

**Mental health in the academic Twittersphere –
An analysis of conversations in the French and UK academic communities**

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Purpose

The prevalence of mental health issues amongst researchers is well documented by the literature. 38% of researchers are at risk of mental health disorders, which is double the average population. This gets worse when looking at doctoral researchers, also called PhD candidates or PhD students, with 50% experiencing psychological distress (Levecque et al., 2017).

Notwithstanding the significance of such papers to bring mental health to the agenda, they also suffer from some limitations: they offer a snapshot picture in a given country while the situation can differ across cultural and economic contexts. For instance, they do not allow seeing how the prevalence of the issue may have changed over the years, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. They are also not very vocal about the causes of this distress. Some studies link it to individual characteristics such as whether or not the researcher is international (Mattijssen et al., 2020), has to provide informal care (Bergmans and Van der Weijden, 2020) as well as motivation, writing skills, academic identity, self-worth and self-efficacy (Sverdlik et al., 2018). Studies stemming from groups of doctoral researchers themselves show that some other factors play a role: the type of contracts doctoral students have, the clarity of the rules in their institution, and the regularity of supervision meetings (PhD net, 2019).

Yet, there is not much research identifying good practices. For instance, Kusurkar (2020) mentions the role of affiliation with colleagues and focusing on achievements and intrinsic motivation, which is hardly actionable. Help may be offered at several levels, but not always easily accessible or fitting needs.

Focus on the cases of France and the UK

Haag et al (2018) show that French doctoral students suffer from high levels of stress, caused in part by poor supervision. Around the same time, the government issued a roadmap to address mental health issues. It considers how to identify mental health issues and support people who suffer from them through an organization that trains individuals on mental health. Then, the plan gets rolled out to local territories, as established in article R3224-5 of the Public Health Code (2017, July 27th), with a territorial mental health project which has to enable access to specialized opinions on mental health matters, access to care, access to regional initiatives. In some cities, a committee on mental health exists. Action focuses on children or individuals experiencing disability, not on our target population. However, the Ministerial Delegate for Mental Health and Psychiatry, nominated in 2018, mentions the importance of considering mental health throughout ministries, including those of Labor and Research (Ministère des solidarités et de la santé, 2022), which creates an opportunity to work out a plan for academics.

This study will compare the French case to the UK one, where mental health is more discussed than in France, and a framework for mental health has been developed by the universities.

Analysing tweets about mental health: a short review

In order to identify the needs of the academic communities and potential areas for policy, a wide variety of approaches are possible, from stakeholder consultations to survey. While the Haag and al. study (2018) provides a quantitative snapshot of the French situation, qualitative approaches are necessary to identify what stress and poor supervision mean to the community. We chose to study natural conversations, i.e. how academic communities discuss mental health in France and the UK, without interfering. To do so, we analyze tweets. This enables us to avoid bias stemming from interviews such as historical bias or narrative bias.

We requested access to tweets from Twitter. Mental health is often discussed on Twitter (Berry et al., 2017), and the discussion during mental health awareness week 2017 has been analyzed recently, showing that stigmatization, personal experience, and awareness and advocacy are key topics (Makita et al., 2021). Other streams of research show how individuals discuss mental health, bringing up topics such as the impact of diagnosis on personal identity and as a facilitator for accessing care; balance of power between professional and service

user; therapeutic relationship and developing professional communication; and support provision (Shepherd et al., 2015). Recently, analysis of the mental health discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic have been conducted (Valdez et al., 2020). Several methods are used: natural language processing methods to identify mental health issues (Coppersmith et al., 2014) and autoregressive integrated moving average (ARIMA) data analysis (McClellan et al., 2017).

Research design

First, we looked for tweets about PhD, stress, mental health, burnout, depression over the last 5 years. The provenance of the tweets is analyzed. Themes are identified. We look for signs of change or stability of the discussion comparing the 2017-March 2020 period to the discussion at the peak of the COVID-19 crisis period (March 2020 to March 2021, which corresponds to lockdowns in most regions), and the current one (March 2022 to March 2023) where COVID-19 is still not over. We then separate tweets from PhD students from tweets from other academics and academic institutions when possible, to see what is specific about them.

Second, we identify how the conversation converges and diverges in France and in the UK, in perspective with policy development and other triggers of conversation.

Results

At the time of submission, the database of tweets is being organized, and thus results are pending.

Implications

This research has implications at several levels. First, it can shed light on the topics of concerns in terms of mental health in academia, for doctoral students and academics. Second, it can help to identify how policy enables, shapes, guides public discussion on mental health. For instance, the role of awareness building events, such as mental health awareness week, can be traced, which can be useful to establish their relevance. In the future, a comparison with the way in which researchers and the rest of the population discuss mental health will enable to analyze the relevance of policies for mental health for the academic community. This can help creating interventions or support programs.

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