

Relational Welfare in Student Life: Narratives of Belonging and Exclusion

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Introduction

- **Focus:** How students experience well-being and belonging in higher education.
- **Context:** Mental health shaped by relational and structural conditions.
- **Perspective:** Shift from individual to relational well-being frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

- Relational welfare (White): Well-being as co-constructed.
- Mattering-Wellness-Fairness model (Prilleitensky): Fairness and recognition.
- Complexity theory (Rod): Nonlinear, systemic influences on well-being.

Methodology

- **Data:** 470 student narratives (SenseMaker platform, 2020–2023).
- **Participants:** Undergrad/postgrad students, diverse demographics.
- **Analysis:** Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke).

Key Findings

1. Small Signs of Mattering

- Modest gestures (e.g., invitations) signal inclusion.
- Recognition fosters belonging and stability.

2. Mechanisms of Exclusion

- Subtle norms (e.g., drinking, digital groups) marginalize.
- Exclusionary loops deepen isolation over time.

3. Dynamics of Vulnerability

- Transitions and structural issues (e.g., illness) amplify distress.
- Relational support (e.g., collectives) buffers challenges.

Summary of Themes

Theme	Impact on Well-Being
Mattering	Enhances belonging
Exclusion	Deepens isolation
Vulnerability	Amplifies distress

Discussion

- Well-being is relational and systemic, not individual.
- Small interactions have lasting effects on mental health.
- Universities must foster inclusion as a norm.

Conclusion

- Well-being emerges from institutional design and interactions.
- A systemic approach (fairness, recognition) is needed.
- Universities should create "well-being ecosystems."

Keywords

Student well-being, belonging, relational welfare, higher education.

Selected References

- White, S.C. (2017). *Relational wellbeing*.
- Prilleitensky, I. (2023). *Mattering, wellness, and fairness*.
- Atkinson, S. (2020). *Being well together*.