

Review of Teresa Heinz Housel's *Mental Health among Higher Education Faculty, Administrators, and Graduate Students: A Critical Perspective* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021)

Michelle Walter

Centre for the Study of Higher Education, Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

What does it mean to be mentally ill in academia? This is the central question of Teresa Heinz Housel's edited book which focuses on the experiences of academic staff, university administrators, and graduate students experiencing mental illness and mental health distress. Divided into three sections of four chapters each, including "Mental Health Distress and Mental Illness in Academic Culture," "Intersections of Mental Health and Marginalised Academic Populations" and "Institutional Policies on Mental Health and Recommendations for Best Practice," the book covers a variety of perspectives and experiences and draws on both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

As a lived experience researcher who lives with chronic mental illness, I am often hesitant when approach-

ing new research on mental health in higher education, bracing myself for the grim pronouncements and the erasure of people like me whose experiences are the very subject under discussion. This edited collection sidesteps these pitfalls by centering experiences of those with mental illness in academia, turning the abstract monolith of the "mental health crisis in higher education" into flesh and bone stories that grasp the heart as much as the mind. It is a relief, too, to find that Heinz Housel avoids the easy individualization of a medicalized narrative that positions those with mental illness as somehow inherently vulnerable. Instead, examining the broader structures of intense competition, job insecurity, financial pressure and increasing workloads of the contemporary neoliberal university that work to create a breeding ground for mental health distress. Indeed, after reading this book, the message seems to be that psychological distress is a perfectly reasonable response to the current situation facing higher education more broadly.

Yet Heinz Housel also avoids a purely doom and gloom narrative, one in which faculty, staff, and students are simply victims of a brutal system. Stories that emerge from the chapters in this book are far more complex, making space for nuance and complication of both the victim and the individualised narratives that tend to dominate the mental health landscape. In the opening preface, Heinz Housel writes

As this volume's research demonstrates, many academics with mental illnesses and mental health distress have quite successful careers. At the same time, faculty, administrators, and graduate students with mental distress and illnesses are increasingly speaking out about their struggles to manage their conditions in a demanding career. (p. xxi)

First-person narratives of mental health distress in academia begin this edited collection with personalised accounts from Katie Rose Guest Pryal and Teresa Heinz Housel in which they briefly chart their own experiences of mental illness and distress in academia. Grounding in the personal is part of the strength of this edited collection,

Correspondence: : Michelle Walter, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, Faculty of Education, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia.

E-mail: michelle.walter@unimelb.edu.au

Key words: Mental health; academia; stigma; lived experiences.

Conflict of interest: The Author declares no conflict of interest.

Received: 24 November 2023.

Accepted: 24 November 2023.

Publisher's note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article or claim that may be made by its manufacturer is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

©Copyright: The Author(s), 2023

Licensee PAGEPress, Italy

Qualitative Research in Medicine & Healthcare 2023; 7:12127

doi:10.4081/qrmh.2023.12127

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits any noncommercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author(s) and source are credited.

as it lends credence to the call to “break the silence,” and thereby shatter the stigma, surrounding mental health in the academy.

Commitment to representing lived experience is further highlighted by the inclusion of an autoethnographic account of anxiety in academia by Andrea L. Meluch. Meluch writes of her experience first as a graduate student where she found that despite having lived with anxiety her whole life, nothing could have prepared her for the struggles ahead (p. 41). Writing of her sense of profound panic and isolation, what comes through in Meluch’s story is a sense of anger at the unnecessary difficulties she and her fellow graduate students faced in the context of a culture that celebrated struggle and burnout.

Yet alongside this anger is a thread of hope, in which academic life remains one worth pursuing. And it is this thread of optimism that, in part, makes this work a valuable contribution to the study of mental health in higher education. In Chapter 11, “Navigating Boundaries While Creating Safe Spaces for Faculty and Students,” Sandra Smeltzer, David M. Walton and Nicole Campbell successfully walk the line between acknowledging the extent of the mental health crisis while avoiding over pathologizing human experience, explaining that they do not wish to add to existing discourses suggesting that the demands and stress of academia are not for the mentally vulnerable. Instead, they ask readers to engage in “...deep reflection on their biases, assumptions and experiences” (p. 231) so as to avoid the perpetuation of this narrow and discriminatory narrative.

That academics and students with mental illness experience a unique form of stigma is discussed by Alena Amato Ruggerio and Erica Knotts in Chapter 8, “The academic Amygdala: Tropes of PTSD in Higher Education News Coverage:”

Everyone with PTSD, academic workers included, copes with significant stigma. However, for faculty, the stigma is unique and especially insidious due to the intellectual demands of the job. (p. 177)

Here, Ruggerio and Knotts highlight the central tension that haunts all discussions of mental illness in the academy. Where mental illness is read as mental vulnerability

or a loss of control over cognitive functions, the rational, intellectually capable, and independent scholar of academic myth cannot simultaneously exist. As Margaret Price made clear in her 2011 book *Mad at School* and which Ruggerio and Knotts confirm, within modernist, medicalised conceptualisations of mental illness that dominate the academy, mental illness and academic capacity cannot coexist.

Faculty who choose to disclose their psychological disabilities face the very real risk of a ‘presumption of incompetence’ under which they are obligated to invest harder and work longer hours to prove their ability to do their jobs. (p. 177)

Despite this, there is a sense within this edited collection that higher education is not doomed to be a place of mental suffering. Instead, there are ways that higher education institutions can make themselves more hospitable to those with mental illness should they wish to, although perhaps this would require higher education to engage with the deep—potentially uncomfortable—self-reflection advocated by Smeltzer, Walton and Campbell in order to “examine its own biases” (p. 231). Perhaps out of this examination might come a new conceptualisation of mental health and illness such as that provided by Mad Studies scholarship; if there is a critique to be made of this collection of essays, then the lack of Mad Studies perspectives is it.

With that said, there is a gratifying amount of attention paid to those with lived experiences whose voices make up the majority of the work within this collection. For this alone, Heinz Housel deserves credit in a field where the silence of the subjects (objects?) of study is so often the norm. I encourage all who work within the higher education space and culture to read this collection, even if for no other reason than to realize that they are not alone.

Reference

Price, M. (2011). *Mad at school: Rhetorics of mental disability and academic life*. University of Michigan Press.