

REVIEW ARTICLE

Ontoepistemic reflections: mental health and its impact on higher education

Reflexiones ontoepistémicas: salud mental y su incidencia en la educación superior

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Abstract The article explored ontoepistemic reflections on mental health in higher education, focusing on its impact on students and faculty. It defined mental health as a biopsychosocial well-being that goes beyond the absence of clinical symptoms. It identified the university transition and the second academic year as critical stages of stress and emotional disruptions due to academic, social, and economic pressures. Students faced adaptation challenges, academic stress, and concerns about their future, while faculty dealt with working conditions that affected their well-being. The text emphasized the importance of psychoemotional interventions and guidance strategies, as well as understanding mental health as a dynamic process influenced by individual and contextual factors. It proposed a comprehensive approach considering knowledge, attitudes, and social structures, highlighting faculty and counselors as key agents in preventing and promoting well-being. The article urged universities to integrate mental health into their pedagogical strategies, fostering metacognitive skills and providing resources to manage stress. It also encouraged overcoming the stigma associated with psychological help, promoting an inclusive environment that prioritizes collective well-being as essential for academic and personal success.

Keywords mental health, health psychology, higher education.

Resumen El artículo exploró las reflexiones ontoepistémicas sobre la salud mental en la educación superior, centrando su análisis en el impacto que tiene sobre estudiantes y docentes. Definió la salud mental como un estado de bienestar biopsicosocial que va más allá de la ausencia de síntomas clínicos. Identificó la transición universitaria y el segundo año académico como etapas críticas, caracterizadas por estrés y desajustes emocionales debido a las presiones académicas, sociales y económicas. Los estudiantes enfrentaron desafíos de adaptación, estrés académico y preocupación por su futuro, mientras que los docentes lidiaron con condiciones laborales que afectaron su bienestar. El texto subrayó la importancia de intervenciones psicoemocionales y estrategias orientadoras, entendiendo la salud mental como un proceso dinámico influenciado por factores tanto individuales como contextuales. Se propuso un enfoque integral que considerara conocimientos, actitudes y estructuras sociales, destacando a docentes y orientadores como agentes clave para la prevención y promoción del bienestar. El artículo instó a las universidades a integrar la salud mental en sus estrategias pedagógicas, fomentando habilidades metacognitivas y proporcionando recursos para manejar el estrés. Además, se alentó a superar el estigma asociado a la ayuda psicológica, promoviendo un ambiente inclusivo que priorice el bienestar colectivo como esencial para el éxito académico y personal.

Palabras clave salud mental, psicología de la salud, educación superior.

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Introduction

Various authors and perspectives have defined Mental health as a core and fundamental dimension of the individual over the years. Among them, Adame et al. (2013) highlight that the period between the ages of 16 and 25 is associated with a range of risk factors that affect young people's mental health. They emphasize the importance of the adjustment and adaptation of the individual based on the three fundamental bio-psycho-social elements, underscoring the complexity of relying on just one of these components. Mental health is a favorable adjustment that assumes personal mental characteristics, particularly mood states.

Garita (2013) explains that positive mental health is a state of well-being that allows individuals to fully realize their potential and capabilities to face the tensions of daily life. Garita also emphasizes the ability to work productively and fruitfully, contributing to the community individuals belong to.

This state facilitates the effective development of all areas where individuals operate and ensures their growth within society. It refers to the quality of life and well-being perceived by the individual and derived from daily life. Beliefs, lifestyles, resources, and personal potential influence this perception.

Viewed from this perspective, optimizing psychological functioning to generate a general sense of well-being becomes necessary. Conversely, adverse mental health encompasses detrimental aspects such as health problems, psychopathologies or psychiatric disorders, emotional imbalances, and stress. Thus, mental health can be understood as a cyclical and active process of constant adjustment, balancing internal needs with those imposed by the physical and social environment.

Mental health in higher education

The discussion of mental health and its impact on higher education has gained relevance, particularly from the perspective of health psychology. Until recently, these topics were not considered significant in academic and teaching circles, let alone addressed among university students. There was an assumption that gaining admission after passing rigorous and demanding exams was a certification of students' everyday personal, emotional, cognitive, or psychological well-being. It is now evident that this assumption is inaccurate. On the contrary, the convergence of various circumstances can make university students a population at moderate to high risk for mental health issues. The stress they experience is closely tied to the socioeconomic lifestyle challenges students and faculty face.

An international study on mental health practices by Moggollón et al. (2005) highlights that educators in training and students must integrate educational guidance into their roles

across various contexts. Psycho-emotional counseling requires interventions as a preventive measure for situations involving mental health, taking into account the educational diversity among individuals interacting within different environments. This perspective emphasizes mental health's importance for professionals and university students.

Preparing for future roles is critical, requiring the ability to work, educate, and foster mental health among individuals and groups. This involves creating an environment that promotes well-being and supports the development of cognitive, emotional, and relational skills to help individuals achieve their goals.

In this sense, good mental health is essential for enjoying quality of life and well-being. It encompasses both intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences, including family and community dynamics. Mental health enables individuals to manage life's challenges effectively. Therefore, society and educational and health services must work toward optimizing mental health, focusing on its promotion and prevention. This aligns with the definition provided by the World Health Organization (2022), which describes health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease. Consequently, the commitment to health promotion must extend beyond physical well-being to include mental health, adopting a curative, preventive, and promotional approach.

Conceptualization of mental health

Mental health has established itself as a multidisciplinary science. Flórez (2017) defines it as "a state of psychological balance in an individual at a given moment in life, where subjective well-being, the exercise of mental capacities, and the quality of relationships with the environment converge" (p. 4).

This definition highlights that mental health represents a state of well-being in which an individual recognizes their abilities, copes with the everyday pressures of life, works productively and fruitfully and can contribute to their community.

Based on these definitions, good mental health is a fundamental element for enjoying the quality of life and well-being arising from intrapersonal, interpersonal, familial, and community experiences.

For the individual, mental health means knowing how to manage one's own life, maintaining positive feelings of self-esteem, happiness, and aptitude, and being able to live, work, and engage in leisure activities. It also enables the individual to address life's challenges appropriately, seek solutions, and make sound decisions.

It is important to note that the current social realities presented by various social actors bring new demands related to understanding the complex social contexts in which people develop mentally. These demands call for focused actions to

address changes that impact personal and collective well-being, regardless of the circumstances that define these social environments.

Various perspectives on mental health in higher education highlight overlooked factors significantly impacting students' well-being. Subject 1 emphasizes that university access involves multiple transition periods—admission, the first year, mid-second year, and mid-third year—each requiring substantial adjustment. These transitions contribute to distress, negatively affecting students' mental health through academic stress, anxiety, loneliness, feelings of inadequacy, depression, nostalgia, and negative projections from dissatisfied faculty. Subject 2 adds that behavioral symptoms such as depression, anxiety, difficulties with social relationships, and physical symptoms like exhaustion are especially prominent during the second year of university.

These insights suggest that, according to key respondents, the causes of these challenges revolve around significant changes experienced during the initial university years. These include moving to new residences, adjusting to new peers, less structured university guidance systems for second-year students, and increased academic pressure, among other factors.

Interviews reveal several risk factors for university students, including academic pressures, career-related anxiety, social experiences, university life, and economic challenges. The transition to university and the second academic year are particularly high-risk periods for students' mental health. Subject 3, a faculty member, points out that vulnerable groups face additional risks, such as inadequate pay, lack of benefits, and poor working conditions, all of which negatively affect their well-being. Subject 4 observes a loss of engagement with incoming students, with a tendency to assume they understand university processes without proper guidance. This lack of support often increases dropout rates, especially in the early semesters.

These challenges reflect pre-existing mental health issues exacerbated by unfavorable environments. Key respondents emphasize the limited evidence surrounding the mental health needs of these groups and stress the importance of addressing psychological deterioration.

Evidence shows that an increasing number of students are seeking support from university counseling services, yet several barriers persist. These include stigma, where students fear being treated differently or seen as "weak," insufficient communication about available resources, and a lack of awareness or understanding among academic staff regarding mental health support.

This highlights the critical need to address these barriers and provide timely interventions to support students and faculty in managing their mental health and well-being.

This perspective, as highlighted by Adame et al. (2013), underscores the importance of providing timely responses to enable individuals to effectively navigate their life circumstances and empower their ability to act toward their well-being. This emphasizes the significance of mental health as a field of intervention within guidance counseling, supported by theoretical, methodological, and instrumental frameworks. These frameworks facilitate identifying and reinforcing an individual's strengths and abilities despite their challenges while fostering the development of new skills to face life's demands.

Furthermore, the current social realities and conditions experienced by various population groups—shaped by political, economic, labor, family, and other factors—can either support or hinder personal development, depending on an individual's position in the social structure. These factors permeate all areas of human life, making existence more vulnerable to challenges and increasing the risk to individual and collective health.

A person's lifestyle inherently carries health risks when it is marked by conditions of inequality and exclusion related to gender, culture, disability, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, illness, or poverty.

González and García (1994) emphasize that such conditions must be considered in any guidance policies, as psychosocial issues can significantly impact the mental health of population groups. This reality calls for redirecting strategies and reevaluating the role of guidance centers and services worldwide.

The role of the guidance professional must focus on improving the quality of life for the populations they serve, addressing physical, emotional, and social well-being rather than providing isolated, problem-centered, and purely assistive actions.

When health is included in programs and projects, regardless of the context or population addressed, the guidance professional must adopt an integrated, clear, and coherent approach to their actions within this field of intervention.

Challenges and contradictions in mental health and its impact on higher education

Two central themes emerged as key debate points in discussions among university researchers in Venezuela—spanning institutions such as the University of Oriente, the Ministry of Popular Power for Health, and independent contributors. These themes illustrate an open-ended discussion without definitive solutions. First, mental health within national universities is still in its early stages. Second, a notable weakness is in promoting guiding strategies to address this issue.

Thus, the objective should be to establish a robust and continuous debate within the academic community. The two

main themes reveal a progression from an ontoepistemological framework to conceptual and methodological considerations. The first theme involves understanding the concept of mental health, while the second focuses on measuring the capacity to respond to mental health needs.

From this perspective, González and García (1994) argue that nearly half of the student and faculty population in Latin America report experiencing mental health disorders, raising questions about whether such manifestations and experiences should even be categorized as disorders.

The framework underscores the significant challenges in identifying psychological distress that has not been formalized or classified as a disease, nor necessarily should it be. Developing practical mental health guidance is far from straightforward, especially given the lack of discussions addressing mental health in higher education. These discussions should aim to provide solutions that channel such complex behaviors.

Mental health in higher education must be understood as a multidimensional and contextual aspect where individual and collective biological and social factors intersect. Addressing this complexity is critical to the well-being of those within university settings.

Mental health in university education

The psychosocial characteristics of modern life compel us to consider mental health in all areas of daily life. As the Pan American Health Organization (2016) points out, higher education is no exception, as it is critical in preparing individuals for professional life within society.

For this reason, mental health is as important as physical health. The mind and body cannot be considered independently of each other; they are intrinsically connected in a psychophysiological relationship. It is no coincidence that the integration of mind and body has been a prominent topic in university culture.

However, emotional stability is a product of good mental health. Emotions encompass both conscious and unconscious elements and have physiological and cognitive foundations. Emotions respond to neurovegetative, endocrine, and behavioral patterns, which enable adaptive responses to events. At the same time, social cognition plays a significant role, as stress factors can significantly influence emotional responses.

Mogollón et al. (2005) highlight that daily situations often generate worries, including the challenge of educating and forming another human being. Educating someone lacking the maturity required for learning can become a concern. While the ultimate goal of worrying is to resolve problematic situations, it should be a constructive concern that allows

individuals to perceive viable alternatives to the problem.

When a university professor worries excessively, emotional distress emerges, creating a “worrier”. On the other hand, the student, unable to resolve their issues, becomes obsessively concerned. If both (professor and student) are unable to manage their worries, the result is generalized anxiety, characterized by persistent and uncontrollable anxiety and excessive concern.

Anxiety in the context of mental health is an emotional response triggered by internal and external factors involving cognitive and physiological aspects. While some argue that genetic factors play a role, stress is undoubtedly a key contributor. Stress is a universal experience in daily life, but certain factors can intensify its impact.

Adame et al. (2013) categorize stressors into three types: cataclysmic events, such as natural disasters, which impact many people at once and are considered significant stressors; personal events, like the loss of a loved one, which have a significant emotional impact on the individual; and daily hassles, which are the minor complications and challenges people encounter in their everyday lives.

However, some theories argue that the true origin of stress is internal rather than external. Psychiatrist Garita (2013) suggests that an individual’s predisposition to react with fear, for instance, depends on the extent of fear already present within them. In this view, stress is an emotional reaction to a triggering stimulus shaped by the person’s belief system and associated emotional pressures.

The rational and emotional effort to confront or overcome stress produces biological and psychological responses, which can contribute to health problems. Everyday stressors often elevated glucocorticoids, adrenaline, and noradrenaline levels, which may affect the body and contribute to the onset of various diseases. Examples of stress-inducing scenarios include a hostile work environment or academic exams.

Students, in particular, face external stressors related to the academic load they must manage. The anxiety that arises from assuming academic responsibilities can lead to emotional and behavioral problems, highlighting the critical need to address mental health concerns in university settings.

Mental health in the university education model

The teaching model significantly influences students’ emotional well-being or distress. Any educational framework designed for university students must necessarily consider the particular characteristics of this population. As Flórez (2017) asserts, it is essential to account for the physiological and cognitive changes that shape their learning processes.

Mental health is a necessary component of educational practice. An education model that integrates mental health

into its didactic strategies and activities can significantly enhance students' emotional well-being, improve their academic performance, and prevent adverse outcomes.

Flórez (2017) further points out that higher education has unique characteristics compared to other levels of education. The teaching and learning processes in universities require greater responsibility in their execution. As a result, students encounter professionals who may lack formal training in university pedagogy, and these professionals may find the didactic aspects of university teaching to be outside their area of expertise. Conversely, professors deal with a heterogeneous student body often lacking the metacognitive skills necessary for self-directed learning, leading to a cycle of blame. Professors might fault students for lacking the intellectual maturity needed to succeed in their courses, while students might blame professors for inadequate teaching methods.

This situation highlights the need for a new conception of teaching, learning, and pedagogy that incorporates the perspective of emotional well-being.

Implementing an educational model requires considering various social variables. Both rational and emotional aspects are equally crucial for achieving balanced intellectual health.

While it is true that academic workloads generate stress for students, the issue lies not in the responsibility they assume but in the teaching model adopted by universities. When universities fail to update their didactic strategies, traditional teaching models are often treated as optimal. This reliance leads to pedagogical complacency and repetitive teaching methods.

A clear example is when a professor enters a classroom and reads verbatim from text-heavy slides. The class devolves into an educational karaoke session devoid of rhythm, engagement, or interest. Teaching becomes a profession perceived as mundane by students and other professionals alike. Innovation and academic research are relegated to the background.

In this scenario, both students and professors lose. A vicious cycle emerges: the professor disengages from the student's learning process, and the student later criticizes the professor, diminishing their reputation.

Another socio-educational variable to consider is the learning skills of the students themselves. Many university students lack the metacognitive skills needed for active learning or show little interest in developing these skills independently. These metacognitive abilities are crucial for academic success.

Preparing students to learn should be a priority for any education model. The absence of effective didactic strategies in higher education and the lack of innovation in educational approaches contribute to the decline of academic excellence. The quality of a student's work directly reflects the quality

of their instruction. A lack of innovation in educational strategies leads to student demotivation.

Mental health among university students is intrinsically linked to the quality of university teaching. However, few educators actively engage in addressing this issue. There is a noticeable lack of intervention to improve students' psychological well-being through enhanced teaching practices. Outdated workshops and superficial approaches often place an emotional burden on students rather than alleviating their challenges.

A critical analysis of university teaching practices is urgently needed. The paradigm of routine pedagogy benefits no one. Instead, it exacerbates students' emotional stress, negatively impacting their mental health and extending these challenges to faculty members as well.

Promoting mental health as a focus in guidance practices

The epistemological stance on mental health highlights that this field of action cannot remain exclusive to health science professionals. Instead, it necessitates the inclusion of new social actors, such as university professors. Their participation must align with their respective disciplines' objectives, principles, functions, and innovative contributions emerging from interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary work.

The guidance requires robust theoretical and methodological frameworks to understand and support individuals' socio-emotional development across different life stages, contexts, and situations. Emphasizing emotional well-being by focusing on the individual—interacting with their socio-cultural and historical environment—must remain a priority.

This approach, as proposed by González and García (1994), demonstrates how the development of human strengths, guided evolutionarily, enables professionals to address any challenge with any population. The goal is to leverage individuals' skills and talents despite their problems. In this way, the role of guidance in health is firmly rooted in mental health, defined as a state of well-being grounded in self-awareness of one's abilities and the capacity to handle the everyday pressures of life.

The contribution of guidance as a discipline is valuable because, as noted by the World Health Organization (2022): "Mental health is essential for the well-being and functioning of individuals (...) as an inseparable part of general health, contributing to societal functions and impacting overall productivity" (p. 25).

In university contexts and among students, the role of guidance in promoting mental health becomes increasingly relevant to fostering personal and social well-being. This demands a redefinition of the responsibilities of guidance pro-

professionals within this evolving field of intervention.

The key focus of guidance in mental health promotion is to empower individuals by encouraging them to reflect on personal, social, economic, political, religious, and other factors that shape their lifestyle and influence their overall health. According to Adame et al. (2013), both individual and group approaches must address internal and external factors, including knowledge, which provides information for making healthy decisions; willpower, driven by personal values and beliefs that guide healthy behaviors; attitudes, which reflect principles and values in challenging situations; habits, which are ingrained routines that impact health; culture, which shapes beliefs about health and illness and can limit the adoption of healthier practices; gender, where stereotypical roles may affect health decision-making; science and technology, which offer advancements in health care; and physical, economic, political, and social factors, including health infrastructure, public policies, economic investments, and the creation of healthy environments.

These elements represent determinants of the health-disease process. Considering them in guidance interventions offers individuals an integrated understanding of their circumstances, fostering well-informed, multifactorial decision-making for self-management of personal and social well-being.

Conclusions

The complex social circumstances faced by university professors and students significantly impact their personal and collective well-being. Factors such as economic, political, social, familial, ethnic, and religious issues pose critical risks to mental health. This highlights the need to broaden the understanding of mental health beyond the mere absence of illness, acknowledging the emotional disruptions that affect overall well-being. This shift in perspective treats psychological health as a multifactorial process, integrating physical, social, axiological, and cultural dimensions. It calls for the involvement of new social actors, including guidance professionals, to address mental health within higher education. Simply establishing wellness centers is insufficient; a deeper commitment is needed to address the causes and consequences of emotional challenges. Psychological guidance plays a vital role by offering frameworks that strengthen individual and collective capacities to maintain or improve mental health. By adopting a holistic, dialectical approach that recognizes the bio-psycho-social nature of mental health, professors can act as health promoters, empowering individuals to understand their complex realities, identify their strengths, and make informed decisions to improve their well-being. This proposal aims to spark further discussion on this emerging field of intervention in guidance practice.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Author contributions

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Data availability statement

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Statement on the use of AI

The authors acknowledge the use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies to improve the readability and clarity of the article.

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