelmed with the demands of time, complexity, lack of predictability and containment, physical and emotional exhaustion. A couple of students contemplated quitting as a flight response because of these role demands. Distress was experienced due to the students feeling *responsible for others* (Snyder & Lopez, 2009). Some of the female students mentioned their responsibility in caring for their families and children as stressors, which is consistent with the experiences of professional women in stressful situations (Naik, 2015). Others mentioned feeling responsible for not disappointing their student colleagues (in the Personal Growth module). Whereas the conscious purpose of the relationship was about mutual academic and emotional support, the students seem to have created an unconscious

authority object to deal with their own fear of failure (Hirschhorn, 1997). The students' *interpersonal demands* caused distress in their relationship with lecturers, whom they sometimes experienced as non-supportive, and with their fellow students, whom one student referred to as non-responsive (see Linley & Joseph, 2004). The *organisational structure* did not cause significant distress. The evidence showed that they experienced the structure of student-lecturer-academic departments and the professional body as logical and meaningful. The *nature of the task* caused distress in terms of the highly structured and regulated way the course content, assignments, assessments and research proposals were presented and controlled. The students experienced this as inhibiting their individual decision-making, freedom and creativity (as supported by Czander, 1993). The students mentioned *physical problems* (e.g. an emergency operation, reconstructive surgery on a leg), which were interpreted as the symbolic sense of immobilisation of the students (Linley *et al.*, 2007). Psychological *stress symptoms* manifested as a sense of irritation towards the university system for not listening and containing their issues, anger towards the lecturers for not treating them as adults, and a sense of boredom during the FG. In terms of psychosomatic symptoms, some participants mentioned having problems sleeping (which had a sense of being overstimulated) as well as oversleeping (interpreted as avoidance of working on an academic task) (Czander, 1993). No cognitive symptoms such as problems with concentration or decision-making were reported.

Organisational forces: Job resources

The students' *relations with management* (the lecturers and academic department) were experienced as supportive. The significant personal growth that students experienced could relate to the programme and management's focus on well-being and self-realisation in the Personal Growth module as well as that by various staff members who actively do research in positive psychology. This relates to Guse's (2010) suggestion to teach positive psychology in psychology master's courses. The above resulted in the stimulation of the students' level of engagement and intention to stay in the programme (Rothmann, Diedericks & Swart, 2013). The identity and *nature of the task* was experienced as a conflict. On the one hand, most students experienced eustress – finding the task clear and purposeful in terms of the focus on becoming a psychologist working in organisations, the variety as well contained, balanced between too little and too much and being allowed to work autonomously. The student-task interaction was interpreted as consisting of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) with reference to the synchronisation of and harmony between thought, feeling and action. In contrast, a few students experienced distress manifesting as irritation and being inhibited in having to adapt to the strict and detailed academic rules in research conceptualisation, conversation and documentation. This was interpreted as due to the crossing of the boundary into a different systemic domain (Bain, 1998), in this case taking up a dependent position as a learner with the primary task of knowledge

creation and sharing, and being assessed according to vague and unknown academic, professional and ethical criteria. The identity and *nature of the social context* facilitated the students' flourishing (Rothmann & Cooper, 2015). According to Rothmann's (2014) model, this includes the student's emotional (job satisfaction, positive affect balance) and psychological well-being (self-determination in the satisfaction of psychological needs, meaningfulness, purpose, engagement and harmony). The students illustrated flourishing in (1) their experiences of emotional well-being – their positive assessment of their task as master's student and the positive affect – their positive and pleasurable emotions overshadowed their negative emotions, such as feeling overwhelmed and out of control, and (2) their psychological well-being – their autonomy, competence, relatedness, experience of meaningfulness, purpose and engagement. Their *interpersonal relationships* with other students were experienced as supportive, respectful and appreciative, which created their sense of identity as a group, belonging to a significant system. Interestingly, the students defended against the diversity between them by creating a fantasy that all students have exactly the same experiences. *Communication* upward was experienced by most students as having role models as psychologists and facilitators of growth, although one student mentioned lectures being rude. The students' *performance management* (assignment feedback) was experienced as timeous, accurate and thought-provoking. This encouraged engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Moderators

The students shared the *perception* that being a master's student was a voluntary and challenging academic endeavour involving theoretical, practical, professional and personal learning towards attaining a professional qualification and career advancement and becoming an optimally functioning human being and psychologist. Some students expressed their own individual reality of struggling with the demands of working with unsupportive lecturers and fellow students. This indicated a differentiation in reality testing amongst students; this finding was interpreted to mean that the well-being of students are perhaps distributed normally between high and low (Hirschhorn, 1997) – even for such a carefully psychologically selected group of candidates. Their *experience of the programme* was about being confronted with something momentous in their careers, initially emotionally overwhelming, but with time and exposure their stress levels normalised. The students' *self-efficacy* varied between doubting and realising their capabilities. They doubted their potential to get into and stay in the programme, compared to the other students and their perceived superior intelligences. They realised their capabilities to mobilise their cognitive resources, motivation and courses of action needed to meet given academic demands. The text also gave evidence of their task-specific efficacy in how they could in advance judge the likelihood and expectation of passing the degree and fulfilling their dreams of becoming a psychologist. In this process they used resilience to overcome setbacks, such as work demands, time constraints and below-expected

assignment marks (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998), as well as to counter guilt (I have done something wrong) and shame (there is something wrong with me) (Mollon, 2004). The students' external *locus of control* manifested in a limited manner in how they blamed lecturers and fellow students, yet their internal locus of control manifested strongly in the way in which they took control over their work, personal environment and success without ascribing this to the power of the other or to chance (Rothmann & Cooper, 2015). The students illustrated both learned and dispositional *optimism* – in how they explained their situation in detail, owned their choices and behaviour, had a global sense of taking responsibility for their choices, mobilised their strengths to secure a future and a career filled with promise and success in spite of the occasional pitfall. Thus, their optimism illustrated how they lessened their stress levels by engaging with the task, experiencing and verbalising the stress involved (Medlin & Faulk, 2011). The students experienced *non-coping* behaviour in how difficult and overwhelming the programme was experienced. It was as if students who worked in isolation, avoiding the demands and interpersonal contact, expressed more distress, while those who worked in collaboration with fellow students and lecturers experienced less stress. Coping behaviour was described as keeping stressors at bay through applying perceptual, cognitive, emotional and motivational behaviour to focus on the task and to focus on positive expectations and outcomes (Edwards *et al.*, 2014).

Conclusion

The psychological well-being models used in this research served as good-enough containers (Czander, 1993) for the description of the master's students' experiences. (1) The effort-reward imbalance model facilitated an understanding of how students' imminent and delayed rewards significantly reduced the impact of their academic investments in terms of time, energy and family relations. (2) The demand and control model illustrated how the students' sense of autonomy over tasks and responsibilities safeguarded them from distress. (3) The PsyCap constructs of self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience all manifested in the students' coping profiles. (4) The JD-R model was functional in differentiating between the students' distress and eustress. (5) The positive instruction constructs of languishing and flourishing acted as a core description of the students' experiences and the role of both in describing the nature of the students' relationships was valuable. (6) The Rothmann and Cooper (2015) integrative diagnostic model for psychological well-being provided validity for the analysis and interpretation of psychological well-being as a construct.

The psychological well-being manifesting among master's students in IOP can be integrated as follows. Physically, the students coped well with the course demands. Two students were exposed to surgery but seem to have recuperated. Cognitively, they seem to have coped well with the course demands. This is not surprising, seeing that the students were scientifically selected in terms of academic performance.

Affectively, the students struggled with balancing the demands from their different roles. Female students felt overwhelmed in their family and mother roles. Otherwise most students experienced high levels of optimism and flourishing behaviour. Motivationally, the students experienced high levels of coping and self-efficacy from an internal locus of control. Interpersonally, the students felt unsupported by their families, some lecturers and some fellow students. Overall their relationships were characterised by effective and meaningful contacts between them and the university department, lecturers and fellow students. Their task behaviour was characterised by a positive experience of the structures and a sense of flow in how they integrated the demands of the assignments.

It was concluded that the psychological well-being manifesting among first-year students in this part-time coursework master's degree in IOP is characterised by distress and eustress. Their distress is caused mostly by outside factors and job demands, leading to a sense of languishing and feelings of being overwhelmed. Their eustress is caused by job resources and the moderating factors of self-efficacy, locus of control and optimism, leading to flourishing behaviour. They use their eustress to manage their distress, and their interpersonal distress in one area is compensated for by investing more energy into another area.

Limitations

Although not an academic or examined input, the masters' programme's Personal Growth module could have made the students sensitive towards their own psychological well-being, which may have had an effect on their experiences and the research data. In terms of the research design, the lecturers working with their own students could have created subjectivity, in spite of the researchers keeping this in mind throughout the study. This aspect could have inhibited the students' responses by creating suspicion or the desire to impress authority figures.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the above information be used by IOP departments at this and other universities to understand the experiences of their master's students and to gain empathy for their positions as learners. It is not recommended that the course content or academic procedures be changed, because that was not studied in this research and would be seen as a reactive and mechanistic approach to this qualitative study. Rather, the programme management is urged to engage with the master's students about their psychological well-being experiences, often in a dynamic manner, for example at the beginning (emotionally checking in) and end (emotionally checking out) of workshops, as well as in regular psychological well-being engagement sessions (see Guse, 2010). Thus, the staff could act as containers and role models of well-being. It is suggested that this research be replicated biannually in a longitudinal approach to monitor students' experiences, including the generational aspect in the teaching of

psychology. Lastly, it is recommended that this study design be applied amongst second-year students in the part-time dissertation master's degree programme in IOP as measurement and support in the completion of their master's degrees.

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Authors' contributions

F.C. and A.P.F. were equally responsible for the whole research project, including the planning, data gathering and analysis as well as the writing up and interpretation of the findings.

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