How do people make sense of their recovery from academic burnout during their undergraduate studies?

An interpretative phenomenological inquiry into the experience of young adults.

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ABSTRACT

Academic (student) burnout involves a rise in absenteeism, lack of motivation to meet coursework requirements and a higher student dropout rate. Its symptoms manifest on an emotional, social, cognitive and physical level. The aim of this study was to explore young people's experience of recovering from burnout during their undergraduate studies, with the purpose of contributing to the very limited phenomenological research on both student burnout and recovery from student burnout. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The analysis produced three superordinate themes. Firstly, *Falling Behind, Falling Short* captures the academic, social and personal challenges that promoted burnout. Secondly, *Getting Stuck* depicts burnout as a state of psychological distress that led to social withdrawal and disengagement from studies. Thirdly, *Finding a Way Out Through Personal Growth* presents recovery from burnout as a turning point marking the start of new attitudes and behaviours, followed by deepening self-understanding, cultivation of support and increasing self-regulation. For counselling psychologists, the research sheds light on the subjective and interpersonal dimensions of academic burnout, the different manifestations of student burnout and the role of personal growth in recovering from burnout. The study also points to the role of negative coping responses and negative attitudes to help-seeking in the development and perpetuation of burnout. Further research on academic burnout during university and pre-university education is called for. Phenomenological research exploring the student's experience of learning, seeking support and coping with stress arising from the undergraduate environment is recommended.

DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

This dissertation is written by Annemarie Visser and has ethical clearance from the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and the Psychology Department of Middlesex University. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling and the Psychology Department of Middlesex University for the degree of Doctor in Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy by Professional Studies (DCPsych). The author is wholly responsible for the content and writing of the dissertation and reports no conflicts of interest.

TRANSCRIPT CONVENTIONS

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1 INTRODUCTION

Burnout first emerged as a concept in psychological literature and cultural discourse in the mid-1970s through the concurrent but independent work of Freudenberger (1974, 1975) and Maslach (Maslach & Schaufeli, 1996). Since then, professional recognition of the burnout concept has spread to countries in Europe, South America and the Far East, with burnout syndrome now recognised as a global problem that could damage the individual's psychological and physical health and reduce the effectiveness of organisations (Carod-Artal & Vázquez-Cabrera, 2013).

Burnout is commonly viewed as an adaptive response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors in the work environment (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Muheim, 2013). In the absence of a consistent definition of the burnout syndrome, researchers usually measure burnout along three dimensions: emotional exhaustion as indicated by a depletion of psychological and mental energy; depersonalisation as indicated by cynicism and detachment from work and relationships in the workplace; and a reduced sense of personal efficacy (Nuallaong, 2013).

Academic burnout, also known as student burnout, is based on the concept of general (work-related) burnout, where academic studies represent 'work'. However, due to a lack of evidence for personal efficacy as the third dimension of academic burnout (Qiao & Schaufeli, 2011), researchers have started to measure academic burnout along two dimensions only. Accordingly, this study adopted a two-dimensional construct of academic burnout developed by Maroco and Alvares Duarte Bonini Campos (2012). Student burnout is defined as physical and psychological exhaustion associated with coursework activities and disengagement from coursework.

Burnout may lead to serious physical illness (Cohen, 2013) and mental health problems (Prinz, Hertrich, Hirschfelder, & de Zwaan, 2012). Risks of burnout also include suicidal ideation, suicide attempts and significant impairment in cognitive, social and occupational functioning (Kakiashvili, Leszek, & Rutkowski, 2013). Furthermore, academic burnout is associated with a rise in absenteeism, lack of motivation to meet coursework requirements and a higher dropout rate (Yang & Farn, 2005).

The risks and costs of academic burnout provide a strong imperative for seeking an understanding of the phenomenon. So far, research on academic burnout has been dominated by quantitative studies investigating the relationship between academic burnout and the personal, social and environmental factors contributing to its development. The present body of literature contains hardly any research or theoretical literature on the phenomenology of student burnout or interventions to prevent and overcome burnout. The literature search yielded no qualitative research on the lived experience of recovering from student burnout, or the experience of student burnout itself. Consequently, this phenomenological enquiry into recovery from academic burnout is a timely study.

1.1 PERSONAL ORIGINS OF THE STUDY

I first became interested in burnout while working in a high pressure corporate environment many years ago. The job held no intrinsic meaning for me, and by the time I resigned, I was highly anxious and physically and mentally drained by the long hours and constant pressure. My physical energy was quickly replenished, but my mental and emotional recovery was much slower and more complex. I have been

intrigued by the phenomenon of burnout ever since: how it develops and how people recover.

For Ekstedt and Fagerberg (2005), burnout arises from a complex interaction between the individual and their life world, from a sense of being trapped between stimulating challenges in the person's social world, and the responsibilities and demands associated with those challenges. As a counselling psychologist and psychotherapist, I am both curious and concerned about the prevalence of chronic anxiety reported by my clients in the present, and the many stress-related issues I encountered among undergraduate students in the past, while working as a university counsellor and student mental health mentor. Coupled with my interest in anxiety and stress, I am intrigued by catalysts for change and our human capacity for transformation.

I also take great pleasure in learning and teaching others, having taught in various settings and roles for many years, most recently in higher education. I would like to know more about people's attitudes to academic performance and achievement, their experience of academic stress and the obstacles they encounter in the learning process.

My areas of interest not only fuelled my engagement with the research topic, but also contributed to my pre-understandings, assumptions and expectations, which I address in Chapter 3.

1.2 AIM OF THE STUDY

Over time, the gaps in the literature on academic burnout slowly converged with my personal interest in undergraduate learning and my professional leaning towards interpretative phenomenology, both as a scientist-practitioner and a reflective

practitioner. This meeting of opportunity and interest resulted in the formulation of the study aims.

I concluded that I wanted to develop an understanding of the lived experience of overcoming burnout during undergraduate studies, through an in-depth exploration and description of the phenomenon. I was interested in the changes involved in overcoming burnout, the insights gained, facilitators of recovery, and obstacles to recovery. I was also curious about the part that psychological support played during the process of recovery. Finally, I wished to understand the physical and psychological impact of academic burnout, to aid my understanding of recovery from burnout.

The aims outlined above informed the formulation of the research question: 'How do people make sense of their recovery from academic burnout during their undergraduate studies? A phenomenological inquiry into the experience of young adults.'

1.3 RELEVANCE TO COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY

McLeod (1994) suggests that a researcher's first ethical consideration should be the rationale for their inquiry: is the question worth researching from the stakeholders' perspective or will it waste people's time? Considering that the bulk of qualitative research projects have no impact on practice, further research, policy or citizens (Keen & Todres, 2007), I wanted to make sure that my research produced findings relevant to the field of counselling psychology as its primary stakeholder.

The aim of this study was congruent with my identity and values as a counselling psychologist. This is particularly true of its phenomenological stance and focus on

the individual's subjective and interpersonal experience in the context of their social and cultural world.

With its roots in both human science research and the main psychotherapeutic traditions, counselling psychology is multifaceted. It values phenomenology as a basis for practice and enquiry, alongside the more traditional modes of enquiry employed in scientific psychology, without assuming the "automatic superiority of any one way of experiencing, feeling, valuing and knowing" (BPS, 2005, p. 1). The aim of this study respected "first person accounts as valid in their own terms" (BPS, 2005, p. 1), by pursuing a phenomenological enquiry into academic burnout and focusing on the individual's subjective, lived experience of overcoming academic burnout from a first-person perspective. In doing so, it also recognised and respected the individual's potential for overcoming adversity and achieving personal growth.

This research also reached beyond the individual's subjective experience to explore the role that interpersonal relations played in the development of academic burnout and recovery, in line with the counselling psychology value of engaging with intersubjectivity. Furthermore, it provided an understanding of the individual's experience of burnout and recovery within the context of their social and cultural milieu, taking account of the pluralistic nature of the undergraduate environment.

And finally, carrying out this project reinforced and strengthened the scientist-practitioner dimension of my identity as counselling psychologist.

1.4 ORGANISATION OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation is organised by chapter. This chapter, the introduction, is followed by Chapter 2, in which I review the most relevant literature on general and academic burnout and locate the research question in the existing body of knowledge.

Chapter 3 presents IPA as the chosen methodology, the rationale for employing IPA and alternative methods considered. The same chapter details the research design, data collection and analysis, the anticipation and management of risks, ethical considerations and the handling of ethical issues.

Chapter 4 presents a description and illustration of the research findings.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the findings in the light of salient opinion and research literature, critically evaluate the methodology, limitations and quality of the research, and reflect on the relevance of the findings for counselling psychology and psychotherapy.

I conclude the dissertation with Chapter 6, which summarises the contribution of the study, suggests future directions for research and reflects on the personal and professional impact of the research on the researcher.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The overarching aim of this study was to develop an understanding of the lived experience of overcoming academic burnout in an undergraduate context. The literature review focused on a number of key areas derived from this aim: the definition, development, lived experience and prevention of academic/general burnout; recovery from academic/general burnout; and the undergraduate context of student burnout. 'General burnout' refers to burnout in the workplace and other non-academic settings.

2.1.1 Literature Search

I searched for literature on burnout in the Middlesex University Library resources (via the Summon search engine); the British Psychological Society (BPS) online resources; the British Library Main Catalogue; Google Scholar; Academia; and ResearchGate. Most of the research, theoretical and opinion literature included in this review came from the Middlesex Library databases and e-journals, the rest from Academia; ResearchGate; and the EBSCO Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection available from the BPS website. No literature was sourced from the British Library Catalogue.

In the literature search I first used the simple keywords 'burnout', 'burnt out' and 'burned out' before expanding the search with key phrases most relevant to a phenomenological inquiry into recovering from academic burnout. Examples include 'academic burnout', 'student burnout', 'learning burnout', 'burnout recovery', 'burnout

prevention', and 'burnout intervention'. Expanding the search with forward and backward citation searching also produced relevant literature.

The burnout literature is vast: the keyword 'burnout' alone yielded more than 105,000 resources from Middlesex Library's resources. However, the literature search produced only a small number of items focused on academic/student burnout, and after the exclusion of studies focused on medical or nursing students, less than 150 studies were left. Of these, more than two thirds were published in the last five years. The currency of the literature on student burnout suggests that the subject is of growing interest and importance for researchers and practitioners.

Qualitative studies concerned with the meaning of burnout are scarce and the majority of these studies have focused on the nursing profession. The literature search produced a handful of phenomenological studies on general burnout but none on recovery from burnout. Hence this study is uniquely positioned to make a useful contribution in the field of student burnout.

2.1.2 Scope and Organisation of the Literature Review

Literature on medical doctors and nurses in training was largely excluded from the review to focus on three or four year undergraduate courses with similar structures and requirements. Likewise, literature on burnout in schools was excluded to focus on the undergraduate environment. Studies and theoretical papers on general burnout are mentioned where relevant, but of these, only a few studies on the lived experience of general burnout are considered in detail.

The review covers the history of burnout, the definition and measurement of academic burnout, its psychological and physical consequences and the factors contributing to the development of burnout. It then considers literature on the

undergraduate environment, student mental health, stress and coping, and interventions to support student well-being. Next, the review looks at literature on measures to prevent burnout and support recovery from burnout, and finally, it discusses studies on the lived experience of burnout. Where necessary, the review supplements gaps in the literature on academic burnout from the literature on general burnout.

2.1.3   History of the Burnout Concept

Descriptions of burnout-like phenomena have appeared in literature through the ages, but the concept of burnout as we understand it today - as a social problem - is relatively new. American psychologist Herbert J. Freudenberger (1974, 1975) is usually credited with coining the term in the early 1970s, although Graham Greene preceded Freudenberger with his 1960 novel *A Burnt-Out Case* (Greene, 2004). For Greene's character, burnout was an existential crisis marked by indifference and loss of meaning, whereas the notion of burnout introduced to psychological literature a decade later, was more technical and related specifically to work.

Burnout was introduced to psychological literature and wider cultural discourse in the mid-1970s by psychoanalyst Herbert J. Freudenberger (1974, 1975) and psychologist Christina Maslach (Rosse, Boss, Johnson, & Crown, 1991; Maslach et al., 2001). Freudenberger's personal experience of burning out whilst running an after-hours clinic for drug addicts inspired his later exploration of the burnout phenomenon. He borrowed the term "Burn-Out" from the drug scene to describe clients who experienced exhaustion and disillusionment (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980, p. xvii). Maslach's work on burnout was inspired by interviews with human service workers who introduced her to the concept of burnout (Maslach & Schaufeli, 1996). With colleagues, Maslach continued to develop the first and still

widely used burnout instrument, the Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Survey (MBI-GS) (Chao, McCallion, & Nickle, 2011). Following early papers by Freudenberger and Maslach, burnout soon became embedded in the wider cultural discourse (Rosse et al, 1991).

At first, burnout was assumed to be unique to aid work and the human services professions such as health care, social work and education, in which the inability to continue meeting unrealistic external demands led to psychological and physical breakdown (Kaschka, Korczak, & Broich, 2011). With time, researchers and practitioners realised that burnout is not confined to any particular profession (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). Whilst the work on burnout has expanded to other professions and areas of human endeavour, including non-occupational contexts such as sport (Gustafsson, Hassmén, & Lundqvist, 2007), research in the human services field has continued in parallel. Burnout in the medical profession has been a widely published cause for concern. Burnout is a chronic problem among primary care physicians (Schaufeli, Maassen, Bakker, & Sixma, 2011) and a recent cross-sectional UK study reported substantial depersonalisation of GPs (Orton, Orton, & Pereira Gray, 2012). Other recent studies have explored the prevalence of burnout in nursing (Hooper, Craig, Janvrin, Wetsel, & Reimels, 2010; Isaksson Rø, Gude, Tyssen, & Aasland, 2010), counselling (Wallace, Lee & Lee, 2010) and psychotherapy (Clements-Cortes, 2013).

2.2 CURRENT DEFINITION OF BURNOUT

Researchers generally regard burnout as a psychological response to chronic work-related stress (Devereux, Hastings, Noone, Firth, & Totsika, 2009; Grau-Alberola, Gil-Monte, García-Juesas, & Figueiredo-Ferraz, 2010). These stressors are not

purely task-related; they also have a social and interpersonal dimension (Maslach et al., 2001; Constantino, Ramos de Souza, Gonçalves de Assis, & Correia, 2013; Muheim, 2013).

Burnout is not a recognised disorder in the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In the ICD-10, burnout appears under "Factors influencing health status and contact with health services" (WHO, 2014, chapter XXI). The ICD-10 calls burnout a "state of vital exhaustion" that is part of "problems related to life-management difficulty" (Z73). A state of vital exhaustion is characterised by lack of energy, increased irritability and demoralisation.

Most researchers employ a three-dimensional definition comprising emotional exhaustion, disengagement and a reduced sense of personal efficacy. Emotional exhaustion, the individual stress component of burnout, refers to feelings of being depleted of psychological and mental energy. Disengagement or depersonalisation, the interpersonal component, refers to negative, cynical and/or excessively detached responses to work and relationships in the workplace. Thirdly, a reduced sense of personal efficacy or personal accomplishment is the self-evaluation component of burnout and refers to a lowered sense of competence, productivity and efficacy (Maslach, 1998; Elloy, Terpening, & Kohls, 2001; Mommersteeg, Keijsers, Heijnen, Verbraak, & van Doornen, 2006; Prins et al., 2008; Nuallaong, 2013). Some researchers have questioned and excluded the third dimension of general burnout, citing evidence that reduced personal accomplishment (efficacy) has only a weak relationship with the two core dimensions of exhaustion and disengagement (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004).

As an extension of general burnout, academic burnout involves feeling emotionally exhausted by academic demands, detached from one's academic responsibilities and study environment (depersonalisation) and feeling incompetent as a student (inefficacy) (Schaufeli, Martinez, Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002). However, as with general burnout, the third dimension of student burnout has been questioned by researchers such as Qiao and Schaufeli (2011), who found no empirical or theoretical support for personal efficacy.

The present study employs a definition proposed by Maroco and Alvares Duarte Bonini Campos (2012), whose structural analysis from three burnout inventories concluded that student burnout is best defined by two dimensions only: exhaustion associated with coursework activities; and disengagement and cynicism towards coursework. Hence, in academic burnout, exhaustion refers to feeling mentally, emotionally and physically depleted, and disengagement refers to a decline of interest in coursework, increasing emotional detachment from coursework and increasing doubts about the significance and potential usefulness of one's studies.

2.3 MEASUREMENT OF ACADEMIC BURNOUT

The most well-known burnout measures are the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), followed by the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) and Shirom-Melamed Burnout Measure (SMBM) (Milićević-Kalašić, 2013). These self-reporting measures have been used as a basis for the development of student burnout instruments.

A student version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the MBI-Student Survey (MBI-SS), has been validated across nationalities (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Bresó, Salanova, & Schaufeli, 2007; Hu & Schaufeli, 2009). Researchers have also developed alternative self-reporting instruments to the MBI-SS, such as the OLBI-SS

(Oldenburg Burnout Inventory – Student Survey) and the CBI-SS (Copenhagen Burnout Inventory – Student Survey). The two-factor structure of the OLBI-SS has been validated with students in several European countries and it is regarded as a robust instrument (Maroco & Alvares Duarte Bonini Campos, 2012; Reis, Xanthopoulou, & Tsaousis, 2015). Unlike, say, the PHQ-9 depression questionnaire, burnout surveys do not produce a global score for burnout; instead, they score exhaustion and engagement individually, and the scores are continuous variables with no cut-off point (Demerouti et al., 2003; Kristensen, Borritz, Villadsen, & Christensen, 2005).

Tools that measure academic burnout tend to rely more on subjective symptoms than on signs, where symptoms are the individual's subjective experience of the internal consequences of burnout, such as a loss of interest in studies. Signs are external consequences of burnout that can be observed by someone else, such as lack of participation in class. Even then, burnout often leads to behaviours that signal the individual's internal state to others, which makes it possible for those close to a burnout sufferer to detect warning signs.

2.4 THE SYMPTOMS, SIGNS AND COST OF BURNOUT

Due to its wide-ranging and potentially severe impact, burnout can have serious consequences for an individual, their family, organisations and society. The symptoms of burnout manifest on an emotional, social, cognitive and physical level (Karl & Fischer, 2013). Emotional symptoms include anxiety, low mood and helplessness. Social symptoms include avoidance and withdrawal from social contact and deterioration of interpersonal relations, and cognitive symptoms involve

reduced concentration and deterioration of memory, decision making and problem-solving abilities.

Burnout is associated with increased risk of serious physical illness, such as cardiovascular disease (Melamed, Shirom, & Toker, 2006; Cohen, 2013) and musculoskeletal pains, sleep disorders, gastrointestinal problems, immunodeficiencies, skin disorders and respiratory problems (Constantino et al., 2013). Moreover, Honkonen et al. (2006) found that the risk of physical illness increased with the severity of burnout. The risks posed by the burnout syndrome also include mental health problems, long-term sick leave and absence from work (Karlson et al., 2010; Prinz et al., 2012), independent of co-occurring mental disorders and physical illnesses (Ahola et al., 2008).

A systematic review of medical findings related to burnout shows that burnout is characterised by anxiety, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts and memory impairment (Kakiashvili et al., 2013) and therefore may lead to significant impairment in social and occupational functioning. Further symptoms identified by Constantino et al. (2013) include: cognitive impairment such as lack of concentration, memory changes, and sluggish thinking; emotional symptoms including feelings of loneliness, helplessness, mood swings and low self-esteem; and substance use.

Burnout is commonly used by doctors as a motivation for certified sick leave (Kaschka et al., 2011) and associated with high rates of attrition in professions such as medicine (Brooks, Bradt, Eyre, Hunt, & Dileo, 2010) and education (Vanderslice, 2010). In health care, burnout has been associated with compassion fatigue (Michalec, Diefenbeck, & Mahoney, 2013) and a lower quality of service delivery to patients (McHugh, Kutney-Lee, Cimiotti, Sloane, & Aiken, 2011). In the field of psychotherapy, an earlier study by McCarthy and Frieze (1999) suggests that

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burnout reduced client satisfaction. The high incidence of burnout in the caring professions, including counselling and psychotherapy, underlines the need for practitioners to understand and manage their own risk of burnout as a form of self-care, which according to professional guidelines is an ethical responsibility (Bond, 2004; BPS, 2009; UKCP, 2009).

In addition to the risks described above, student burnout also involves consequences specific to an academic environment: a rise in absenteeism; lack of motivation to meet coursework requirements; and a higher dropout rate (Yang & Farn, 2005). Researchers differ about the extent to which burnout impacts on academic performance. Whilst Yang (2004) found burnout to have a significant negative impact on academic achievement, others have reported only a mild relationship between burnout and diminished academic performance (Schaufeli et al, 2002; May, Bauer & Fincham, 2015). Yet other studies have indicated that burnout is not a significant predictor of academic performance, or that the relationship between burnout and academic performance is complex and mediated by several personal and contextual factors (Salanova, Schaufeli, Martínez, & Bresó, 2010; Galbraith & Merrill, 2015).

Lin and Huang (2014) highlight the negative impact of burnout on a student's relationships with their lecturers, peers and educational institution, and draw attention to the need for counsellors, advisors and lecturers to understand student burnout. Further to Lin and Huang's conclusion, the risks and potential cost of burnout provide a strong imperative for studies that will enhance current knowledge and understanding of burnout.

2.5 DEVELOPMENT OF BURNOUT

Research on environmental and personal factors related to burnout has been dominated by quantitative studies concerned with examining the relationship between burnout and individual risk factors. A sound understanding of how these risk factors contribute to the development of burnout is thought to be important for recognising, preventing and treating the burnout syndrome (Bährer-Kohler, 2013).

2.5.1 Factors in General Burnout

Early understandings of burnout gave precedence to environmental over individual factors in the genesis of burnout. For example, Alexander's (1980) article on burnout prioritises managerial, organisational and community environmental factors over individual characteristics in the development of burnout. In a later review of burnout research and interventions, Maslach (2003) still claims that research evidence favours burnout as a function of the situation rather than the person. However, she concludes that a focus on the interaction between personal factors and the individual's environment would be more fruitful in understanding burnout than a singular focus on personal or situational factors.

More recent work in burnout reflects a shift towards the interplay between environmental and personality factors, together with an increased interest in individual, demographic and personality factors. For example, in Heinemann and Heinemann's (2017) extensive review of all burnout literature in PubMed until 2011, factors contributing to the development of burnout, i.e., personality, organisational and social factors, represent the largest category of burnout literature. The majority of studies in this category focus on personality traits.

Some personality traits are regarded as risk factors in the development of burnout whilst others are associated with resilience. A study with potential relevance to student burnout investigated the relationship between adult attachment styles and burnout, combining five participant samples from different cultures, occupations and social strata (Malach Pines, 2004). This study suggests that an individual with a more secure attachment style is less likely to burn out, whereas an insecure attachment style (avoidant or anxious ambivalent) is associated with poor coping and a higher likelihood of burnout.

Farber (2000, p. 675) proposes three forms of burnout: "classic", in which the individual responds to stress by working increasingly hard, "underchallenged", in which monotonous and unstimulating work conditions result in burnout, or "wearout", in which the individual becomes depleted by stress and gives up. Furthermore, Farber proposes that self-interested goals have replaced idealistic goals in the development of burnout. He argues that burnout was originally the result of inner disappointment in not meeting goals that were personally and socially meaningful, whereas in the present, because of economic and work cultural changes, burnout derives from failing to meet the demands of others, competition with others, financial drivers, or the sense of being deprived of what one is entitled to.

2.5.2 Factors in Student Burnout

So far, research on factors predicting academic burnout has focused more on personal and social factors than on the learning environment. The most salient studies are discussed here.

According to Schaufeli et al. (2002), higher education students are particularly prone to burnout since they experience multiple socio-economic, relational, and future

career concerns during their studies. Lin and Huang's (2014) Taiwanese study investigated six life stressors, four of which partially predict academic burnout: stressors related to personal identity (e.g. negative self-perception and poor self-awareness), interpersonal difficulties, concerns about future development/employment and concerns about academic work. The remaining two factors - emotionally stressful events and stressors related to family life – did not significantly predict burnout.

Perfectionism is a personal factor that can increase vulnerability to student burnout. A Chinese study by Zhang, Gan and Cham (2007) links academic burnout with a negative perfectionist approach involving self-critical responses to imperfections, and academic engagement with a positive perfectionist approach involving high but realistic standards and personal organisation. Chang, Lee, Byeon, Seong and Lee (2016) found motivation to have a mediating effect on this relationship between perfectionism and academic burnout. Their study suggests that adaptive perfectionism boosts intrinsic motivation, which provides protection against academic burnout. In their study, the high standards of students with an adaptive perfectionist approach reflected the interest, enjoyment and meaning their studies held for them. Conversely, maladaptive perfectionism was associated with extrinsic motivation which were positively related to burnout. These students experienced hopelessness, were concerned about external evaluation and judgement and tried to meet unrealistic external expectations and standards. They were also often exceedingly competitive, all of which eventually led to academic burnout.

Another personal factor in student burnout is self-regulation or dispositional self-control, which refers to a consistent ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts and behaviours and resources (e.g. time) in the face of challenging situations and

environments. Duru, Duru and Balkis (2014) found that well-developed self-regulation skills offered protection against student burnout and boosted academic achievement. Likewise, Seibert, May, Fitzgerald and Fincham (2016) found that lower self-control was associated with higher student burnout and negative academic outcomes.

Yet another personal factor with a significant link to student burnout is self-efficacy, i.e., the individual's belief that they will succeed when faced with a particular situation or task. Charkhabi, Azizi Abarghuei and Hayati (2013) examined the relationship between student self-efficacy and burnout. When faced with academic challenges, students with high self-efficacy persevered and found solutions, whereas students with low self-efficacy were less likely to find useful solutions, less likely to plan and more likely to give up. They tended to employ avoidant strategies in the form of alienation from studies and others and were more likely to experience stress in the face of academic challenges.

Lin and Huang's (2014) identification of interpersonal difficulties as a partial predictor of burnout corresponds with studies that found loneliness to be a predictor of academic burnout (Lin & Huang, 2012; Stolker & Lafreniere, 2012). Loneliness is associated with feelings of isolation, emptiness and worthlessness, dissatisfaction with one's social life and status, and lack of emotional connection. Just as loneliness contributes to burnout, the converse also applies. Tukaev, Vasheka and Dolgova (2013) identified a relationship between academic burnout and low motivation for interpersonal cooperation, suggesting that burnout and social difficulties may be mutually reinforcing.

A positive link between concerns about future career prospects and undergraduate burnout is well supported (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Tukaev et al., 2013; Lin and Huang,

2014). The role of concerns about academic work in student burnout appears to be more complex. In a qualitative survey by Cushman and West (2006), using an open-ended questionnaire, students identified academic workload as the most important contributor to burnout, followed by non-academic influences and lack of motivation. However, the results of a large quantitative study by Meriläinen (2014) challenge a simple, direct relationship between academic workload and burnout. Instead, the researcher found a strong negative correlation between burnout and achievement motivation, which in turn is influenced by an interplay between perceived meaning of life, the teaching-learning environment and perceived workload.

The impact of social and academic factors may reach beyond undergraduate studies to predict early career burnout. In a longitudinal study Salmela-Aro, Tolvanen and Nurmi (2011) examined the relationship between social strategies at university (e.g. seeking social support) and early career burnout and engagement. Effective social strategies at university predicted high levels of work engagement and low burnout ten years later; likewise, difficulty to deal with social situations at university predicted high and increasing levels of career burnout ten years later. An earlier study by the same researchers found that high and increasing optimism during university studies predicted strong work engagement and low burnout between ten and seventeen years later; conversely, high task avoidance predicted low work engagement and high career burnout (Salmela-Aro, Tolvanen, & Nurmi, 2009).

Factors contributing to burnout in undergraduate students may also differ from those affecting post-graduate students. Clark, Murdock and Koetting (2009) found that traditional support outside a counselling psychology doctoral program did not moderate the effects of stress on burnout whilst the academic advisor-student relationship and sense of community within the doctoral program significantly

predicted burnout. Overall, levels of burnout in counselling psychology post-graduate students were relatively low.

2.5.3 Burnout and Stress

Since burnout is regarded as a psychological response to chronic work-related stress (Devereux et al., 2009), an understanding of stress itself is important for an understanding of burnout.

2.5.3.1 The Nature of Stress

The endocrinologist Hans Selye coined the term 'stressor' for the stimulus that evokes a stress response and the term 'stress' for the stress response itself (Rosch, 2013). Even though some stressors have more inherent stress potential, people respond very differently to the same psycho-social stressors. According to the transactional model of stress developed by Lazarus and colleagues, stress arises when the individual, based on their subjective perception, does not have sufficient psychological, physiological or cognitive resources or strategies to cope with the demands and constraints of a stressful situation. An important feature of the individual's stress response is that their appraisal of stress is not entirely conscious and the outcome of one stressful situation, whether positive or negative, influences the appraisal and management of subsequent stressful situations. Some theorists disagree with the primacy of cognition in this theory, but at present cognitive theories dominate the field (Everly & Lating, 2013).

Stress has widely diverse effects on the individual. When the stress arousal becomes excessively chronic or intense, organs affected by the stress response will become diseased or dysfunctional. Physical effects include gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, respiratory, musculoskeletal, skin and immune disorders.

Psychological manifestations of the stress response include anxiety and mood disorders (Everly & Lating, 2013).

The difference between stress and burnout has been a controversial question. Karl & Fischer (2013) propose that the development of burnout arises slowly from chronic, unmediated stress and ongoing and fruitless expenditure of energy, i.e. when the individual is under stress without the resources they need to avoid, reduce or alleviate their stress. According to the authors, the difference between burnout and chronic stress lies in the extent to which the person experiences psychological and physical symptoms and experiences feelings of inadequacy, with more intense symptoms indicating burnout.

Maslach et al. (2001, p. 399) highlight the interpersonal dimension of burnout as "a psychological syndrome in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job". However, Malach Pines and Keinan's (2005) path analysis shows a higher correlation between burnout and the meaning of work than between burnout and stressors in the work context.

2.5.4 Conservation of Resources Theory

The relationship between demands versus resources is also central to the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, which conceptualises burnout as a loss of resources over time (Alarcon, Edwards, & Menke, 2011). In terms of this theory, people try to acquire, preserve and maintain four types of resources that are relevant to optimal functioning: objects, conditions (e.g. social support), personal characteristics (e.g. conscientiousness) and energies (resources that aid in acquiring other resources, e.g. time). The individual draws on these resources when facing demands. Adaptive coping strategies depend on sufficient resources and lead to the

acquisition of more resources. Conversely, maladaptive coping strategies follow from insufficient resources and lead to further loss of resources. When resources are threatened, lost, or when investment of resources do not yield any gains, stress increases. The continued use of maladaptive strategies can lead to an endless spiral of resource loss known as burnout (ibid.). These authors explored predictors of burnout and engagement in first year undergraduate students and concluded that intercepting maladaptive ways of coping with the academic environment and teaching students adaptive coping strategies instead can increase engagement and decrease burnout.

2.6 THE UNDERGRADUATE ENVIRONMENT

The transition from further to higher education brings about changes in nearly every aspect of the new undergraduate student's life. It requires academic, social and psychological adjustments and the assumption of new responsibilities (Robotham & Julian, 2006). Whereas many undergraduate students embrace the transition to university, others find it overwhelming and stressful (Thurber & Walton, 2012). To understand academic burnout, it is important to understand the challenges posed by the transition to university and the nature of the undergraduate environment. This section therefore considers relevant literature on the context within which student burnout takes place.

In the past, students were a privileged elite with lower rates of mental illness than the general population. However, the widening participation in higher education have brought the incidence of mental health problems in the student population closer to that of the general population (Macaskill, 2013). Two recent changes in higher

education have had a significant impact on the experience of students at university: the 2012 increase in tuition fees and widening participation in higher education (HE).

2.6.1 Increase of HE Fees

Higher education tuition fees in England nearly tripled in September 2012 (Robotham, 2012), thereby increasing student debts and the long-term financial burden after graduation. Key findings of the National Union of Students (NUS) UK (2012, p. 21) report include concerns from a third of students across all groups about their "ability to meet the cost of basic expenses like rent and bills" and "ability to concentrate on studies without worrying about finances". A web-based survey of full-time undergraduates found that 68 percent of the students surveyed held at least one part-time job during term-time. The majority were employed more than ten hours per week. Students worked for various reasons: financial, to reduce the debt they incurred, to aid their future career by working in a course-related field and to enhance their employability. Paid employment reduced stress for some students and raised it for others. Some students claimed that part-time employment yielded benefits such as enhanced future employability, experience and increased financial security (Robotham, 2009).

2.6.2 Widening participation in HE

The second significant change over the last two decades has been the government initiative to increase participation from lower socio-economic groups traditionally under-represented in higher education. This policy has resulted in significant numbers of students being the first in their family to attend university, entering the "unknown" (Greenbank, 2007, p. 368). Many of these students have fewer financial and social resources to draw on than 'traditional' students. It is known that access to

financial support from a student's family has a significant impact on the individual's wellbeing and progression to further study (NUS UK, 2012).

2.6.3 Transition to HE

Whilst the transition to university involves common challenges, research also shows individual differences in patterns of adjustment over time. In a longitudinal study, Nightingale et al. (2013) investigated differences between the development trajectories of first year students' adjustment to university in the UK, looking at associations with emotional intelligence and academic performance. They identified four patterns of adjustment, each with potentially different needs. Worth noting is the relatively high percentage (31%) of students who fell into the low, stable adjustment pattern most strongly linked to depression, loneliness and poor academic performance. Macaskill's (2013) assessment of the mental health of UK undergraduate students across three years identified another pattern, in which anxiety, depression and somatic symptoms all peaked in the second year. This peak indicates an increase in stressors and/or cumulative effect of stressors into the second year.

A review of the literature (Robotham & Julian, 2006) identified several stressors commonly experienced by students: academic pressures in the form of increased workload, deadlines and assessments, financial pressures, lifestyle changes, social pressures, parental pressures and concerns about a future career. They also found that common stressors may vary across cultures. In a rare IPA study into the experience of first year undergraduate students, Denovan and Macaskill (2013) identified both stressors and supportive factors. In common with Robotham and Julian (2006), their study highlights the impact of increased academic demands,

concerns about finance and future career, and stress arising from independent living and homesickness.

At the same time, certain personal, social and emotional factors protect students against the development of mental illness. Examples include academic ability and achievement, high self-esteem, a network of family and friends and sources of emotional support (Macaskill, 2013). In Denovan and Macaskill's (2013) study, students regarded their social environment as a source of pressure as well as support, and self-discipline, motivation, and learning from experience were important prerequisites for meeting academic challenges.

Thurber and Walton (2012) conducted a review of literature on homesickness and adjustment in university students across several countries. Adjustment involved changes: to the student's daily routine and diet, in their social, cultural and geographical context; and in their contact with primary caregivers. Intense homesickness was associated with significant anxiety, depression and loneliness. Risk factors included inexperience in being away from home, high dependence on family, insecure attachment to parents, unsupportive parenting, perception of discrimination and low control.

The importance of social adjustment is also highlighted by a mixed-methods Canadian study (Buote et al., 2007). The quality of new friendships in the first year significantly predicted social adjustment and to some extent academic adjustment too. Friendships provided students with a sense of belonging, a source of emotional support, practical help and a way of growing their social networks. A less obvious benefit was that it normalised the experience that transition was hard, as first year students often held idealised expectations of university life and questioned themselves when they struggled to adapt.

Another study that recognises the importance of social support at university is a thematic analysis by Holdsworth, Turner and Scott-Young (2017), which explored resilience from the first-person perspective of students. The authors define resilience as "a set of attitudes and behaviours which are associated with an individual's ability to bounce back and to adapt in the face of risk and stress" (p. 1). The study suggests that students developed a more complex understanding of resilience over time, from the first year to post-graduate years. First year students prioritised support from friends as an attribute of resilience, whereas later years and postgraduate students increasingly valued support from peers, and to some extent family. The development of perspective through self-reflection, learning through experience, and goal setting was a highly important feature of resilience for first year students, but became less so in later years. Meanwhile, maintenance of physical and mental health as the third attribute of resilience became more important in later years.

Wintre and Yaffe (2000) found that a student's relationship with parents influenced most aspects of their adjustment to university. Current relationships with parents contributed most directly to positive adjustment. Within that, mutual reciprocity was particularly important, i.e. open, ongoing communication, relative equality and mutual respect with regards to the other's point of view and the opportunity to discuss the student's experience of university. Authoritative parenting, as opposed to authoritarian or permissive, had an indirect positive effect on a student's adjustment to university.

Students transitioning to higher education are expected to become more independent as learners. Macaskill and Denovan (2013) argue that autonomous learning is developed through the development of capabilities that facilitate independent learning in students rather than the transmission of methods. An

intervention to develop confidence in first year students brought about an increase in self-efficacy and self-esteem and a resulting increase in autonomous learning when compared with a control group.

2.6.4 Coping Strategies

The ways in which students perceive the academic, social and emotional demands placed on them and the coping strategies they employ, play an important role in their mental health and academic engagement.

In their review of research on homesickness and adjustment, Thurber and Walton (2012) note that university life often introduces and exposes students to unhealthy behaviours such as binge drinking and drug use, which may become ways of coping. Alcohol consumption in first year undergraduates is raised as a concern by Macaskill and Mobach (2011) too, who carried out an investigation into this cohort's motivation to drink. The researchers found that students not only drank to cope with negative emotions, they equally drank to integrate socially and enhance their mood.

Looking at changes in stress and subjective well-being in UK undergraduate students over the first six months at university, Denovan & Macaskill (2017) found that optimism mediated the relationship between stress and negative emotions and was therefore a key factor in students' ability to cope with stress during their transition to university. The researchers proposed positive psychology interventions to promote an optimistic attitude in undergraduate students, but also cautioned that further investigation into the role of optimism in subjective well-being is needed.

In terms of potentially helpful coping strategies employed by students, the literature addresses three kinds of strategies: problem-focused, emotion-focused and meaning-focused coping.

Testing the COR theory in first year students, Alarcon et al. (2011) found that conscientiousness and social support promoted problem-focused coping, a strategy that aims to change the individual's relationship with the stressor and is typically employed when the person feels in control of the situation. Problem-focused coping was related to preventing burnout and encouraging engagement. On the other hand, individuals who employed more emotion-focused coping strategies did not perceive control over their situation and focused on dealing with the negative emotional impact of the stressor. These individuals seemed to be more sensitive to demands; the authors suggest that demands might have a greater impact when resources are already low. They also propose that burnout in students could be prevented and engagement increased by intercepting maladaptive ways of coping with the academic environment and teaching students adaptive coping strategies instead. They also point out that neither emotion-focused not problem-focused are inherently helpful or unhelpful; the usefulness of the coping strategy is dependent upon the situation. Hence, emotion-focused can be adaptive in some circumstances, even if it was unhelpful in their study.

In addition to problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, meaning-focused coping strategies that involve reformulating perceived demands as challenges rather than threats, can be employed to meet academic and other demands. Ortega-Maldonado and Salanova (2017) investigated the role of meaning-focused coping in psychological capital and academic performance, measuring meaning-focused coping in terms of acceptance, humour and positive reframing. The findings showed that meaning-focused coping strategies such as acceptance, self-regulation, positive reframing, adjusting priorities and adapting goals might strengthen a student's

psychological capital, thereby enabling them to persevere in meeting an academic challenge and reaching their goals.

2.6.5 Student Counselling

An online survey of service data across 113 UK university counselling services for three years from 2013 showed that alongside the growth in student populations, the demand for student counselling increased over this period (Broglia, Millings, & Barkham, 2017). The rise in demand for counselling has coincided with the increase in tuition fees, and the survey data also supports the hypothesis that widening student participation in higher education contributes to the increased demand for mental health support, as more students from more disadvantaged backgrounds with poorer mental health are attending university. Moreover, the number of students seeking help for severe mental health problems has increased, and students tend to seek help when their ability to cope is already compromised. Julal (2016) investigated the use of university support services by first year students and found that students' perception of the social support available to them played a part in help-seeking: students with more perceived support at the start of the academic year used fewer student services during the year than students with lower levels of perceived support

2.7 BURNOUT INTERVENTIONS

The focus of the literature review now returns to burnout, to consider interventions aimed at preventing and reducing burnout and promoting the individual's recovery from burnout. The review produced some material related to burnout prevention strategies for general burnout, which typically include person- or group-directed interventions, organisation-directed interventions, or a combination of the two

(Walter, Plaumann, & Krugmann, 2013). The search yielded no literature specific to student burnout. Furthermore, much of the general literature on intervention and recovery was too far removed from an academic context to warrant discussion here, hence only a small subset of the literature on general burnout is covered below.

2.7.1 Communication

Karl & Fischer (2013) regard communication as one of the most important means of preventing and intercepting burnout. As a primary preventive measure, communication will help prevent burnout by raising awareness of the many individual vulnerability factors and ways in which burnout can develop. Communication as a secondary preventive measure can intercept burnout in the early stages, and as a tertiary preventive measure it will help people with burnout reintegrate into the work environment and prevent relapse. The authors point out that people who are on the road to burnout increasingly lose awareness of their own needs and therefore cannot communicate them to others, so intervention should encourage self-awareness and support the individual to understand and reframe experiences that indicate or may lead to burnout. Even though the authors write about communication in a work context, one might expect communication to play an important role in preventing and intercepting student burnout too.

Also noted from this source was the authors' view that recovery from severe burnout is a long, protracted process with an unpredictable outcome. Karl & Fischer (2013)

2.7.2 Awareness of Student Burnout

Given the suggested importance of communication in preventing burnout, the websites of a small selection of London universities were searched for information on burnout, and counselling for burnout, to gauge the extent to which academic burnout

is recognised and addressed by student counselling services. Using a crude systematic sampling approach, six universities were selected from an alphabetic list of London universities (4ICU, 2016). The sample comprised City University London (CUL), Imperial College London (ICL), Middlesex University (MU), School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (SOAS), University of East London (UEL) and University of Westminster (UW).

Of the six universities, only UEL's Mental Health and Wellbeing Policy was available online, but the policy did not mention burnout. With the exception of ICL, none of the universities' counselling services mentioned burnout as an issue experienced by students. ICL's online Student Space promoted work-life balance and relaxation, warning against burnout through non-stop work and recommending realistic thinking as a tool to reduce the risk of burnout. The only other university that mentioned burnout was UW, whose website had a news item on the collaboration between its Centre of Resilience and medical schools at three other universities to address burnout in physicians.

Several counselling services, however, mentioned factors commonly associated with burnout, such as: exam stress (CUL, MU, UW); study stress (MU), stress (UW); academic difficulties/concerns (CUL, ICL, SOAS); difficulties with academic relationships (CUL); procrastination (CUL, ICL); and thinking of dropping out of university (UW). Some universities provided online publications on these issues, such as the UW's Mind Matters booklet on managing exam stress and ICL's self-help leaflet on anxiety, and several universities offered workshops or support groups on stress management (ICL, MU, SOAS, WU), exam stress management (UEL) and overcoming procrastination (ICL).

In summary, the student services of the universities in the sample did not recognise academic burnout on their websites, with the exception of ICL. However, they all seemed concerned with factors associated with academic burnout. This suggests a need to raise awareness within higher education institutions of the nature and risks of student burnout, including the value of informing students about the symptoms and contributors to burnout. My study's focus on a first person perspective on burnout will resonate with students and provide support services with an understanding of what it means to overcome burnout.

2.7.3 Psychotherapeutic Interventions

Psychotherapists and counsellors are well placed to identify burnout symptoms in students, raise self-awareness and support them in developing constructive responses to their situation.

Systematic reviews of the literature have typically investigated the effectiveness of organisation-directed and person-directed interventions, and a combination of the two. Mainly person-directed interventions that are potentially relevant to student burnout are discussed here. Organisation-directed interventions are geared towards workplace structures and processes, for example, work process restructuring, work performance appraisals and work shift readjustments (Awa, Plaumann, & Walter, 2010). They tend to bear little relevance to the academic demands placed on students.

Several systematic reviews found evidence for the positive effect of psychotherapeutic interventions on one or two dimensions of burnout (Awa et al., 2010; Kaschka et al., 2011; Korczak, Wastian, & Schneider, 2012; Westermann, Kozak, Harling, & Nienhaus, 2014; West, Dyrbye, Erwin, & Shanafelt, 2016).

Kaschka et al. (2011) suggest that the severity of burnout should guide the choice of treatment. For mild burnout, adjustments to work-life balance and life habits are recommended, with a focus on adopting more realistic standards, reducing stressors and bringing about physical recuperation. For severe burnout, psychotherapeutic interventions are recommended, with or without psycho-pharmaceutical drugs, but the authors also identify the paucity of information about the effectiveness of these different interventions.

Lack of information also posed a problem for Korczak et al. (2012), who could identify only 17 suitable studies on therapeutic interventions. Cognitive behavior therapy was found to be effective in reducing emotional exhaustion in most studies, whereas the evidence for stress management interventions, music therapy, Qigong and physical therapy was unclear due to an inadequate number of studies. The researchers argue for further investigations into the effectiveness of therapies for the treatment of burnout syndrome, alongside studies on natural recovery from burnout without any therapy, and studies on how workplace conditions impact on therapeutic interventions. By exploring what burnout sufferers found helpful in recovering from student burnout, my study is a response to the gap in current knowledge as identified by the authors.

Awa et al. (2010) found a combination of person- and organisation-directed interventions most effective, with positive effects lasting a year or more. Person-directed programs included psychotherapy, counselling and cognitive behavioural training, relaxation exercises, adaptive skills and communication training. The authors recommend refresher courses to enhance the benefits of interventions. West et al. (2016) do not cite psychotherapeutic interventions but they too found evidence that both organisation-focused and individual-focused measures such as

mindfulness, stress management, and small group discussions can be effective in reducing burnout among physicians. Westermann et al. (2014) found evidence that a brief mindfulness-based stress reduction intervention can have a significant health-promoting effect on the burnout dimension of emotional exhaustion in elderly care nursing staff. According to their review, work-directed and combined intervention programmes appeared to achieve longer-lasting effects than person-directed interventions, but again, the results were limited by the small number of suitable studies.

The literature on psychotherapeutic interventions in burnout is sparse and qualitative studies even more so. Hence three case study articles by Malach Pines (2000; 2002a; 2002b) offer a rare exception. The author illustrates the use of an integrated psychoanalytic–existential perspective to explain the aetiology of burnout and provide a foundation for an effective approach to treat it.

The first case study (Malach Pines, 2000) illustrates the application of a three-step treatment for a middle aged Israeli man suffering from burnout and anxiety. Her approach combines the existential perspective that people try to derive significance/meaning through work and the psychodynamic perspective that career choices are informed by an unconscious motivation to replicate significant childhood experiences. She recommends a "treatment plan" (p. 635) that explores the motivations for the client's choice of occupations, the existential significance of their choice, i.e. how their choice was meant to create existential meaning, reasons for failure to derive meaning from this choice, and changes that would enable the client to derive an existential meaning from their work.

The second article (Malach Pines, 2002a) describes the use of the same psychodynamic-existential approach with three individuals: a nurse, a teacher, and a

manager, who all suffered from burnout. As in the previous case, therapeutic work involved exploration of the three-way relationship between childhood variables, the client's occupational choice and goals, and their experience of burnout. The author points out that the clients in question chose their occupations and that the factors contributing to burnout were different for individuals who did not have such choice, such as blue-collar workers. Whilst white-collar human service professionals in an earlier study (Pines & Guendelman, 1995) experienced burnout when they felt unable to have a significant impact on people's lives, blue-collar workers experienced burnout when they failed to escape poverty through work.

In the third case study (Malach Pines, 2002b), again based on the same psychodynamic-existential approach to burnout, this time with a female entrepreneur, the author conceptualises burnout as a failure in the person's existential quest.

Several quantitative studies support counselling as an effective intervention to prevent burnout. A Norwegian study (Isaksson Rø, Gude, Tyssen, & Aasland, 2003) examined the effectiveness of a counselling intervention to reduce burnout in physicians. The 227 doctors who participated could choose one of two counselling interventions: individual counselling lasting one entire day, or a week-long group intervention aimed at encouraging reflection and acknowledging the person's situation and personal needs. An integrative approach drawing on psychodynamic, cognitive, educational, and motivational interviewing theories was used for both individual and group interventions. The group intervention comprised a daily lecture on possibilities and constraints in working life, a group discussion, daily physical activity and one-hour long counselling session during the week. Data from both interventions were combined in the statistical analysis. Participants' burnout

symptoms (emotional exhaustion), mental distress and job stress were significantly lower at one-year follow-up than at baseline. The researchers also found a considerable reduction in full time sick leave at follow-up than at baseline. They recommended more controlled research into the factors contributing to the reduction in emotional exhaustion. The authors acknowledged the lack of analysis to distinguish between the effectiveness of the individual and group intervention.

The same researchers examined the effectiveness of counselling for nurses who participated in a short-term self-referral counselling intervention (Isaksson Rø et al., 2010). Self-reported emotional exhaustion was reduced one year after the intervention, and the number of nurses who sought psychotherapy after the intervention increased, due to the positive impact of counselling.

Gorter, Eijkman and Hoogstraten (2001) investigated the effectiveness of a career counselling program for Dutch dentists who showed unfavourable burnout scores in a national survey the year before. They found that a combination of individual and group counselling sessions using CBT over a six-month period led to an improvement in two burnout dimensions: a reduction of emotional exhaustion and an increase in the individual's sense of personal accomplishment. The program started with one individual counselling session, followed three months later by three day-long group sessions at monthly intervals. Over the course of the three sessions, participants worked on aspects of their professional and personal lives to produce a personal action plan by the end of the intervention.

Further support for group interventions comes from a study by Salmela-Aro, Näätänen and Nurmi (2004), who investigated the extent to which two different group therapeutic approaches influenced the goals and personal projects of 98 Finnish white-collar employees who suffered from severe burnout symptoms. Participants

were randomly assigned to either psychoanalytic group therapy involving discussion about their work, or an experiential group involving more active therapeutic interventions such as psycho- and socio-drama techniques. Both approaches aimed to work with employees' work-related personal goals, and both programs aimed to change the way participants perceived and dealt with difficult work situations. Both interventions comprised 16 full day sessions every other week, and both were effective in reducing severe burnout symptoms. Notable results included a reduction in work-related commitments and a decrease in negative emotions about work, along with an increase in participants' ability to regulate their emotions about work-related projects.

2.7.4 Supervision

The suggestion that supervision may prevent stress and burnout seems relevant to counselling psychology and mental health practitioners in general. In a descriptive-phenomenological study, Nielsen and Tulinius (2009) investigated the effect of group supervision on seven Danish GPs who met for supervision once a month, ten times a year, with a supervisor using a process-oriented supervision model. The researchers observed three supervision sessions over five months. They also conducted individual interviews with the GPs and supervisor, and a group interview. Changes brought about through supervision included learning to sit and be with patients without trying to solve problems straight away (which provided better outcomes for patients), learning organisational skills from the group, and learning to intercept compassion fatigue.

Echoing the significance of meaning and choice in the case studies by Malach Pines (2000; 2002a; 2002b), Lambie's supervisory approach to the prevention of burnout in professional counselling, a "humanistic existential structured supervision activity"

(2006, p. 39), explores and explicates supervisees' personal meaning, life stressors and life incongruence. It has to be noted that Lambie's intervention formed part of a continuous supervisory process rather than a single intervention.

Related to the developmental aspect of supervision is Macaskill and Denovan's (2013) proposal that autonomous learning is developed through the development of capabilities that facilitate independent learning in students rather than the transmission of methods. An intervention to develop confidence in first year students brought about an increase in self-efficacy and self-esteem and a resulting increase in autonomous learning when compared with a control group.

2.8 LIVED EXPERIENCE OF BURNOUT

The literature search failed to produce literature on the experience of academic burnout or overcoming burnout. However, a small number of primarily Scandinavian studies explored the lived experience of general burnout from a first-person perspective.

Ekstedt and Fagerberg (2005) used Dahlberg's phenomenological life world approach to explore the experience of the time preceding burnout by interviewing eight white-collar workers on more than three months' sick leave with a high burnout score. They conceptualised burnout as arising from the complex interaction between the person and their life world; the essence of burnout was the experience of being caught between an inner drive to meet stimulating challenges, and conflicting responsibilities and demands of the social world. Over time, such conflict led to depletion of physical and psychological resources and a sense of failure. Theoretically, this conflict could be understood in terms of the COR Theory

discussed in section 2.5.4, with maladaptive coping strategies leading to further loss of resources and culminating in a spiral of resource loss.

The authors identified eight constituents of burnout. Participants derived satisfaction from a strong engagement with work, assumed unlimited responsibility, protected a strong sense of professional identity against failure, and as their struggle intensified, increasingly cut themselves off from everything that interfered with their attempt to defend their self-image. Over time, burnout manifested as bodily and psychological manifestations and an overwhelming fatigue that converged towards reaching a crisis point. This 'bottom line' was characterised by acceptance, stopping the struggle and letting go, which marked a turning of the tide and the start of recovery.

In another phenomenological enquiry into the experience of burnout, Gustafsson, Norberg and Strandberg (2008) interviewed 20 female healthcare personnel on sick leave with burnout symptoms. Their phenomenological-hermeneutic analysis conceptualised participants' burnout as developing from a conflict between inner strivings and external factors, echoing the inner conflict described by Ekstedt and Fagerberg. Participants were frustrated by the discrepancy between their desire to show themselves as productive, responsible, independent, amiable and flexible in the work environment, and their inability to meet constantly increasing work demands. The discrepancy between their reality and their expectations resulted in dissatisfaction with themselves and disappointment with others. They felt a victim of their circumstances, with no agency and unable to earn the recognition they strived for. Participants experienced bodily warning signs and emotional distress in the form of guilt, feelings of inadequacy and an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. Over time, they lost the struggle to meet work demands and had to give up, resembling

the participants in Ekstedt & Fagerberg's (2005) study, who had to let go of their struggle.

The lived experience of burnout was also explored by Arman, Hammarqvist and Rehnsfeldt (2011). They followed eighteen people's experience of burnout in a year-long longitudinal study. Their phenomenological-hermeneutic analysis produced an understanding of burnout as existential deficiency, characterised by an absence of conscious reflection, lack of self-awareness and lack of communion with self and others. They also found that participants approached life as a project based on the demands of their context. Participants derived a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction from meeting the perceived expectations of others, and they often felt a victim with no choice.

Several themes in this study correspond with the findings of the previous two studies. Lack of communion resembles participants cutting themselves off as described by Ekstedt and Fagerberg (2005). Meeting the perceived expectations of others resembles participants assuming unlimited responsibility in the same study and it also resembles participants striving to prove themselves in Gustafsson et al. (2008). Lastly, the participants in Gustafsson et al. (2008) also felt powerless, with no agency.

A grounded theory analysis by Putnik, de Jong and Verdonk (2011) explored the process of burnout in fourteen human service professionals receiving psychological care for work related stress. They found burnout was characterised by strong identification with an unrealistic and idealised professional role, denial of warning signs, delay in seeking help and disrupted social relationships. Themes from previous studies that are repeated here include participants' unrealistic expectations of themselves and the emergence of relational issues.

This study is the first that highlights a delay in seeking help, brought about by individuals holding high expectations of their work performance and an internalised ideal. Help was often sought for medical symptoms or by talking to supervisors. In line with previous findings, this study also showed that individuals reached a breaking point if help-seeking was postponed for too long.

Of the studies located in this literature review, the most recent one into the lived experience of burnout is a doctoral dissertation by Menda (2014), which explored burnout in Israeli teachers. His existential-phenomenological analysis based on Van Deurzen-Smith's (1997) four dimensions (physical, social, psychological and spiritual) drew out themes relating to demands and constraints of the work environment, physical symptoms, challenging relationships coupled with loneliness and isolation, threats to professional identity, a sense of failure, discrepancy between their personal values and values promoted in the work environment, and a lack of meaning in their work. It is worth noting that personal meaning was central to the interventions employed by Malach Pines (2000, 2000a, 2000b) and Lambie (2006).

The role of self-awareness and social support in preventing burnout is reported in a mixed methods study by Gupta, Paterson, Lysaght and Von Zweck (2012), who complemented the measurement of burnout amongst occupational therapists with a hermeneutics approach to explore their lived experience and individual coping strategies relative to burnout. Here, self-awareness and social connection were identified as coping strategies, together with maintaining work-home boundaries. The role of social connection as a coping strategy fits with the association between burnout and the disruption of social relationships described in the previous five studies. Likewise, self-awareness as a coping strategy complements lack of self-awareness as a characteristic of burnout (Arman et al., 2011).

Taking an outsider's perspective, Ericson-Lidman and Strandberg (2007) conducted fifteen qualitative interviews exploring the signs preceding burnout as seen by fifteen staff members who had worked with someone who developed burnout. The researchers found unrealistic ideals and social isolation to be strong warning signs of burnout. Their thematic content analysis of interviews identified self-sacrifice, unattainable goals, social distancing and isolation as signals of potential burnout, and also signs that the individual is falling apart. The study is by definition limited to the signs of burnout that staff could observe, however, the themes correspond with the findings of studies looking at the burnout sufferer's experience.

Common threads across the seven studies above include a struggle between unrealistic individual striving and expectations from outside, a sense of powerlessness, social isolation, physical and emotional symptoms of burnout, and the reaching of a crisis point.

Finally, Gustafsson and Strandberg (2009) adopted yet another perspective on burnout, by exploring the experience of twenty staff members who stayed healthy when others in the same context developed burnout. Their study was a follow-up enquiry to the research by Gustafsson et al. (2008) outlined above, conducted in the same healthcare district. Their phenomenological-hermeneutic analysis pointed to participants' approach to life as the most important factor in staying healthy. Acceptance of the ups and downs of life, and of their own limitations and possibilities, was accompanied by an underlying sense of contentment, whatever their circumstances. Participants' outlook contrasts with the unrealistic ideals of individuals who suffered burnout in the other studies discussed so far. Participants also recognised and accepted their interdependency on others, cooperating and reaching out for support when needed, again in contrast with the reported social

isolation and disrupted relationships of burnout sufferers. The importance of work was moderated by an awareness of wider life priorities and they actively adapted to their circumstances, planning and taking measures to avoid or reduce the strain of working. Lastly, they attended to their own needs and set limits to the demands of work.

2.9 CONCLUSION

My literature search produced mainly quantitative studies focused on the cost of general burnout and the development of explanatory models, revealing a dearth of literature on the first person experience of burnout and recovery. Systematic reviews of the general burnout literature confirm this unequal distribution of interest across the different potential areas of burnout research (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach et al., 2001; Maslach, 2003; Schaufeli, 2003; Halbesleben, Buckley, Hall, & Brooks, 2004; Schaufeli, Leiter, & Maslach, 2009). Despite a considerable increase in the number of publications on burnout in the past 40 years, Heinemann and Heinemann's (2017) review of PubMed literature shows that three quarters of publications still only focus on factors that facilitate and contribute to the development of burnout and the prevalence of burnout in different occupational groups. Studies aiming to develop and test interventions to reduce and prevent burnout represent only a tenth of the publications reviewed.

I found a similar pattern in the literature on academic burnout. The bulk of publications comprise quantitative studies investigating predictors and precursors of student burnout. A smaller percentage of studies are concerned with preventative measures or the validation of screening instruments for student burnout. Moreover, a

substantial proportion of publications on academic burnout is dedicated to burnout in medical and nursing students.

A small collection of studies that explore general burnout from a first-person perspective were discussed in section 2.8. I found no literature on academic burnout from the individual's perspective. Furthermore, no publications were found on the first person experience of recovering from burnout, whether general or academic burnout. Hence my study addresses aspects of student burnout that have been neglected by researchers to date.

Quantitative studies that isolate environmental, social and individual components of burnout do not fully recognise the individual as situated and actively engaged in the world. So far, researchers have paid scant attention to the meaning that burnout has for the individual, the ways in which people recover from burnout, and the impact it has on their lives. As a consequence, current knowledge and understanding of student burnout is almost exclusively based on an outsider's perspective and therefore misses important nuances that only an insider's perspective can provide. My enquiry into recovery from student burnout provides such an insider perspective.

The cost of student burnout is high, as outlined in section 2.4. I would argue that recovery from student burnout warrants more attention from researchers and practitioners alike, and that the findings of my study will be highly relevant to educators, counselling psychologists, psychotherapists and students themselves.

I based this study on the basic assumption that burnout is a problem with living rather than a form of psychopathology. As a counselling psychologist who values the individual's subjective experience, I wanted to give a voice to students who had suffered burnout. The overall aim of the study was to elicit an insider's perspective

on how students recover from burnout. I was interested in the embodied, lived experience of students, and their understanding of the environmental and personal factors involved in their burnout, from the vantage point of recovery and with the potential benefits of hindsight. I believed an enquiry into the individual's experience would reveal more about what it is like to overcome burnout: the thoughts, feelings, insights, personal values, beliefs, concerns, challenges encountered, choices made, and changes observed. I was also curious about the part that psychological interventions and support played in the path to recovery. Consequently, these aims were turned into the research question:

'How do people make sense of their recovery from academic burnout during their undergraduate studies? An interpretative phenomenological inquiry into the experience of young adults.'

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a rationale for my choice of research methodology. It also describes the research design, data collection and analysis, with close attention to ethical research practice.

The research question was: 'How do people make sense of their recovery from academic burnout during their undergraduate studies?'. I wanted to explore the individual's subjective, lived experience of student burnout and the meaning they gave to events, thoughts, feelings, and their own and others' behaviour. More specifically, I wanted to gain an understanding of:

- ➢ the lived experience of overcoming academic burnout.
- ➢ changes and insights involved in overcoming burnout.
- ➢ facilitators of recovery from student burnout.
- ➢ obstacles to recovery.
- ➢ the experience of psychological support during recovery.

3.2 CHOICE OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

I reasoned that a phenomenological approach would best support a study that aims to explore the lived experience of a phenomenon. Despite the diverse span of phenomenology as a philosophy and the wide range of phenomenological research methodologies and methods, phenomenological researchers generally agree that "…our central concern is to return to embodied, experiential meanings. We aim for

fresh, complex, rich descriptions of a phenomenon as it is concretely lived." (Finlay, 2009, p. 6).

From the different phenomenological methodologies available, I chose Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an approach to qualitative, experiential research concerned with the detailed examination of how people make sense of significant life experiences, and how those experiences influence and change people's perception of themselves and their relationship to their world (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Eatough & Smith, 2017). Apart from being highly compatible with the focus of my research question, IPA is congruent with counselling psychology's concern with understanding the detail of the individual's experience together with people's shared experience of a phenomenon (Hays & Wood, 2011). Moreover, I have an interest in phenomenology that precedes my training as a counselling psychologist; I regard phenomenological enquiry as a cornerstone of my therapeutic and supervisory practice.

Very early in the research process, I considered grounded theory as an alternative to phenomenological research. I also weighed up Husserl's transcendental phenomenology against methodologies influenced by Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology. I discuss these alternative methodologies in section 3.4.

3.3 PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS

This section gives an account of my theoretical perspective and epistemological and ontological position as researcher, along with the philosophical underpinnings of IPA.

My preference for phenomenological research is indicative of my assumptions about the nature of the reality I set out to investigate, the kind of knowledge I wished to acquire, the ways in which I believed this knowledge could be attained, my role in the

process of enquiry, and the value of the findings. Mindful of the confusing way in which terms for epistemological positions, methodologies and methods are employed in the field of qualitative research, I followed the framework developed by Crotty (1998). This framework makes a clear distinction between methodology and theoretical perspective, and it outlines the epistemological and ontological positions informing different theoretical perspectives. The theoretical perspective from which I approached this study was interpretivism, informed by a social constructionist epistemology and an ontological position of subtle realism.

3.3.1 Interpretivism as Overarching Theoretical Perspective

Phenomenological research is informed by interpretivism, a major anti-positivist stance that seeks to understand how people interpret and construct meanings about their social reality, themselves and others. An interpretivist perspective is concerned with "culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). Knowledge (including the researcher's and participant's knowledge) is contextual, with people's interpretations being shaped by their history and temporal, cultural, social and personal context, so that multiple meanings, ways of knowing and therefore realities are expected and accepted (ibid).

3.3.2 Epistemological Assumptions

Epistemology is concerned with the nature and acquisition of knowledge: what constitutes legitimate knowledge and how we can acquire knowledge about (social) reality (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2014). Interpretivism is informed by social constructionism, an epistemology that views all knowledge to be constructed and communicated in a social context. Meaningful reality is the product of people's engagement and interaction with each other and their world, in a cultural, historical, political and social context. "There is no meaning without the mind. Meaning is not

discovered, but constructed." (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). One example of socially constructed knowledge is the burnout concept itself, and the way in which definitions of burnout and academic burnout have been evolving. A social constructionist view is congruent with the kind of knowledge this study aimed to acquire about student burnout and the ways in which I as researcher believed I could attain such knowledge. A social constructionist epistemology also accepts that different people may construct different meanings in relation to the same phenomenon, hence I wished to understand how different people made sense of their experience of burnout.

A constructionist epistemology and interpretivist perspective stand in direct contrast with a positivist perspective, which is underpinned by an objectivist epistemology. According to positivism, things (objects) in the world have inherent meaning independent of human consciousness. Furthermore, truth and meaning can be revealed through careful, systematic study. Hence, positivist research typically employs experimental and survey methods to develop explanations through causal relationships and universal laws.

Whereas traditional positivist research assumes that reality can be observed from a value-free and detached point of view, the more moderate post-positivist view acknowledges that even scientific methods cannot be entirely independent of the observer's influence (Crotty, 1998). Nevertheless, the researcher is still an observer in post-positivist research, whereas interpretivist research assigns a distinctly active role to the researcher. Section 3.5 discusses in more detail this active interpretive relationship between the self of the researcher and what is researched.

A final consideration with regards to epistemology is the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research. This interpretative phenomenological study

falls under the umbrella of qualitative research, which Willig (2012, p. 22) describes as a systematic process of inquiry into the "quality and texture of human experience." Qualitative research is commonly perceived as concerned with the personal and shared meanings constructed by people to make sense of their own and others' behaviour and events in the social world (McLeod, 2001). However, some authors (Crotty, 1998; O'Leary, 2017) put forward an argument for distinguishing between qualitative and quantitative research at the level of *methods* only, without equating them to the assumptions of particular research paradigms. Seen in this way, qualitative approaches simply involve the analysis of qualitative data such as words, images and experiences whereas quantitative approaches rely on quantified data using methods such as statistical analysis. Mixed methods research involves a combination of the two, regardless of the researcher's epistemological assumptions (O'Leary, 2017). This distinction at the level of methods seems conceptually clear and recognises that constructionist research is not confined to qualitative methods.

3.3.3 Ontological Assumptions

Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality, and in the context of social sciences, with the nature of the social world. It asks questions like: Is there a social reality that exists independently of our perception, experience and interpretation of it? And is there a shared social reality, or does it consist of multiple, individual and context specific realities? (see Ormston et al., 2014).

At opposite ends of the spectrum, the two primary ontological positions are realism and idealism. Realism distinguishes between an external reality and human interpretation and understanding of that reality, whilst idealism does not recognise a reality independent of human beliefs, understanding and socially constructed meanings. Instead, idealism views the world as a creation of the mind.

My ontological position as researcher is subtle realism, a variant of realism that recognises an external reality, but maintains that it can only be known through human perception, interpretation and socially constructed meanings (Ormston et al., 2014). This position is clearly congruent with a social constructionist epistemology and interpretivist perspective. The existential philosopher Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. vii) captures a social realist stance in his description of our pre-reflective experience: "… The world is always 'already there' before reflection begins - as 'an inalienable presence'...".

3.3.4 Theoretical Perspectives of IPA

Underpinned by a synthesis of three theoretical perspectives: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborne, 2015), IPA is a thoroughly interpretivist approach to human inquiry. Firstly, Crotty (1998) conceptualises interpretivism as an overarching theoretical perspective that encompasses several variants, including phenomenology and hermeneutics, and in its concern with the individual's perspective, interpretivism also has roots in idiography. Secondly, Smith and Osborne (2015) suggest that IPA shares with symbolic interactionism – another variant of interpretivism - a concern with how individuals construct meaning within the context of their personal and wider social context.

3.3.4.1 *Phenomenological focus of IPA*

Phenomenological research aims to provide complex, rich descriptions of everyday lived experience, whether an event, situation or process (Finlay, 2011). Furthermore, it views body, self and world as inseparable; it does not attempt to access an intra-psychic experience but rather seeks to understand the individual's ongoing embodied relationship and engagement with their world, the personal and shared

meanings given to their experience and the existential dimensions of experience (Finlay, 2011). Since burnout develops through the individual's embodied interaction with their environment and their response to events and other people in their world, phenomenological inquiry allowed me to investigate participants' behaviour and interpersonal relationships from a first-person perspective, taking account of their concerns, values, beliefs, personal history and cultural and social context.

Philosophers who influenced IPA's emphasis on first person perspective include Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Heidegger sees *Dasein* (the human mode of being) as situated ('thrown') in a world of things, relationships, history, culture and language. Our 'thrownness' limits our freedom, our experience and our understanding (Polt, 1999). For Merleau-Ponty (2002), our embodiment situates us in a temporal, social, cultural and political context, and in relation to others, which shapes how we perceive the world. We always perceive from somewhere.

The implication for my research was that I could only understand a participant's experience from my own unique, situated perspective, and that I needed to attend to the impact of my own situatedness on the research process and outcome. This is discussed in more depth in Section 3.5.

3.3.4.2 Hermeneutic focus of IPA

IPA is grounded in hermeneutic phenomenology, a philosophical movement that brings together phenomenology and hermeneutics, where the latter is the theory of interpretation, especially of texts, with the purpose of developing a valid understanding of the meaning of the text (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). IPA assumes that the researcher cannot make sense of the participant's experience without

interpretation shaped by the preconceptions and pre-knowledge arising from the researcher's personal history and social context (Willig, 2012).

Influences on IPA's focus on interpretation include the ideas of Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur. Heidegger described his phenomenology as hermeneutical in the sense that interpretation is a basic structural aspect of *Dasein*, and this interpretation is based on pre-conceptions arising from our situatedness (Finlay, 2011). Gadamer used the term "horizon" to refer to the limits of our understanding resulting from our historical and cultural situatedness (Finlay, 2011, p 59). He regarded questioning as an essential aspect of interpretation, as it opens new possibilities of meaning, thereby expanding the horizon of one's understanding (Laverty, 2003).

In terms of research, it means that understanding is more than a re-creation of the participant's experience; understanding is co-created between researcher and participant. The researcher must be aware of their horizon and they need to maintain an open, questioning attitude to the participant's experience. IPA recognises this co-creation through the concept of a double hermeneutic, in which the researcher makes sense of the participant's making sense of their experience, so that understanding is produced in a shared activity between researcher and participant.

IPA also employs the hermeneutic circle of interpretation in its method of analysis. According to Heidegger (1962, p. 153), we inevitably interpret new experiences in the light of our "fore-structure", i.e. preconceptions, prior experience and knowledge and expectations. However, following preliminary interpretation we need to make sense of this fore-structure in terms of the phenomenon itself (Smith et al., 2009). The implication for research is that we cannot always identify our fore-structure in advance, we need to work it out through engagement with, for example, the transcript during analysis. For that we employ the hermeneutic circle, an iterative

circling between the parts and the whole of the text being interpreted, the text and its context, and the researcher and the participant's account, with the purpose of developing deeper understanding. In the process of circling, the researcher's pre-understandings are challenged and revised to evolve new understandings. This process of analysis can never be exhausted (ibid.).

3.3.4.3 Idiographic focus of IPA

Finally, IPA has an idiographic concern with the individual and unique aspects of experience and with depth of analysis, alongside its nomothetic concern with generalisation to produce themes. IPA research tends to focus on the individual person through detailed examination of single cases or small samples (Shinebourne, 2011), highlighting both convergence and divergence between individual participants' experiences and retaining individual nuances (Smith et al., 2009). It is also idiographic in its focus on specific situations or events in people's lives (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006), such as recovery from burnout.

IPA allowed me to look for meaningful patterns across individual experiences of recovering from burnout, attending closely to both similarities and differences across participants. In the findings, the unique characteristics of each individual participant's experience of recovering from burnout complement and enhance the shared dimensions and provide a fuller and richer understanding of the burnout phenomenon.

3.4 CONSIDERATION OF OTHER METHODOLOGIES

3.4.1 Grounded Theory

Early in the development of the research proposal I considered using grounded theory, an approach concerned with action, interaction, the reciprocal impact of

individual and social processes, and its meaning for the individuals involved (Nolas, 2011; Charmaz, 2015). With its focus on 'how' and 'why', grounded theory is the preferred approach for understanding professional practice in applied settings (Nolas, 2011). Doing grounded theory involves an iterative cycle of data collection and generation and refinement of conceptual categories and theories through induction (Charmaz, 2015). Knowledge is derived through constant comparison within and between the data and concepts, with the intention of saturating the data to generate theory (Hays & Wood, 2011).

Like IPA, grounded theory can examine how individuals interpret reality and construct meaning out of their intersubjective experience (Suddaby, 2006), but I expected grounded theory would emphasise action and process at the cost of subtle shifts in meaning making that could be at the core of recovery from academic burnout. For that, I regarded IPA's focus on the depth and meaning of participants' lived experiences as more suitable. In essence, I wanted to focus on meaning-making rather than the generation of theory, so IPA was a more suitable method to reach this aim.

Furthermore, both grounded theory (Nolas, 2011) and IPA (Smith et al., 2009) employ inductive procedures but treat differences, anomalies and exceptions in different ways. In grounded theory, the researcher groups similar instances of data into categories, using exceptions and contradictions to challenge and expand the analysis and employing theoretical sampling to check and refine tentative conceptual categories and theories (Charmaz, 2015). This means grounded theory may lose potentially valuable individual differences. Given the paucity of research on recovery from burnout, I expected IPA's idiographic focus would allow me greater choice in

retaining individual nuances to illustrate themes and provide a basis for further research.

3.4.2 Descriptive Phenomenology

IPA's hermeneutic and idiographic focus also informed my choice of IPA over Giorgi's method of Descriptive Phenomenology, which is based on Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Giorgi's method focuses on first person accounts, aiming to discern the underlying structure of an experience. The findings describe the universal structure (essence) of the experience as well as its individual, idiosyncratic meanings (Langdridge, 2007).

My primary reason for deciding against descriptive phenomenology was the concept of an essence. As a counselling psychologist and existential therapist, I see human beings as embedded in a social and relational context. I also assume the way we perceive the world is shaped by this situatedness and resonate with Merleau-Ponty's (2002) view that the possibilities we find in our situation are not facts but arise within the context of our individual situation. Our possibilities are constrained, albeit not determined, by our assumptions, beliefs and values, as well as our past experiences and decisions. From this perspective, phenomenology cannot be purely descriptive of experience. I feel more at home with Heidegger's perspective that Dasein's access to the world is always through interpretation, and that it is not possible to discern the essence of a phenomenon, as our perception of phenomena is informed by our situatedness and developed in our relationship with them (Willig, 2012).

On a purely practical level, I was also concerned about the practice of the epoché, a series of steps in which the researcher aims to recognise and to set aside presuppositions about the phenomenon under consideration, to discern its essence

(King & Horrocks, 2010). From previous experience of attempting epoché in the context of research, I knew that I found it problematic.

3.5 RESEARCHER REFLEXIVITY

3.5.1 Impact of the Researcher

Different methodologies all recognise that the researcher influences the research process, but their views on the role of the researcher in producing the findings range from witness to author. The epistemological assumptions of a methodology determine the extent to which the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings is acknowledged, and the resulting emphasis placed on researcher reflexivity (Willig, 2013).

IPA assigns the researcher an active, interpretative role in producing understandings. Knowledge is co-constructed in a shared activity between researcher and participant. Just as much as the findings reflect the participant's account of their experience, it is also impacted by the researcher's involvement throughout the research project: the questions asked, the choices made, their position in relation to the participants, and their interpretation of the participant's experience during the interviews and subsequent analysis of the data (Langdridge, 2007, Smith et al., 2009). For these reasons, IPA researchers are expected to practise reflexivity.

3.5.2 What is Reflexivity?

Berger (2015, p. 220) captures reflexivity as "…the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome."

Berger's definition highlights three aspects of reflexivity. Firstly, researcher reflexivity is not confined to specific moments in the process; it involves ongoing, evolving action throughout the research project (Mann, 2016). Secondly, a reflexive attitude involves recognising and taking responsibility for one's position as researcher in relation to the research participants, and the pre-understandings, values, assumptions and interests that one brings to the research. Thirdly, reflexivity involves a critical attitude; a critical awareness and evaluation of one's impact on the research process and findings (Finlay, 2011).

3.5.3 The Purpose of Reflexivity

Reflexivity enhances the quality of research by increasing trustworthiness and accountability (Mann, 2016). The trustworthiness of research is enhanced by the disclosure of the relevant theoretical, methodological and personal orientations and experiences related to the research. This transparency helps readers to interpret the findings and consider possible alternatives (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie,1999). Furthermore, by encouraging the researcher to identify and monitor the potential or actual effects of their involvement on the process and findings of the study, reflexivity increases accountability and rigour.

Reflexivity also helps to address the question of power in the researcher-participant relationship, by encouraging researchers to monitor their role in the process, the interpretation of the data and creation of the findings (Berger, 2015). Overall, reflexivity could be said to enhance the quality of the research and promote ethical practice.

3.5.4 Reflexivity in this Study

The main tools for encouraging reflexivity in this study were the widely recommended use of a research journal (Etherington, 2004, Mann, 2016), a reflexive interview and analysis, discussions with my academic supervisors and discussions with colleagues. Here I focus primarily on my use of the research journal, which exemplifies my ongoing reflexivity throughout the project.

During the writing of the research proposal, I started a research journal to note and explore my personal interest in the study, preconceptions and expectations about burnout and recovery, expectations of the outcome, ethical considerations, initial questions and decisions about my choice of methodology. Over time, the journal became a multipurpose, central repository and resource that anchored the study.

Firstly, I used it for planning, recording questions, problems, decisions with their rationale and solutions. Secondly, it was a repository for ideas and the source of ideas, and new avenues in literature and theory, especially during data analysis. Thirdly, I recorded reflections on the research process, for example, I noted expectations before each interview and my impressions, questions and concerns after each interview, on the researcher-participant interaction and ethical considerations. Fourthly, I captured new insights and shifts in understanding and presuppositions.

Lastly, and most importantly, I used it to reflect on my impact on the research process and findings. I distinguished between the different forms of reflexivity I encountered in my reading: reflexivity concerned with theoretical assumptions, epistemological/methodological assumptions, the influence of the role of the researcher, the ethical implications of process and power, relational reflexivity concerned with the interpersonal dimension and embodied reflexivity focused on the

researcher's felt sense and embodied dimension of the interview (Langdridge, 2007; Finlay, 2011; Willig, 2013).

Prior to the pilot study, I used a reflexive interview and analysis to encourage my reflexivity, as advocated by Bolam, Gleeson and Murphy (2003). A research colleague interviewed me using the interview guide I intended to employ with participants, and I transcribed and analysed the interview using IPA. In line with the authors' prediction, I found that it sensitised me to the experience of being a participant, of being on the receiving end of the questions in my interview guide, and it helped me reflect on the difference between my insider position as someone who had experienced burnout and recovery, and my outsider position as a researcher exploring how younger people overcame academic burnout. It also helped me identify the key features I associated with burnout in the early stages of the study, some of which were not borne out by the findings: external pressure in terms of workload, internal pressure in terms of inner conflict and perfectionism, and overcoming burnout as a slow process that involved external changes (removing myself from the situation) and changes in personal identity and values.

3.6 RESEARCH ETHICS

In this section I describe the early measures I took to manage the risks of my research and promote ethical practice. My primary sources of ethical guidance were the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2014) in conjunction with the general BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2009), the BACP guidelines for conducting research (Bond, 2004) and my academic supervisors and colleagues.

McLeod (1994) maintains that it is impossible to design research that is ethically neutral; all research involves decisions that may bring ethical values and principles in

conflict. For example, what is needed to gather rich descriptions that will enhance the quality of the findings may be too intrusive for certain participants. Risk cannot be completely avoided, but the researcher can strive to mitigate unnecessary risks and balance conflicting ethical values. Throughout the study, I strived to remain vigilant about ethical dilemmas and conflicts and respond to them by drawing on my resources and experience of ethical decision making in therapy.

3.6.1 Ethical Approval

Gaining approval for my study from the Research Ethics Board highlighted the risks and responsibilities involved in doing research with human participants and verified that adequate precaution was taken in the planning of the study to mitigate such risks. Appendix A contains the Risk Assessment Form and Appendix B contains the letter of approval from the Ethics Board. My understanding of good practice was further enriched by discussions with my academic supervisors and colleagues throughout the process of carrying out this study.

3.6.2 Participant Autonomy, Informed Consent and Debriefing

Participants were informed in advance about all relevant aspects of the project, including psychological risks of taking part, and their necessary formal consent was obtained prior to commencing the interview process. Their right to withdraw at any stage of the research process was emphasised. See Appendix C for the Participant Information Sheet and Appendix D for the Participant Consent Form. At the close of each interview I conducted a debriefing and gave the participant a copy of the Debriefing Sheet (Appendix E).

3.6.3 Confidentiality and Anonymity

The limits of confidentiality and anonymity were made clear under the conditions for participant consent. Participants were informed about parties who would have access to unprocessed data, secure storage of recordings and transcripts, and measures to anonymise transcripts and verbatim extracts in the dissertation. I also informed participants about the scope and nature of the dissemination of findings.

3.6.4 Managing Risk to Participants

Researchers must consider the ethical implications for all involved in the research process (King & Horrocks, 2010). In this study, risk pertained mainly to the research participants. I was mindful of Bond's (2004) advice, that the relationship between researcher and participant should be a primary focus for ethical consideration throughout all stages of a research project. I strived to anticipate ethical issues and mitigate the risk of harm to participants.

As a precautionary measure, I excluded from recruitment any individual receiving psychiatric care for diagnosed mental illnesses, due to the increased risk of psychological vulnerability. I was also sensitive to how I handled power differences between me and my participants, prior to and during the interviews. In the event of concerns, disagreements or complaints that could not be addressed and resolved between me as researcher and the participant, the participant had recourse to my primary academic supervisor and the principal of NSPC.

3.6.5 Integrity of the Research and Findings

Section 3.5 described the role of reflexivity in promoting rigour in the research process, enhance the quality and encourage ethical practice. My proposed methods involve active interpretation of participants' experience, through conducting the

interview and carrying out an interpretative approach to data analysis. Reflexivity as described in the previous section was key in making sure my interpretation respected and conveyed participants' voices rather than imposed meaning that distorted their experience and undermined the integrity of the research.

To make sure that participants' motivation to take part was related to an interest in the research topic, I did not offer them any monetary awards or inducements to participate, other than the reimbursement of reasonable travel expense, which one participant accepted. I also ruled out prior or dual relationship with participants, which could inhibit participants or motivate them to 'help' the researcher.

3.7 RESEARCH DESIGN

3.7.1 Semi-structured interviews

IPA supports a range of data collection methods, provided it produces rich and detailed personal accounts of participant experiences. I chose to conduct semi-structured, face-to-face interviews so that I could encourage reflection and in-depth exploration of each participant's experience.

Semi-structured interviews combine structure to ensure key areas are covered with flexibility to follow the participant down new and potentially fruitful avenues. The questions of a semi-structured interview are intended to guide the researcher, rather than dictate the course of the interview (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Questions focus on specific themes, but the guide does not employ standardised questions and the researcher does not adhere to a strict predefined structure during the interview. Instead, a semi-structured interview relies on the researcher's judgement and skill to develop the interview guide and elicit participation during the interview, by asking appropriate questions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

I developed an interview guide with eight main questions and a closing question. The pilot study confirmed the areas I wanted to focus on, so I revised the questions to create three main areas with prompts (Appendix G). Open questions invited reflection and allowed participants space for spontaneous contribution.

3.7.2 Sampling

In line with the recommendation for IPA, purposive sampling was employed to create a relatively small, homogeneous sample of eight participants. Whereas an approach concerned with the essence of a phenomenon aims to recruit a heterogeneous group so that common structures and aspects of the experience will come to the fore, IPA aims for homogeneity so that both convergence and divergence between participants can be explored in depth (Langdridge, 2007; Smith et al., 2009).

By recruited only eight participants, I honoured IPA's commitment to the idiographic aspects of experience, which encourages smaller sample sizes (Eatough & Smith, 2017) and the depth of interpretation expected from an IPA study. Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011, p. 756) argue that "more is not always more" when it comes to IPA sample size: it is preferable to explore a smaller number of participants in depth than produce a shallow analysis of a larger number of participants.

I used the selection criteria set out below to create a homogeneous sample that would enable a detailed exploration of the phenomenon of overcoming burnout. At the same time, the criteria were flexible enough to facilitate recruitment.

➢ Participants experienced burnout during a full time face-to-face undergraduate degree.

➢ At the time of burnout, participants were between the ages of 18 and 25.

- Participants experienced one or more of the following due to burnout: a drop in academic performance, having to retake assessments, having to take time out from their course, having to repeat all or part of a course, or dropping out of their course.

- The participant's level of exhaustion and disengagement at the time of perceived burnout, as measured by an adapted version of the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory – Student Survey (OLBI-SS) indicated burnout.

- Participants regarded themselves as having recovered from burnout.

- Participants were still at university or had graduated.

The following individuals were excluded from selection.

- Individuals receiving psychiatric care for diagnosed mental illnesses were excluded from recruitment, due to the increased risk of psychological vulnerability.

- Individuals who received their secondary further education outside the British education system were excluded, since the challenges involved in negotiating a foreign education system, a foreign culture and, possibly, a foreign language, may create additional and different academic pressures to those experienced by students educated in Britain.

- Medical students were excluded on the grounds that a degree in medicine differs significantly from a standard undergraduate course in terms of its length and composition. Furthermore, the demands of medical training are already known to contribute to high levels of burnout in medical students (Carod-Artal & Vázquez-Cabrera, 2013).

3.7.3 Pilot Study

Following ethical approval, I conducted a pilot study to test the interview guide and practise my interviewing skills. Mann (2016) ascribes successful interviewing to developing rapport, eliciting participation, and listening. I was curious to see how my therapeutic skills would help or hinder the process.

The pilot participant talked without pause. She was intensely focused on her story and seemed to be making sense of it as she spoke. Any intervention to check my understanding seemed to disrupt her trail of thought, so I decided to follow her rather than impose my interview guide on her. Fortunately, she did not digress from the topic. Listening to the pilot interview afterwards, I concluded that my skills in building rapport and listening were an advantage, but I also needed to prepare myself for steering future interviews when needed.

Following the pilot study, I read Finlay's (2011) view that it is often more productive to let the interview progress and unfold more spontaneously. I simplified the interview guide to comprise only the three main areas I wanted to cover, with prompts (Appendix G). This I kept at hand as an aide-memoire in subsequent interviews.

I transcribed and analysed the pilot interview and wrote up the findings, closely following the strategies outlined in Smith et al. (2009) and Smith and Osborne (2015). My findings suggested that my participant could not share her experience of overcoming burnout without talking about burnout itself. It also challenged my assumption that the impact of burnout would be most strongly felt in the area of academic performance. I realised that although academic performance was likely to suffer, the psychological impact could be more severe. Consequently, I adjusted the original selection criteria after the pilot study to include individuals who had only

suffered a drop in academic performance and added screening with the OLBI-SS as described in section 3.8.3. The change was approved by the Ethics Board.

3.8 RECRUITMENT

3.8.1 Participant Pool

Participants were recruited from officially recognised universities providing traditional face-to-face degree courses in Greater London. A list of 44 qualifying universities was obtained from UK-Universities.net (UK-Universities.net, 2017) and validated using the government services and information website (GOV.UK, 2016). Narrowing down the participant pool to Greater London not only provided some homogeneity in terms of geographical location but also made it more feasible to conduct face-to-face interviews.

3.8.2 Advertising

From university websites I obtained whatever contact details were available for departments and services that might be interested in the findings of my research project. Typically, these departments and services were the counselling, wellbeing and academic support teams within the university's student services function, the student union and the communications services that managed online forums, electronic notice boards, newsletters and the university's Facebook page. I contacted each of these functions via email and/or phone calls, offering to make my findings available in a format that suited them in return for allowing me to post a request for participants. When, over the course of several weeks, this process yielded no positive responses, I concluded that these services were probably, and understandably, acting as gatekeepers shielding their student population from

external demands and potential risks to their wellbeing, and were unlikely to accommodate a request from an unknown researcher with no links to their university.

The second strategy involved forwarding my advertisement to everyone in my personal and professional network and asking them to pass it on.

The third strategy involved online and social media channels. This involved:

- Registering with the online student community https://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/ and advertising on their research forum.

- Advertising via the Research Degrees Administration Team at Middlesex University.

- Creating a blog and a Facebook page dedicated to my research and embedding links to both in an email version of the request for participants.

- Visiting universities, effectively 'blind calling' to find someone willing to distribute the links to my blog and Facebook page.

- Systematically sending emails to counsellors in the BACP register who opted in for canvassing.

- Systematically sending emails with the embedded links to every individual whose email address I had access to.

I recruited two participants through my professional network, three with the help of university staff who distributed my advertisement (with links to my research blog) and three by sending out the same information via my email directory.

I received several emails from individuals who knew they did not meet my selection criteria but wanted to express their interest in my research. Their emails included a brief synopsis of their burnout during post-graduate studies, which I read and acknowledged. Their interest was encouraging, but since their narratives were brief

and factual, and did not relate to the undergraduate context, I believe it did not influence the research process or my assumptions about what I might find.

3.8.3 Screening of Participants

Screening of potential participants involved a telephone conversation followed by completion of a self-reporting questionnaire to assess their burnout retrospectively.

Prior to the phone call I emailed the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) to provide the person with the information they needed to decide whether they wanted to participate. During the phone call I gauged, to the extent possible, the individual's capacity for voluntary participation. I also confirmed that they satisfied the inclusion and exclusion criteria and checked that their motivation for volunteering did not come from expectations of advice, information about academic burnout or emotional support from me as the interviewer.

Seven individuals who met the selection criteria were asked to complete an adapted version of the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory – Student Survey (OLBI-SS), a self-reporting questionnaire that assessed their level of exhaustion and disengagement at the time they experienced burnout (Appendix F). I explained the purpose of the survey as providing an indication of the severity of burnout symptoms on a continuum and made it clear that the survey did not produce an overall global score for burnout and was not a diagnostic tool.

The scores of all seven individuals were well within the burnout range on both dimensions of exhaustion and disengagement and all seven were included in the study. However, I had prepared a response to use if someone was screened out, to minimise risk of harm to the individual. I would have been careful not to refute or diminish their experience of burnout, explaining that my research methodology

demanded a homogeneous participant sample that focused on one specific aspect of burnout, and that their experience of burnout and recovery happened to be different from my project's focus. I might also have pointed out, if appropriate, that their experience could be valuable to a research project with a different focus on burnout.

I was unable to screen the first of my eight participants, who participated in my pilot study ten months before the OLBI-SS was introduced. I emailed her twice, but I did not receive a reply. However, the original analysis of her transcript as a single case indirectly answered the questions in the burnout questionnaire, suggesting she had severe burnout, so I included her in the analysis.

3.8.4 OLBI-SS Scores

The OLBI-SS comprises two sub-scales of eight items each, one for exhaustion and one for disengagement. Even though burnout questionnaires are by definition retrospective (Sonnenschein et al., 2007), the questions in the OLBI-SS are phrased in the present tense as it focuses on participants' experiences of burnout symptoms from the recent past to the present. However, for this study the survey had to reflect that participants do not suffer from burnout anymore, so the questions were adapted to reflect the past tense (See Appendix F).

Like its counterparts, the OLBI-SS does not produce a global score for burnout; it scores exhaustion and engagement individually (burnout is a continuous variable with no cut-off score). Nevertheless, the survey provided a relative indication of participants' level of exhaustion and disengagement at the time of burnout.

3.9 DATA COLLECTION

3.9.1 Research Interviews

At the start, in accordance with ethical practice, I gave participants a copy of the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C) and the Participant Consent Form (Appendix D). I invited them to read it, then confirmed their understanding of the key points, emphasising their right to withdraw at any stage of the research process. I also invited questions about the research process and their participation before they signed the Participant Consent Form.

It was important to mitigate the emotional risk to participants, since burnout is a disruptive and distressing life event and I was about to ask the participant to talk about their experience in depth. If the interview triggered painful memories and unresolved emotions, it could leave the participant feeling exposed and vulnerable in the presence of a stranger. Likewise, new and unexpected insights had the potential to be upsetting. Therefore, I followed advice from the BPS (2009), to reduce the risk of emotional exposure by informing participants from the first point of contact of their right to decline answering questions.

I gathered some demographic information at the start and asked a few general, superficial questions about their present circumstances to put participants at ease and establish early rapport. I hardly referred to the interview guide, opting instead to track the participants who, for the most part, spontaneously covered what I was most concerned with: the experience of burnout, the experience of recovery and consequent changes in their lives. Often, what seemed like a digression at first yielded relevant material; I rarely needed to guide my participants back to the research topic. I was mindful of Mann's (2016) emphasis on listening as the most

important aspect of an interview. I share his belief that participants know when the researcher is really listening, or not.

Even if the researcher does not probe, McLeod (2001) cautions that research interviews could bring up issues that cannot be discussed and contained within the time boundaries of the interview. Moreover, the researcher-participant relationship might not be the appropriate forum for dealing with certain issues, even if time allowed. In such an instance, the debriefing discussion is crucial for signposting the participant to professional resources. Hence, at the end of each interview I conducted a debriefing discussion to identify and address any issues, discomfort or misunderstandings that I had missed during the interview. No such issues were identified during the study. I gave participants a copy of the Debriefing Sheet (Appendix E) with references to sources of support in the form of links to online forums and therapist registers.

After the interview I jotted down in my research journal any salient thoughts, feelings and sensations about the interview. Here is a short extract from my journal entry following the interview with Sam.

> *This felt less spontaneous than the other interviews. He was forthcoming in sharing his experience but also exceptionally polite and controlled, and hard to read. He was telling a well-rehearsed story. Was it because he had to repeat his story to so many people after his breakdown? The interview was shorter than the others and I worried he might think I wasn't interested AND I was reluctant to end with time to spare, but he covered all the areas and I couldn't think of any further questions. I sensed I shouldn't probe about his family. Why was I slightly on edge throughout the interview? What else could I have asked?*

3.9.2 Transcribing

Each transcript was created with a wide margin on the right-hand side and continuous numbering of the lines. I transcribed the first two interviews manually, but from the third transcription onward I used a foot pedal and dictation software, which involved listening to a segment of recording and repeating it out loud while watching the software transcribe my dictation to a Word document. Each participant had a very distinctive 'voice' and repeating their words created deep immersion in their experience and a strong sense of them as individuals.

I was mindful that IPA's focus on rich description might compromise the anonymity of participants. To mitigate this risk, I took reasonable steps to protect participants' and others' identity by using pseudonyms and omitted from the transcripts potentially identifying details such as dates, places and the names of institutions and courses.

3.9.3 Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

Towards the end of her interview, Erin had tears in her eyes when she described how she was so exhausted that she could not cry at her grandmother's funeral.

> Erin: I didn't know how they'd take it, so I was trying to bottle it up, like, "Oh, no I'm good, I don't need to, you know, talk about it or worry about it. It was kind of different for me as well. I'm getting emotional [tears in eyes, she laughs self-consciously]. I'm getting emotional but yeah, [unclear] [pause] it was a… I'm OK, I'm OK…

> Researcher: Mmm… What's the emotion about? May I ask?

> Erin: HUH?

> Researcher: What is the emotion about?

Erin: It's just, even now I've still never cried about it, so there's a bit of the guilt there in it so she knows I'm upset but, I don't know, it's just…

Researcher: Were you close to your grandmother?

Erin: Um, I was close before I left [place], so I haven't seen her since I was like, 12 years old

(Erin: 520-537).

This exchange exemplifies how talking to the researcher may bring up unresolved issues for participants. I chose to acknowledge Erin's emotion and give her space to process her emotion by asking what had triggered her tears. Although I did not intend to continue with an exploration of her relationship with her grandmother, I wanted to understand whether her sadness was related to loss of her grandmother, or whether it was more about her family being emotionally unsupportive, which was relevant to the research question. Her level of distress seemed very low and I was therefore not concerned about the risk of harm.

King and Horrocks (2010) draw attention to how interviewers often fear the emotional reactions of participants, even though it contradicts the aim of eliciting rich, detailed and in-depth information, given that emotion is an essential part of our experience. The authors argue that this is likely to require "layers of emotional input". They advise the researcher to acknowledge the participant's emotion and if helpful, suggest a short break after which they can choose to continue. From their experience, they believe that it is often more useful for participants to continue.

At the end of the interview, Erin reflected on this moment.

Well, I didn't know I was going to get emotional, you know, I was getting emotional when I was talking about stuff in the first year. Ah, I didn't know this.

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It's like I still have stuff that I still need to work on and understand that. And I

did enjoy it because it was like, I felt like you're a counsellor. --- I thought I

could say anything to you (Erin: 1145-1158).

Whilst I was reassured that she had gained insight from the experience, it also

alarmed me to hear that she had experienced me as a counsellor, because I was

consciously trying to embody the attitude of a researcher instead of a therapist.

However, I was also aware that as a novice researcher I was still trying to negotiate

what seems to be a fine line between researcher and therapist.

For several reasons, the nature of the interview might resemble a therapeutic

relationship. Firstly, given the age difference between me and participants, they

might perceive me as a benign older figure, a counsellor, teacher or family member

with whom they could share issues. Secondly, I paid attention to establishing rapport

with participants, drawing on past experience as a student counsellor. Thirdly, my

therapeutic stance of listening and the non-directive nature of the interviews also

encouraged open communication.

At the same time, I was sure that I only probed more deeply when something was

relevant to the research question, and when it seemed sensitive, I first checked the

participant's willingness to talk about it. I also agree with Langdridge (2007), who

warns against overestimating the risk of harm to participants. I knew that Erin

already had effective strategies in place for emotional self-care, and she had access

to university counselling in addition to the information on the debriefing sheet. I also

hoped her experience of the interview would prompt her to question her negative

perceptions of counselling.

Afterwards, I walked through Erin's transcript, looking for moments where I encouraged inappropriate self disclosure or where my questions and responses were not appropriate for a research interview. I could not find any, but this experience sensitised me to questions around participants' emotions in interviews and the tension between the researcher's pursuit of rich data and the risk of harm to participants.

3.10 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

I followed the flexible guidelines for IPA outlined in Smith et al. (2009) and Pietkiewiecz and Smith (2014), with minor adaptations in the final stages. I give an overview of the key stages here and discuss each stage in more detail below.

The first stage involved multiple readings of the transcript and initial noting of exploratory comments. Next, the comments were transformed into emergent themes. I then looked for relationships between emergent themes to group them into clusters. From the clusters, I developed a structure representing the relationships between main (superordinate) themes and subthemes. Finally, the analysis was turned into a full narrative that involves description and interpretation of the superordinate themes and subthemes, supported by extracts from the transcripts.

3.10.1 Initial Noting by Participant

IPA involves an iterative cycle of in-depth, line-by-line analysis of the text to note exploratory comments within each transcript. I read through each transcript two or three times, noting thoughts, feelings, assumptions, expectations and surprises in my research journal. Here is an example of a journal entry I made in response to Erin's transcript.

She describes getting into trouble through lack of motivation and partying. I was expecting overexertion - I never questioned that burnout goes with overexertion. But hard work is not part of the definition of student burnout or burnout instruments. Is it implied? It seems you can suffer burnout without overexertion. This was a glaring blind spot. I need to spend time working through this assumption and the implications of burnout without overexertion.

I then worked through the transcript line by line, using the MS Word comment function to write exploratory comments. I distinguished between *descriptive* comments on the lived experience and surface meaning of matters of concern; *conceptual* comments involving active interpretation and a deeper, more abstract level of meaning; and linguistic comments on impactful language, such as the use of emphasis, superlatives and emotive words and expressions (Smith et al., 2009). I tried to maintain an open stance, interrogating the text with curiosity and aiming to ask questions alongside noting my initial understandings.

3.10.2 Developing Emergent Themes by Participant

From the exploratory comments, I developed emergent themes through inference, first within each individual transcript and then across all transcripts. At this point I switched from word processing to handwriting on a hard copy of the transcript, because I found working by hand allowed for a more flexible engagement with the text.

Passing through a printed copy of the transcript, I developed emergent themes from the exploratory comments and recorded the emergent themes in the right-hand side margin. I did not rely solely on the exploratory comments but also referred to the original text, which started the hermeneutic circle of interpretation. I was also keenly

aware that I was not revealing truths about the participant's experience, instead, the

emergent themes were the products of my interpretative engagement with the

participant's account (see Willig, 2013). An example of exploratory comments and

emergent themes is presented in Figure 1 below. Appendix H provides a more

comprehensive example of the process of analysis.

Figure 1. Exploratory comments and emergent themes from Erin's transcript.
D = descriptive, C = Conceptual, L = Linguistic

Transcript	Emergent Themes	Exploratory Comments
Yeah. And then I started panicking, "I don't wanna go through this again, oh shit, shall I just drop out?" 'Cause like, and then I was "Oh no, wait, I'm far too in now to drop out, 'cause this is my second year", you know…	Anxiety/panic. Inner conflict. Swings between states – panic and self-soothing	L: "Oh shit" – expresses alarm, she faces a problem. D: Panics, doesn't want to repeat experience, considers dropping out. Then reasons with self. L: "Oh no, wait" – calms herself down, reasons with herself. C: Alternates between emotion/anxiety/panic and reason. Too much invested already. Dropping out to escape the anxiety?

Next, I created an A5-sized card for each emergent theme in the transcript. The card contained the name of the emergent theme; the name of the participant; key words and phrases, thoughts associated with the theme; and the line numbers of all the data in the transcript that supported the theme. An example is presented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. An A5 card for the emergent theme 'Panic/Anxiety' in Erin's transcript.

ANXIETY/PANIC

ERIN

Immobilised, paralysed, desire to escape, avoid, extreme options (dropping out), links with depression, symptoms, thoughts, dreams

37, 41, 108 (thoughts), 118, 122-123 (state), 128, 131-132, 142-144, 249

438-441 (dreams), 432, 436, 458
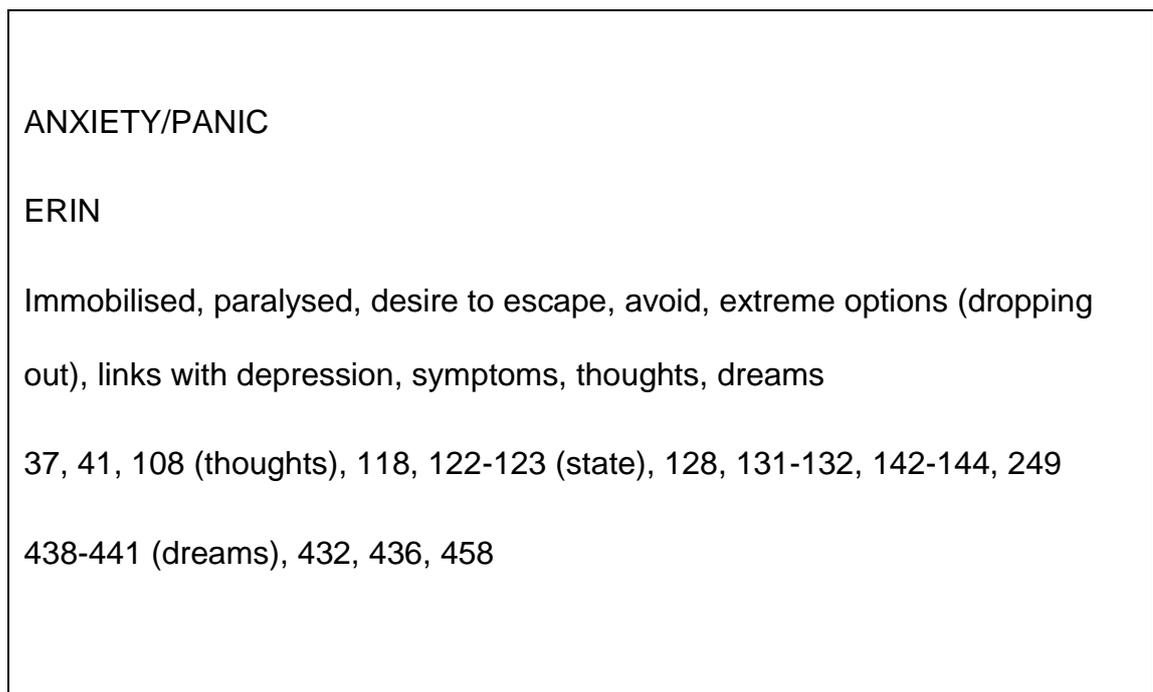
3.10.3 Organising Themes by Participant

I prefer visual, tactile ways of organising material, so I spread all the A5 cards on the floor and started an inductive process of developing tentative themes at the next level of abstraction. I looked for patterns and connections between different emergent themes to create clusters based on similarities, polarities, common features and so on. Once again, the hermeneutic circle was central to the process: as I drew out tentative relationships, I kept checking their origins in the transcript to

make sure the clusters reflected the meaning of the participant's experience as I understood it.

Each cluster was given a working label that represented the cluster. I did not discard any emergent themes at this stage. Odd themes were retained in a 'pending decision' cluster. Figure 3 shows the emergent themes that were grouped to form a cluster labelled Inner Turmoil.

Figure 3. The cluster representing 'Inner Turmoil' from Erin's transcript.

Cluster	Emergent Themes
INNER TURMOIL	Panic/anxiety. Inner Conflict. Swinging between states. Mood/emotions. Physical symptoms. Cognitive symptoms. Lack of awareness.

I repeated the analytic process for each case, developing exploratory comments followed by emergent themes, and grouping emergent themes into clusters.

As I progressed through the transcripts, I noticed a mutual influence between the current analysis and the analysis done so far. In a backward influence, the current analysis raised ideas and questions about the clusters already formed; in a forward

influence, the analysis sped up as emergent themes were repeated across transcripts. The recurrence of emergent themes suggested consistent similarities between participants, but I also had to consider that I might be pre-empting emergent themes, slotting data into themes developed earlier without sufficiently considering new possibilities. As a countermeasure and to offer some triangulation of data, I asked a colleague to check the emergent themes and clusters for the second (Amy's) and second last (Sam's) transcript. We resolved queries and reconciled differences, bearing in mind that the products of IPA are always subjective and tentative (Smith et al., 2009). We did not find significant differences between our respective understandings.

3.10.4 Integrating Clusters Across Participants

The next stage involved another inductive process to develop superordinate themes and subthemes from the clusters of emergent themes. I first tried the incremental approach in which transcripts are added to the analysis one by one, but it conflicted with my preference for working from a wide overall view of the data. Knowing that the framework for IPA is intended to be heuristic, offering the researcher "considerable room for manoeuvre" (Smith et al., 2009), and realising that an incremental procedure would result in the best analysis I could do, I started anew, working with the clusters from all eight transcripts at the same time.

The clusters were spread out across the floor so that I could sort and integrate clusters across all eight transcripts. I first explored potential relationships, commonalities and divergence between clusters and combined similar clusters. I then reviewed the contents of the clusters one by one, working through the A5 cards belonging to the cluster, checking the coherence and discrepancies between them. At this point I also checked whether any of the 'pending decision' items belonged to

the cluster in question. The hermeneutic circle continued as I questioned and tested the internal coherence of the cluster by moving between the individual 'parts' of the text and the higher level 'whole' of the cluster, trying to be open to new ideas by stepping back at times to assume a naïve stance. I retained the items that contributed to a coherent, strong theme within the cluster or meaningful divergences between participants, including items that added enriching nuances to the theme, and discarded the rest.

Next, I revisited and reviewed the hierarchical relationships between clusters, still employing the hermeneutic circle to revise earlier interpretations and connections. I also found it useful to draw and redraw diagrams to examine the relationships between the newly formed superordinate themes and subthemes.

The dilemma that presented itself at this stage was whether to employ a purely thematic structure or a chronological ordering of superordinate themes from burnout to recovery. The chronological organisation reflected the strong narrative thread in participants' accounts, but it seemed so obvious that I felt obliged to challenge it. After several iterations, I set the chronological structure aside and decided to go forward with a purely thematic, i.e. non-chronological organisation. I gave the superordinate themes and subthemes descriptive working titles.

3.10.5 Writing the Findings: Integrating Structure and Texture

I created an MS Word document that represented the main and subthemes as headings and subheadings and wrote initial descriptions for each theme. Through writing, it became apparent that a coherent presentation of the findings depended on a chronological structure that reflected the context of burnout, followed by the

development of burnout, a turning point that marked the start of recovery, and recovery itself.

With the chronological structure in place, texture was added in the form of data from each transcript. Instead of selecting representative examples from each participant straight away, I used the line numbers recorded on each A5 card to copy all the data relevant to each main and subthemes into the MS Word document.

Bringing together the parts and wholes in this way allowed for easy verification that each theme was grounded in the data. It highlighted discrepancies and made it easier to ensure clear demarcation between closely related subthemes such as attitudes to self-disclosure and withdrawal from others during the development of burnout. It also facilitated selection of the most meaningful verbatim extracts to illustrate the themes. The only disadvantage of this approach was the time and effort needed to comb through a huge amount of data to pare down the material.

In the next step I revised the working labels of the themes and organised the material within each main and subtheme into a coherent narrative with evidence from the transcripts. Kamler and Thomson (2014, p. 3) point out the central role that writing takes in the process of enquiry: "We write to work out what we think". I experienced how writing the findings not only elicited new ideas but also raised further questions and exposed weaknesses in the analysis. The latter were resolved by subsuming one weak subtheme into another, stronger subtheme, discarding a second weak subtheme and clarifying the essence of each subtheme.

I was aware that the volume of extracts differed between participants within each theme, but I did not try to equalise this, because it would have undermined the coherence of the supporting evidence. I concluded that the volume of verbatim was

sometimes due to the complexity and nuances of a specific participant's experience, but at other times it simply reflected the participant's way of speech - some participants were more succinct than others (see Mann, 2016).

When I transcribed the interviews, I took care to transcribe the verbal material as accurately as possible and included noticeable pauses, hesitations, emphases and non-lexical sounds. I retained all these features in the findings. However, in a few places, the readability of the findings suffered because of repeated false starts and repetition of filler words such as 'like', 'you know', and 'erm'. I therefore removed these distracting elements when I was sure their omission did not change the participant's intent and meaning. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) argue that there is no one true transcription from oral to written mode; the transcription should serve the purpose of the research, in this instance, content analysis rather than linguistic analysis.

It was hard to determine when the analysis was sufficiently complete. Willig (2012, pp. 36-37) warns that new meanings will continue to emerge as the researcher continues to engage with the text. There is not one correct interpretation and a complete understanding of the text is not possible.

3.10.6 Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

IPA encourages collaboration with participants in the co-creation of the findings; the researcher is not an expert on the participant's experience. Even though I was an insider in terms of having experienced burnout, I was acutely aware throughout the interviews of the many contextual and personal differences between my experience of burnout and those of the participants. Even then, during data analysis, I became increasingly aware of my power as interpreter of the text and its implications for the

integrity of my findings. I found it difficult to strike a balance between an empathic interpretation that respected and communicated my understanding of the participant's meaning, and an interpretation that brought a deeper layer of meaning to their experience.

I tried to ensure that the participant's voice was not lost, but I also wanted to remain open to fresh perspectives and alternative interpretations. To establish the fine line between deeper interpretation and insensitive interpretation that imposed meaning on the participant's experience, I asked myself whether I could imagine the participant voicing my interpretation.

At this point, I found it helpful to refer to Ricoeur's distinction between the traditional phenomenological hermeneutics of empathy and hermeneutics of suspicion. Empathic interpretation moves beyond describing or summarising in order "to elaborate and amplify the meaning that is contained within the material" (Willig, 2012, p. 13), whereas suspicious interpretation is a critical engagement that aims to extract a hidden meaning from the text.

Shinebourne (2011) believes IPA can assume a position between Ricoeur's hermeneutics of empathy and hermeneutics of suspicion. Whilst IPA can aim to understand the participant's experience from their first-person perspective and produce a rich experiential description, it also allows for critical engagement with a participant's account, to question it beyond what the participant themselves might be willing or able to do. For Willig (2012), suspicious interpretation tends to draw on theory and looks for what is hidden to produce explanations. However, Smith et al. (2009) refer to a milder form of suspicious interpretation that does not involve interpretation through the lens of a theoretical perspective imported from elsewhere.

Instead, it involves a more questioning elaboration of the participant's meaning from a different angle, supported by close attention to participant's account itself.

Ricoeur maintained that a combination of the two approaches to interpretation - hermeneutics of empathy and hermeneutics of suspicion - are needed for a good interpretation, and Smith et al. (2009) agree that a hermeneutic of empathy can be combined with a hermeneutic of questioning to draw out or disclose the meaning of participant experience. In my own effort toward deeper interpretation, I preferred the milder, questioning stance that was more congruent with a phenomenological exploration of participants' experience.

In conclusion, I discuss how I brought together several strands of Frank's account to develop a more questioning interpretation of his apparent equanimity and laissez faire attitude. I saw connections between aspects of Frank's experience which he did not make explicit himself. Frank described his struggle to express and assert himself in conversations: *"I need a bit more time to express myself directly and fully"*. He ascribed his shyness to his upbringing: *"my father was very…expressive in his manners." (Frank: 4-8)*.

I considered that Frank did not care when he failed his second year and gave up quite quickly on negotiating permission to supplement his credits with a work placement: *"I decided not to give a f*ck." (Frank: 618-619).* His response to difficult situations was to withdraw mentally and emotionally, *"I forgot completely about university." (Frank: 603).* When he lost interest in the course that his father wanted him to do, he continued, but disengaged from university life and gradually also from his academic studies. His rebellion was indirect: *"I think I did this slightly on purpose"* *(Frank: 326-327)*. He also avoided conflict in interpersonal situations. When he could not get his point across, he gave up: *"…so that for me is where I lose my nerve, I*

want to get more angry but then I stop. So I just focus and just try to… I don't know, I make myself calm down. I shut up…" (Frank: 744-747). Frank had low awareness of feelings: *"Emotionally, I hardly get angry or upset, I think…most of the time. When I do, I feel different, I breathe more…" (Frank: 99-101)* and found it hard to motivate himself from this state of passivity: *"Because, I need to get angry, actually, I feel like I need to get **angry** to actually **do** those things." (Frank: 648-650)*.

From the above, I developed an understanding of Frank's seemingly casual attitude as a way of dealing with distressing situations. When he felt threatened or upset, he withdrew physically and emotionally, but explained his avoidance of confronting others as not caring. On closer examination, his equanimity seemed more like despondency and helplessness. His struggle to motivate himself was part of a wider struggle to assert himself.

Given Frank's quest for greater self-understanding: *"me being here helps me to actually understand…it's not…I'm trying to just understand myself" (Frank: 762-764)*, it felt appropriate and necessary to take my interpretation beyond the sense he was able to make himself of his experience in the interview.

While writing the findings I was also conscious of the decisions for readers of the dissertation, especially how my participants might experience my interpretations, since four participants asked to receive a copy of the findings. The knowledge that participants would read the findings influenced a few of my decisions, even though they were small decisions, about which extracts to include and how to articulate my interpretation. It provided a constant reminder to ask myself whether the participant would feel understood, or at least sense my intention to understand, rather than misunderstood, exposed or diminished. With potential readers in mind, I was also constantly looking for opportunities to mitigate the possibility of identification.

4 FINDINGS

The findings were developed from the analysis of eight semi-structured interviews using IPA. This chapter provides:

➤ a summary of the burnout scores of participants as measured with the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory – Student Survey (OLBI-SS).

➤ a summary of the demographic profile of participants.

➤ a detailed discussion of three superordinate themes with their subthemes.

4.1 OLBI-SS PARTICIPANT BURNOUT SCORES

Figure 4 shows the levels of exhaustion and disengagement that participants experienced at the time of burnout as measured by the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory – Student Survey (OLBI-SS). The two dimensions (exhaustion and disengagement) were scored individually, since burnout measures do not produce a global score for burnout (Demerouti et al., 2003; Kristensen et al., 2005). The minimum score for each dimension is 8 and the maximum score 32. Whilst burnout measures do not provide absolute cut-off scores either (ibid), the graph nevertheless indicates that participants experienced moderate to severe symptoms of exhaustion and disengagement.

Figure 4. OLBI-SS participant scores for exhaustion and disengagement.
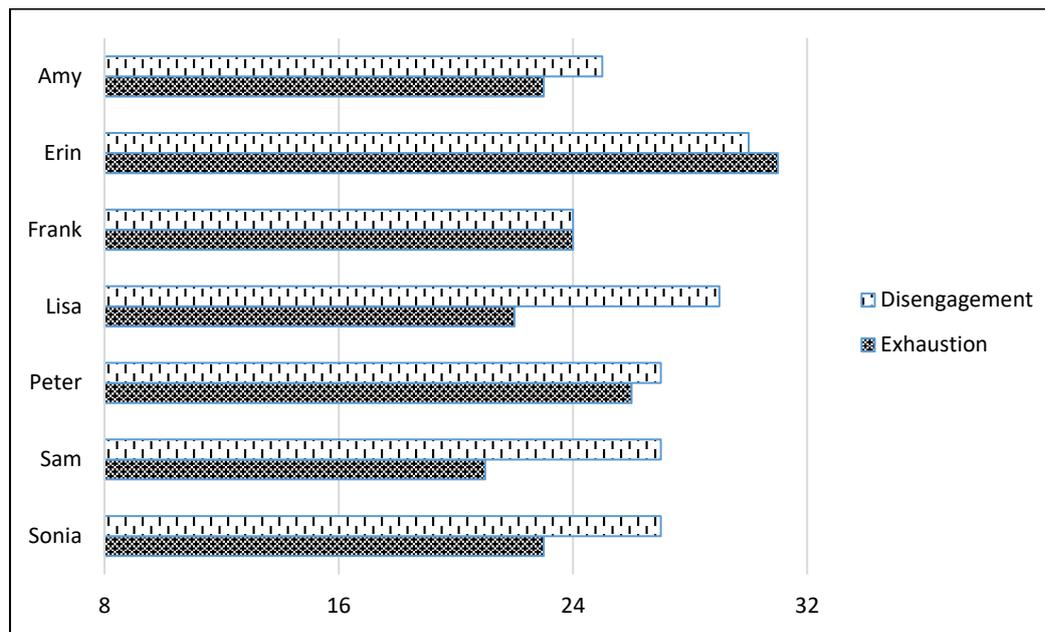
4.2 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

The demographic profile of the eight participants is presented in Table 1, with the number of participants in brackets.

All participants were UK residents and British educated from primary or secondary school onwards. Aged between 19 and 23 at the time of burnout, they represented four different universities and five different undergraduate courses. The sample was diverse with respect to gender, country of origin, race, ethnicity and culture. Only three of the eight participants had one or two parents with a university education.

Having some diversity within the boundaries of the selection criteria, as recommended by Ritchie, Lewis, Elam, Tennant and Rahim (2014), helped to develop a rich picture of the features of burnout and recovery.

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants.

Gender	Female (5), Male (3)
Age at burnout	19 years (5), 20 years (1), 21 years (1), 23 years (1)
Study year at burnout	First year (5), Second year (2), Third year (1)
Course	Psychology (3), Drama (1), Art (2), Business (1), Health (1)
Living at home/away	At home (1), Away from home (7)
Paid employment	3
Education of parents	One or both parents received higher education (3)
Country of birth	UK (2), Europe (1), East Africa (1), West Africa (1), Middle East (1), South Asia (1), East Asia (1)
Ethnicity	Black (4), Arab (1), Asian (1), White (1)

4.3 OVERVIEW OF THE FINDINGS

The analysis produced three superordinate themes with subthemes as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Three superordinate themes with subthemes.

Falling Behind, Falling Short

- Competing Priorities
- The Academic Gap
- The Weight of Expectations

Getting Stuck

- Inner Turmoil
- Alienation from Studies
- Alienation from Others
- The Problem With Talking

Finding a Way Out Through Personal Growth

- Turning Point
- Growing Self-Understanding
- Cultivating Support
- Developing Self-Regulation

The first superordinate theme, *Falling Behind, Falling Short*, captures the context that provided fertile ground for burnout. The analysis drew out three key difficulties that participants experienced in being an undergraduate student. These challenges are presented as the subthemes *Competing Priorities* (between academic work, social life, personal responsibilities and paid work); *The Academic Gap* (between pre-university and undergraduate education); and *The Weight of Expectations,* particularly from parents, but also from participants themselves.

The second superordinate theme, *Getting Stuck*, conveys a sense of what it was like to suffer from academic burnout. The subtheme *Inner Turmoil* captures the psychological distress that characterised burnout. Participant responses to inner

turmoil are brought together in the subthemes A*lienation from Studies* and *Alienation from Other*s. The subtheme *The Problem With Talking* suggests a relationship between burnout and negative attitudes to seeking support.

In the third superordinate theme, recovery from burnout is conceptualised as *Finding a Way Out Through Personal Growth*. The subtheme *Turning Point* represents a decisive event or moment when participants confronted their problem and embarked on the road to recovery. The subsequent changes involved in overcoming burnout, as derived from participant accounts, are discussed as three subthemes: *Growing Self-Understanding; Cultivating Support*; and *Developing Self-Regulation*. Table 3 shows the representation of each superordinate theme and subtheme by participant.

Table 3. Representation of themes across participants.

Theme	Amy	Erin	Frank	Helen	Lisa	Peter	Sam	Sonia
FALLING BEHIND, FALLING SHORT	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Competing Priorities		√	√	√			√	
The Academic Gap	√	√			√			√
The Weight of Expectations	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
GETTING STUCK	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Inner Turmoil	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√

Alienation from Studies	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Alienation from Others	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
The Problem With Talking	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
FINDING A WAY OUT THROUGH PERSONAL GROWTH	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Turning Point	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Growing Self-Understanding	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Cultivating Support	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Developing Self-Regulation	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√

4.4 FALLING BEHIND, FALLING SHORT

The undergraduate environment presented participants with unknown academic, social and physical freedom, but also with the uncertainty and new responsibilities associated with such freedom. The analysis suggested that certain demands interplayed with personal circumstances to create ongoing and insurmountable pressures. The three most challenging aspects of participants' experience were the need to balance their studies with other aspects of their lives, as presented in the

subtheme *Competing Priorities*, the need to bridge the academic gap between higher and further education, as captured in *The Academic Gap*, and the risk of falling short of their own and their parents' expectations, as discussed in the subtheme *The Weight of Expectations*.

4.4.1 Competing Priorities

Participants had a high degree of freedom to determine their own schedules and juggle their academic work with leisure activities and other commitments, such as family responsibilities and paid work. However, some found it hard to balance their priorities in the absence of external guidance and constraints.

Erin and Helen both struggled to strike a reasonable balance between their academic work and social life. Both were used to having their social lives moderated by external rules. Prior to university, Erin's social life was contained by parental supervision and Helen's was dictated by the structure of her boarding school environment.

During A-levels, Erin had a disciplined approach to her coursework: *"I was very strong minded. I didn't party much, you know. I was always on my work*." (Erin: 150-151). The lack of self-discipline she experienced at university surprised her. To some extent, this could be ascribed to social pressures: *"When you're a first year you feel ashamed [of being seen alone]" (Erin: 726-727).* Away from her home and parents, social freedom led to excessive partying and drinking, to the detriment of her studies.

> If you are at home, you have to ask your parents, because you have to be respectful (Erin: 231-232). It was the first time I had **FREEDOM** drinking. Before, I **NEVER** drank. --- But because you have **FREEDOM** [whispers],

there's no mom and dad telling you "Oh, come back at this time" (Erin: 208-213).

Socialising might also have been Erin's defence against homesickness, implicit in the extract below.

> You're alone in your room. If you don't go out you're gonna be alone in your room all in your mind, with your thoughts and everything (Erin: 221-224). Being away from home makes a huge difference. It really does (Erin: 170).

Similarly, after focusing on her academic work during A-levels to the exclusion of a social life, Helen went from the routine and discipline of boarding school, where she had been *"this perfect person this whole time at school" (Helen: 361-362)*, to unrestrained socialising, "*doing something every single night" (Helen: 387-388)*. She went to extremes in rebelling against being a good student.

> All I wanted to do was meet as many people as I can, you know, social time (Helen: 477-479). Basically, got into a lot of drugs, um, you know --- I mean, **COMPLETELY**, as far away as I could possibly get from school (Helen: 372-376).

Frank and Sam faced a different set of competing priorities. Both had to be financially self-reliant and felt the strain of funding their studies and living costs from paid employment. The time and energy they spent at work compromised their ability to focus on their studies.

> Working and studying at the same time is exhausting. (Frank: 233-234). I had to pay rent, so obviously I know every week I need to work a certain number of hours, but the thing is then, when I have lessons, when I have group work,

I'm a bit tired, so I try to focus, but obviously my comprehension will have

changed (Frank: 288-293).

At the same time, non-financial considerations also influenced the way they managed their time. During his second year, Frank's focus gradually shifted from student life to the world of paid employment: *"I met my girlfriend --- I was spending more time with people from work and with her" (Frank: 299-303)*. He did not seem to plan the division of his time between work and study: "*Forty [hours per week], something like that. I was not really paying attention to how many hours I was working" (Frank: 240-244)*.

Sam, on the other hand, was drawn into watching over his psychologically unstable partner.

I thought that I had to be looking after someone whilst trying to maintain four

jobs, a voluntary position, as well as studying (Sam: 25-28).

Furthermore, the researcher surmised that Sam's estrangement from his family, without a *"cushion to fall back on" (Sam: 614-615),* compelled him to boost his future employability and financial security by gaining as much work experience and training as possible. However, this strategy culminated in overload and ultimately burnout.

4.4.2 The Academic Gap

Some participants seemed unprepared for the higher standard, greater volume and faster pace of academic work at undergraduate level. Their academic struggle suggested a discrepancy between their learning approach, their expectations of undergraduate study and the academic challenges presented to them. Three participants with strong academic records (Amy, Erin and Lisa) were surprised and

alarmed when they struggled to keep up with their coursework. Finding academic work tough was an unfamiliar experience that led them to question their ability.

> I did find it a lot difficult straightaway (Amy: 19). It was a bit of a shock, I guess (Amy: 33). I did well in college, I did well in high school, like, in all my academic years before university (Amy: 40-43).

> When I came to uni I was thinking "This is going to be a piece of cake", you know, because I was always the type of person to do it early. So, I was so shocked when I came and then it wasn't like that (Erin: 155-159).

Lisa had a reasonable academic record: *"I did well in my A-levels, I wasn't not bright"* (Lisa, 688-689). However, her undiagnosed dyslexia started to take its toll as the demands to produce more complex written work increased throughout her second and third years.

> [In the first two years] I was getting really good marks (Lisa: 691-692). But then, academically it was becoming more and more stressful, the thesis writing every year got obviously bigger and bigger and then in the third year --- I was really struggling (Lisa: 19-34).

Already lacking confidence in her academic abilities after disappointing A-level results, Sonia soon felt overwhelmed by the volume of work. The way she describes how she "*suddenly*" could not keep up, suggested that she was not following an explicit strategy to stay on top of her workload.

> I was attending everything and so keeping up with everything. We had a week off, I was engaged in everything, but then suddenly when I have all the pieces and everything I can't keep up (Sonia: 258-262). I think it's just, you have all of this thrown at you (Sonia: 163-164).

Sonia also found it hard to tolerate the uncertainty of a less directive teaching environment. Her difficulty with strategising might have been exacerbated by low self-confidence following poor A-level results.

> In A-levels the teachers would give suggestions --- but then here --- they'd tell us to study well, thinking tasks, things like that, but not really how to study (Sonia: 914 -932). How do people revise for exams in university? (Sonia: 910-911).

Amy's use of the word "*blank*" evokes a sense of paralysis.

> I found it easy to study before. --- I could sit in my room and concentrate and focus on what I was trying to revise for, but in university I was like, blank, I didn't know where to even start (Amy: 49-55). I don't know if it was the pressure of more being expected of me that made me feel like, unsure how to do my studies (Amy: 64-67).

Like Sonia, Amy was unable to identify the reasons for her academic struggle, which might have prevented her from adapting her learning approach.

> I didn't understand why I couldn't understand, like, why I couldn't just revise and why I couldn't just understand what the lecturer was talking about in the lessons (Amy: 138-141).

Erin also found the academic adjustment hard. In her pre-university education she had relied on a creative approach to meet coursework requirements, which served her well during A-levels but did not suit the requirements of undergraduate written assignments. Like Sonia and Amy, Erin seemed unable to adapt her way of working.

[Erin was told] "You have to be really good with your essays, you know, you have to be really good with writing" and I'm just like, "Oh, but I'm not, you know, I'm just really creative, that's how I got by throughout" (Erin: 335-339).

4.4.3 The Weight of Expectations

This subtheme conveys the researcher's understanding of the role that expectations from parents, important others and the participants themselves played in their development of burnout. Participants who were the first generation in their family to attend higher education seemed particularly sensitive to familial expectations of their progress at university. Furthermore, the analysis also suggested that the weight of expectations was felt more keenly when participants started to fall behind in their coursework.

I think maybe that might have been playing on my mind, that was the only subject that I've actually been told from my family that they would like me to do (Amy: 414-417). And then, to not be doing well…I did feel the pressure of my family, like, they wanted me to study this and now I'm not, I might not pass, I'm not doing well (Amy: 422-425).

I was the first one in higher education, and, I suppose it was quite a lot of pressure and I didn't have anyone to really help me through what was required (Lisa: 261-264). [Failure is not acceptable] and I think it's also coming from a very [cultural] background, the expectation (Lisa: 235-236).

I felt some kind of pressure to kind of live up to the standards of going to university (Sonia: 23-24). They [the family] just have this perception that once you're clever then you don't really know trouble. My other cousins are all out

there studying medicine and things like that, I don't think they can relate (Sonia: 873-877).

Sonia was caught between the expectations of her wider family and the lack of support from her mother, who did not understand or encourage her academic ambitions.

I'm really close to [my mother] but because she didn't get the chance to study --- I can't really relate to her when it comes to things like this (Sonia: 818-822). She'll be like, argh, you're always studying, studying, studying, studying, why? (Sonia: 837-839).

Academic struggles not only elicited a sense of failure in the eyes of others, it also challenged participants' perceptions of themselves.

So, I think that my impression of my parents was that my worth, my personal worth was connected with my academic achievements and when I had failed to enter a school of medicine, I felt that I had not only let myself down but let them down --- I felt I had failed in their eyes (Peter: 123-130).

When I saw my grades --- I didn't feel good about it (Erin: 136-137). Ah, they [her family] were so disappointed (Erin: 468). Because I know they wanted me to get first class (Erin: 751-752).

Financial concerns contributed to the pressure Sam and Lisa put on themselves to graduate on time.

So, when I started University, --- I was about 21, so I was thinking I know what I want from this, I'm not here to party, I'm not here to waste time, I need to find opportunities, I need to get the most out of my time here (Sam: 543-549).

I thought if I took another year, how am I going to live for that year, and that would be catastrophic [financially] in our family (Lisa: 302-304). There was so much, again, pressure, this awful pressure. I put all this pressure on myself (Lisa: 345-347).

Participants were noticeably vague about their parents' expectations, as evident in the extracts above. The analysis indicated that familial hopes and judgements were often unspoken and implied, and participants were unable to initiate a conversation about the pressures it created: "*Even if it's hard I cannot say it's hard" (Sonia: 37).*

Where participants entered university in the shadow of poor A-level results, their words conveyed a deep sense of failure, disappointment and discouragement.

A-levels were really, really hard and really, really draining. I just felt like a machine the whole time, just do this work and then sleep and wake up and do this work again and I actually barely slept and didn't eat much --- only two years later to go and not do well in those subjects that I took (Sonia: 132-144).

Considering the effort and time I was putting in I should have been getting, you know, literally close to a 100%, so that's what I was getting at the beginning of the year --- So when I got that result during the summer holidays, obviously, to myself, I was like, "Oh my God, all of that for nothing" (Helen: 234-244).

When my results came through I had missed by two points and at the time --- it was like a catastrophe. I had set my mind on being a doctor, and I didn't want to consider another profession (Peter: 62-71).

Frank's growing awareness of the questionable ethics of big business left him disillusioned with his course, but he still adhered to his father's desire that he completed a business degree. Frank's reference to "*slightly on purpose*" conveys the defiance and rebellion underlying his overt compliance.

> I think I did this slightly on purpose [disengage from university life]. I think, because, you need to understand that the degree that I'm still studying now, is not my first choice, this is something that my father wanted me to do. I'm one of those individuals, unfortunately (Frank: 326-332).

In contrast with participants who felt the pressure of parental expectations, Helen tried in vain to secure her parents' attention and "*make my parents proud*" *(Helen: 295).*

> I'd sit at home and brag about "Oh, I got an A in this, I got an A in this", and I constantly felt the disinterest which obviously encouraged me even more (Helen: 296-299).

The researcher surmised that the impact of expectations on participants was coloured by the quality of their relationships with their parents and in some instances, wider family. It is likely that parental expectations created vulnerability to burnout as a consequence of insecure attachments, relational conflict, lack of support and/or poor communication, which were threads running through all participants' accounts.

In summary, the analysis discerned three prominent sources of pressure in participant's experience of being undergraduates. These challenges provided the context for student burnout. Firstly, some participants were unable to manage their multiple commitments; secondly, some participants were lost in the transition to the

academic demands of higher education; and thirdly, fear of falling short of their own and others' expectations compounded the stress arising from falling behind with their studies. Overall, this superordinate theme conveys participants' sense of helplessness in the face of demands they felt unable to meet.

4.5 GETTING STUCK

The second superordinate theme, *Getting Stuck*, represents an understanding of the lived experience of academic burnout as developed from the eight participants' accounts.

The analysis creates and understanding of how participants became stuck in a state of psychological distress, as discussed in the subtheme *Inner Turmoil*. Two prominent responses to distress were derived from the interviews. Firstly, all participants disengaged from their course in some way or the other, as discussed in the subtheme *Alienation from Studies*. Secondly, participants also withdrew from their peers and sometimes their wider social world, as presented in the subtheme *Alienation from Others*. The final subtheme, *The Problem With Talking,* discusses the role that participants' reluctance to disclose distress and their negative attitudes to help-seeking played in the perpetuation of their burnout.

Figure 5 shows a conceptualisation of the relationship between the four subthemes. *Alienation from Studies* and *Alienation from Others* are depicted in a mutually reinforcing relationship with *Inner Turmoil*, whilst *The Problem With Talking* is shown to perpetuate burnout by preventing participants from seeking support.

Figure 5. Relationship between the subthemes of Getting Stuck.
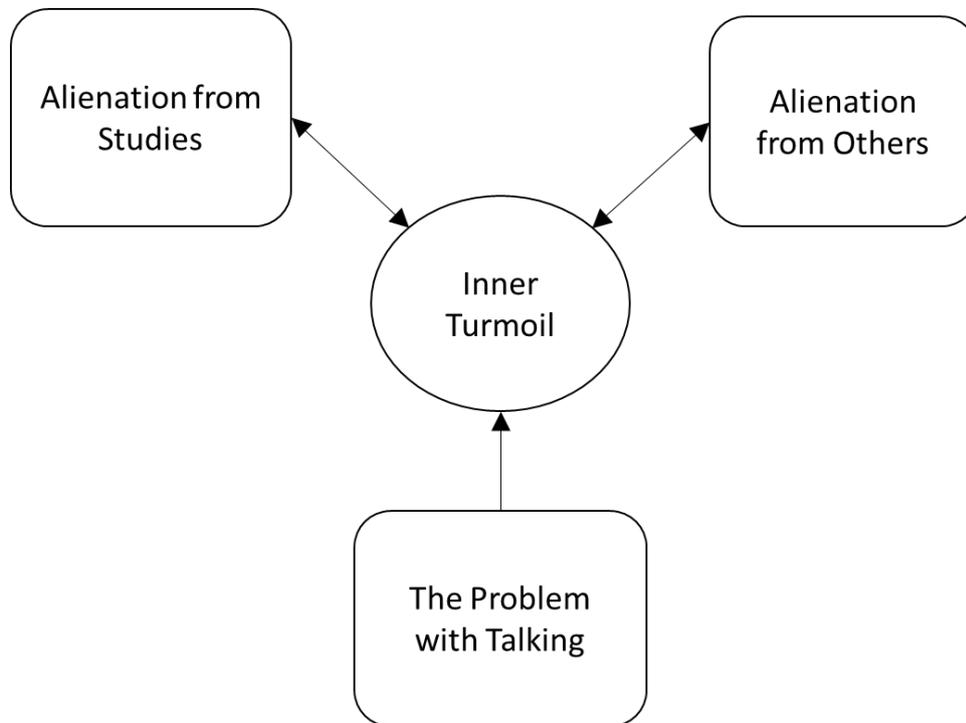
4.5.1 Inner Turmoil

This subtheme captures the researcher's understanding of the thoughts, felt sense, mood and emotions associated with participants' academic burnout. Two prominent characteristics of participants' psychological distress were discerned from the eight interviews: ongoing and unresolved inner conflict, and powerful negative emotions, particularly high anxiety, panic and low mood.

Participants' experience of burnout was characterised by a lack of awareness of themselves and their environment, and of feeling helplessly stuck in a state of psychological distress. Alongside inner conflict, references to anxiety and depression featured strongly in the interviews. Over time, as their academic struggle became

increasingly apparent, participants' distress escalated. Their moods ranged from very low to highly anxious.

Lisa, Sam and Erin gave vivid descriptions of panic attacks.

> Everyone was ploughing through, they were just like machines, they were fine. --- The happier they seemed to be, the worse I was getting inside (Lisa: 82-86). The first one [panic attack] was just horrific, I really thought I was dying (Lisa: 742-743). And it was getting to the point where it was hindering my ability to even leave the house (Lisa: 206-208).

> I was on the phone and I started having a panic attack, so I started getting the shakes (Sam: 30-32).

> I never had panic attacks, but I felt like I was getting anxieties in random places. I wasn't understanding why I was getting anxieties randomly, like, my vision would get blurry, my breathing would be [draws in strained/short breath] --- and people just looking at me like, "What's going on with you?" (Erin: 314-321).

Lisa described giving physical expression to powerful emotions.

> I remember being so upset when I got home, and I actually broke some of my pieces of work, and I remember that quite vividly (Lisa: 458-460). I threw it across the room, probably against the wall, I have no recollection, but I just remember being so frustrated and so angry and upset that I couldn't show [my art] (Lisa: 468-471).

Erin was constantly fluctuating between frantic activity, whether working or partying, paralysis and panic. She gave a vivid description of the rising panic she experienced, trying to overcome her inertia and uncertainty.

I don't know how to do it, I don't know where to start, and then, um, I start

panicking and then I'm like, okay, let me stop thinking about it. Then later on,

which is like closer to the day, mind you, I'm still thinking about it, and then the

same thing happens, I panic, and I stop, I panic, and I stop. Then, close to the

day, I think it's time to stop putting it off and try, at least. I'll sit down, get my

laptop out, and I'll just start reading it. [pause] "Oh my gosh, where do I

START?" And then I start **SCREAMING** at the laptop. okay, okay, okay, okay,

[voice drops as if calming herself down] just, just do this one first, okay, and

then, I do, small parts of my essays, as I go along, and then, the last day --- I

finish it by that day (Erin: 275-294).

Peter, Helen and Sonia described a sense of helplessness and discouragement.

I PROPERLY gave up in my gap year (Helen: 534). I just didn't even want to

do art, I'd lost all hope, I couldn't be bothered with anything (Helen: 431-432).

Actually, I wanted to disengage with life, because there were bigger things for

me to deal with. I would be in the university as little as I possibly could. I

couldn't stand the place. (Peter: 414-419). As tough and as strong as my

outside impression was, internally I was a crumbling wreck (Peter: 711-713).

Oh, that was hell, oh my gosh, I hated getting up knowing I had to go to uni

that day, I hated the thought of just coming here, it felt so overwhelming

(Sonia: 520-524). It did feel like I went to prison (Sonia: 576).

Amy felt low but she also experienced anger directed at herself.

A mixture of sad and angry, like, angry at myself because I didn't understand

why I couldn't understand, ---but I felt sad as in like, I'm, I'm like…[Pause]

(Amy: 137-142). I cried a lot, like, sometimes. ---Mostly alone (Amy: 151-153). Everything was making me feel low (Amy: 247-248).

Frank was the only participant who did not express deep distress; instead, he felt disconcerted by his own passivity and despondency. The researcher developed an understanding of Frank's almost dreamlike state of passivity as a despondent response to distressing situations. When he felt threatened, he withdrew both physically and emotionally. His breath was his only barometer of stress and he found a quickening of his breathing unsettling.

> I like to restrain myself, I think, in a very weird way. Emotionally, I hardly get angry or upset, I think…most of the time. When I do, I feel different, I breathe more, I think…I just, I don't know, it's… (Frank: 98-102). I don't like it, I don't like to feel, to breathe that way, I don't like to feel this, I prefer to know what I'm saying (Frank: 121-123).

Some participants referred to poor concentration and poor memory, which might have been cognitive symptoms of stress.

> I can remember what happened in my lectures from yesterday, I remember that. If you asked me in first year, nope, second year, nope, I wouldn't remember (Erin: 1064-1068).

> I felt that I couldn't help at all, I was feeling helpless most of the time, and, I couldn't focus in class (Sam: 91-93).

> I was expending an awful lot of mental energy without actually knowing I was doing that, and actually exhausting myself. So, I wasn't able to focus on study, I wasn't able to prioritise, I wasn't able to make the right decisions (Peter: 1260-1265).

Inner turmoil was also reflected in Erin and Peter's erratic self-care.

> [When cramming to finish work] you're not going to sleep, you're not going to do your normal things, you're not going to eat. (Erin: 294-296). [I] went from being the skinniest person to being like, so big (Erin: 774-776).

> I wasn't able to look after myself physically (Peter: 1265-1266). Oh, I'd eat any rubbish. --- I was using food to comfort myself a lot. In the first year, I easily put on a stone and a half, easily, and drinking, freely drinking, freely (Peter: 1281-1286).

The data suggested that unresolved inner conflict was at the root of anxiety and low mood. Four different patterns of inner conflict were discerned from the interviews.

The first form of inner conflict was exemplified by Amy, Lisa and Sonia, who fell behind with their coursework despite their motivation to do well. They were unable to make sense of their struggle to cope academically and experienced shame, doubt and confusion about their academic ability.

> Because they [her classmates] were all understanding and I'm not, but we are all in the same class, we should be on the same level (Amy: 100-104). I felt that I should have started grasping what was going on in the year (Amy: 21-23).

> Academically they [her peers] seemed to be way ahead of me. --- And I felt very naïve (Lisa: 714-716). I couldn't understand why I couldn't do it. (Lisa: 90). It was just like, am I really that stupid? (Lisa: 696-697). Your self-esteem goes down as well, --- and then you're not able to face the world, and I remember thinking, "God, what does that make me?" (Lisa: 733-738).

I [couldn't] approach anyone when I had fallen behind. I just feel, I don't know why, but because you're at university you should be able to understand (Sonia: 294-301).

The second form of inner conflict arose when participants were unmotivated and erratic in their engagement with coursework. Both Erin and Helen were caught in a punishing and anxiety-ridden cycle of procrastination followed by last minute bursts of effort. They typically experienced guilt and frustration afterwards.

I don't wanna do it, because I don't understand what's going on (Erin: 269-271) And then you feel depressed, you don't wanna **DO** it, and then, when it gets closer to the essay time or the exam time, it's like the pressure of the exam weighs on you more, than not doing it, so you eventually start doing it. You're caught between the two (Erin: 245-251).

I mean, still now, I do this awful last-minute thing, I mean, I can't get out of that --- for me it just feels like my brain is set --- I'll stress and stress about work, feel guilty, or lazy, lie in bed all day, and I will literally leave it until the **BREAKING** point (Helen: 494-500). It's after you've done it, then you're like: "I could've just done this", you know, and every time I'll get upset, I will have wasted about three weeks feeling horrible about myself, feeling guilty (Helen: 526-530).

A third form of inner conflict was seen where the participant was unable to resolve competing priorities. Sam was caught between the desire to gain work experience, the responsibility for a partner with mental health problems and the need to do well in his studies. This unresolved conflict left him highly anxious and distracted.

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> I can't concentrate in class, I can't NOT be around him, so when I'm not, I'm always thinking: is he okay? Something is going to happen, which was very damaging for me, because I couldn't focus on my studies, I couldn't focus on my coursework (Sam: 99-104).

A fourth form of inner conflict was seen where participants attended a course against their will and interest. Peter and Frank were caught between their rationale for staying on their course, their lack of motivation and their desire to drop out or change course.

> I therefore was harbouring feelings, strong feelings of resentment, being somewhere where I didn't want to be, but also, I had strong feelings of failure (Peter: 84-88). There was very, very strong rebellion and I was in conflict, constantly, with where I am, what I need to achieve, and then the humiliation I would face if I didn't (Peter: 316-320). --- So, starting at university, I just didn't have interest in the course (Peter: 109-111).

Frank's despondency expressed his inability to resolve his dilemma. The following summary was synthesised from different parts of his interview. On the one hand, Frank complied with the wishes of his father, who wanted him to gain a business degree. On the other hand, he was disillusioned with the ethics of big business, which seemed to violate his personal values. He was deeply unmotivated to continue with his course, but at the same time, he had funded himself through paid work and was reluctant to lose his investment. Frank seemed thoroughly trapped in a conflict of expectations, values and priorities. He hinted that withdrawing from university, academically and socially, was a form of protest against his situation. He conveys his apathy and despondency when he says:

Second year I actually failed two modules, I failed them and did not retake them. I simply didn't care (Frank: 467-472).

4.5.2 Alienation from Studies

As participants ran into problems with their academic work, they started to miss lectures and seminars and disengaged from their coursework. Their response could be interpreted as a coping strategy to reduce stress and anxiety. However, the analysis concluded that avoidance of academic responsibilities induced further stress, so that participants became locked in a mutually reinforcing cycle of avoidance and distress.

Lisa described how she missed classes due to anxiety about her thesis.

Because the deadline was creeping up, so I was taking days off university to do the essay writing (Lisa: 139-141). And I think the more I went slower, and the less words I was writing, the more I stayed at home thinking I'm going to catch up, and the less…so it was a horrible Catch-22 (Lisa: 145-151).

Unable to catch up, Sonia started to miss lectures and seminar, anxious to avoid the embarrassment of being confronted in class.

I never asked the lecturer for help, I just felt like I couldn't. I felt he would scream at me or he would embarrass me in front of everyone. --- I didn't want to go through that, so I didn't go to the seminars (Sonia: 413-418).

Sonia's fear of lecturers was rooted in childhood humiliation by teachers when she started primary school in the UK and struggled with the transition, unable to speak English and lacking appropriate support.

I was eight years old. --- I didn't know everything. --- It was really, really, **REEEEALLY** embarrassing, to be honest, quite traumatising. ---[My marks]

would be 0 all the time, so I just don't like sharing my work with people (Sonia: 333-344).

Sam missed his classes to avoid being confronted with his peers.

Because going to class was stressful, I have housemates that I'm living with that are in my class and, at home, things were a little, um, complicated --- so I started avoiding class because of social anxiety (Sam: 150-157).

Amy described a sense of helplessness, of being trapped in *"a vicious circle of not understanding and not doing anything about it, really"* (Amy: 220-222).

Feeling that if I go to university I'm not going to understand anything anyway, so there's no point in me getting up and going (Amy: 210-213). I felt like me going to university is going to make things worse, so I'll just stay home, and look up the lectures which I did and still didn't understand (Amy: 217-220).

Both Peter and Frank were ambivalent about being at university. Their avoidance of academic work could be seen as an escape from the deadlock between the need to complete their degree and their desire to do something else, complicated by their lack of motivation.

I needed time to work out what I wanted, but of course, I was falling more and more behind --- because I was expending a lot of mental energy in trying to get out (Peter: 236-240). My self-esteem was particularly low and fell through the floor as week by week the term progressed, to the point that I stopped going to lectures --- I was attending only mandatory classes --- I was trying to work out where I would go from here whilst being in it (Peter: 216-227).

At first, Frank enjoyed his course, but over time he lost interest as he became disillusioned with the ethics of business and what he perceived as superficial teaching. His cynicism is evident in the following extract.

> Sometimes when I was asking questions I felt ignored by teachers or, not that they don't care, but after the class they need to do other things, they need to go. --- For me it [is more] interesting to know what this means --- garment factories, all these things that exploit workers, why that happens (Frank: 505-5236). Because down the line if we pass --- does this mean that we actually learned more than just focus on passing? (Frank: 564-570).

Erin too, found it hard to motivate herself. Her regular attendance of compulsory drama lectures contrasted sharply with her absence from aspects of the course that did not enforce attendance and therefore required more intrinsic motivation.

> I didn't have any interest in my study at that time, so, a lot of the time I'll miss my lectures, and it caught up to me. I didn't know what was going on (Erin: 48-50). I would literally only go to my drama lectures, because drama was the only thing I understood at that time. I **HAD** to go anyway, because if I didn't go to three lectures in total, they'd kick me out (Erin: 121-125).

A punishing regime of study during secondary school and A-levels left Helen with a negative perception of 'work'. At university she could not reconcile her passion for art with the discipline required to complete assignments.

> For me, art had always been my constant, that was the only thing, I could feel good about myself --- I mean I got 100% for my A-levels Art, it was literally like, all I wanted to do. Then I got to university, obviously, art became work, it became my life, and I just, I barely did anything (Helen: 417-424).

4.5.3 Alienation from Others

As participants withdrew from their studies, they also withdrew from others. The researcher discerned three threads in participants' accounts of isolating themselves: avoidance of others as a form of protection; turning inward as a consequence of low mood; and isolation as an expression of defiance.

In the case of Amy, Helen and Sam, avoidance of social contact could be interpreted as way of protecting themselves against difficult emotions. Avoidance shielded Amy against having to face her guilt, shame and embarrassment about struggling academically.

> I even distanced myself away from [my best friend] --- so that she wouldn't think that I am struggling as much as I was (Amy: 518-522).

For Helen, avoidance of others protected her from facing anxiety-provoking deadlines.

> I also won't speak to my friends because then I won't have to talk about me, and I won't have to talk about, you know, "Oh my God, I haven't done this project due in tomorrow" (Helen: 825-829). It's like a denial, it's like, so I don't have to think about it (Helen: 833-834).

In the case of Sam, avoidance of others protected him against having to deal with what he perceived as their demeaning pity.

> If you were a victim for a long time you really start hating pity from people. --- They would come around trying to be extra caring, extra careful, constantly asking me if I'm fine, which, realistically should sound great, but at the same time it felt aggravating. --- All the dynamics around you suddenly change into, "I'm the victim and everyone is trying to support that" (Sam: 227-240).

Low mood might have contributed to some participants' isolation from their friends, whether through their alienating behaviour or lack of desire for social contact.

> Erin's unfamiliar low mood – "*my energy was always like the best in that first year" (Erin: 671-672)* – confused her friends. Erin believed they were not interested in her problems and withdrew from her social group. "*They [were] getting really angry*" (Erin: 667-68.

In the case of Amy and Erin, social withdrawal appeared to reinforce rumination and apathy.

> In halls you are just in your box room, so I think that can make you even, think about stuff even more (Amy: 231-233). I felt that if I'm going out enjoying myself, that's even another setback. --- Although I wasn't studying, it felt like it didn't make sense for me to go out and have fun when I hardly even grasped what I'm here at university for. --- I really isolated myself a lot without even realising it (Amy: 496-511).

> I got very depressed quickly --- so I locked myself in my room, and then, just **SLEEP** (Erin: 54-57). Towards second year I locked myself in my room every day (Erin: 647-648).

As participants alienated and lost friends who interpreted their withdrawal as rejection, they lost social support at a time when they needed it most. Overall, it is likely that social alienation heightened and perpetuated participants' emotional distress.

> It's possible that she [a friend she lost] had noticed and didn't understand the reason why I was distancing myself (Amy: 525-527).

I've lost a lot of friends because of that [isolating herself], I have to say, a lot of relationships (Helen: 814-816). I became arrogant, you know, because I was in this denial that I didn't need [others]. I just had no-one close to me anymore and I didn't, obviously, I wasn't working, I didn't have a way to feel good about myself, at all (Helen: 406-409).

During the crisis some [of Sam's housemates] mistook me wanting to be alone for a while as me trying to cut them off, and a lot of tension started arising (Sam: 153-156).

Furthermore, Erin, Helen, Peter and Sam all had troubled relationships with their parents. The tone of Sam's brief references to his family made it clear that the topic was sensitive and suggested a deep rift between them.

I'm estranged from my family, so I'm not in touch with them, they don't support me whatsoever (Sam: 63-65).

Both Peter and Helen noticeably suffered from low mood and both keenly felt their parents' lack of interest and acceptance. It seems reasonable to assume that the absence of emotional support from their parents exacerbated burnout.

I never get that sense of my mom being really happy for me. She'd often turn it around as something of her, and you know --- I need that self-validation (Helen: 566-571).

Peter was deeply troubled by his relationship with his parents.

An awful lot of soul-searching, --- I was fighting demons. And what I was fighting, was, my parents do not value me, I'm worthless, I'm not lovable (Peter: 245-248). I was always battling against my parents. --- There were always threats of violence (Peter: 330-337).

Whilst being isolated fuelled troublesome thoughts and feelings, it is also possible that distance from his stressful home environment allowed Peter slowly to come to terms with the pain of parental rejection.

> I think it was because for the first time in my life I was outside of my family home, and alone within four walls, I was able to start to confront some of the issues that were buried when I was living at home (Peter: 249-253)

Erin believed her parents' critical attitude contributed to her low mood and felt let down by their lack of support: "*They never wanted to know*" (Erin: 442-443).

> I just feel they are trying to put me down sometimes, like, a lot of times --- I'm really angry (Erin: 1017-1025). [You feel] so criticised that you almost feel bad within (Erin: 769-770). --- So, when they heard about that [health issue], they were like "Oh what's going **ON**? I know in our family we don't have none of that, so it's YOU." That's how [ethnic group] families are, they like to blame everything on YOU, like "Oh, it's…you're depressed, it's **YOU**. You know, I don't believe in depression, so it's definitely you." (Erin: 413-420).

Frank and Peter seemed to associate their peers and student life with the course they resented. Dissociation from student social life represented an act of defiance, as conveyed by the extracts below.

> I was ignoring things that make you want to stay at University, things that make you want to hang out with people at University. --- And now I think I did this slightly on purpose, because [I did not want to study business (Frank: 315-327).

> I didn't want to be there, and I didn't want to mix with [the other] students, a lot of them had passion about the course, I couldn't see it (Peter: 201-207). I'm

just carrying this…almost a defiant board, "Leave me alone" to the world,

"**LEAVE ME ALONE!**". Like I was on a protest. [silence] (Peter: 421-424).

Lisa was the exception. She did not withdraw from her housemates and peers, and she described the presence of others as helpful, yet her contact with them sounded superficial. She did not share her anxiety with anyone, which might have contributed to her sense of being alone in her distress about her thesis.

> That's the bit I didn't realise, how alone I felt. --- And I don't think it actually hit me, because when you're doing the degree, you are surrounded by other people and though it's not great, it's better than being completely alone, if that makes sense? You can hide within that crowd, but also, there is distraction there, and I think that's what kept me going for that last half year of my degree (Lisa: 384-393).

4.5.4 The Problem With Talking

A crucial dimension of participants' burnout was their reluctance to seek help. It appeared that social withdrawal, coupled with negative attitudes to help-seeking, prolonged participants' distress and prevented earlier intervention.

Nearly all participants refrained from sharing their feelings and concerns with others. They also believed they should deal with problems on their own and held negative perceptions of mental health issues and professional psychological support such as counselling.

The analysis suggested that participants' reluctance to disclose feelings and concerns was rooted in past experience. Avoidance of self-disclosure was a protective coping strategy that participants like Sonia developed in childhood or adolescence:

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But when I was younger I lost my older sister. --- I didn't know how to react to anything so I thought, let me just suppress whatever it is and just live up to the standards and expectations that were put on my sister. -- I've just always suppressed feelings and kept them to myself (Sonia: 52-62).

Vulnerability was not acceptable in Erin's family culture.

They're [her brothers] all tough, you know, and then I thought I was one of the boys when I was young, as well, so, having to, like, break down in front of them. Erm, I didn't know how they'd take it, so I was trying to bottle it up (Erin: 517-521).

Feeling misunderstood discouraged Helen from sharing her struggle with procrastination.

I really struggled with opening up my feelings last year, because I was like, "Oh you know, whatever I've been going through is the same as everyone else", you know, obviously, then it wasn't... I mean, it's something that really does get to me (Helen: 585-594).

Peter had learnt that vulnerability was punished and therefore avoided emotional exposure.

Through my adolescent years, I developed a mistrust of others. I couldn't reveal what was really going on in my heart, in my mind to others, because I'd be rebuked for being weak, or, I'd be taken to one side and punished further for thinking, believing, feeling the way I did. I just felt society was against me. ---- So, I had this mistrust of others which would then prevent me from seeking support (Peter: 556-573).

Frank linked his inhibition to his upbringing. He needed time to express his thoughts and feelings, but sensed that it frustrated others, which in turn inhibited him more.

> I am a shy individual, I need a bit more time to express myself directly and fully. There are many reasons for that, the first one is probably childhood, because my father was very…expressive in his manners, and there were always conflicts, but that's not shyness, I understand now, today (Frank: 4-10). But I'm also aware that I overthink too much of those little things which makes me sometimes think like a robot (Frank: 73-75) I don't want to just let myself go (Frank: 95).

Frank found it hard to be assertive and when faced with lack of understanding, he tended to give up. This withdrawal strategy sheds light on the apathy and lethargy that characterised his burnout.

> That [lack of understanding] for me is where I lose my nerve, I want to get more angry but then I stop. --- I make myself calm down. I shut up (Frank: 744-747).

Erin was ambivalent about disclosing her feelings, and in retrospect, questioned her perception that her friends did not want to know, indicating that she might recognise some choice and responsibility for alienating herself.

> A good, true friend will push through [the denial], like, "Oh, what's going on?" (Erin: 683-684). They told me I wasn't okay, but they didn't want to know what was going on. --- Or maybe, I just didn't want to tell them, or I blocked that out (Erin: 678-681).

Several participants also had negative attitudes to help-seeking at the time of burnout. The analysis pointed to three reasons for their reluctance to seek and accept support: shame; a strong need for self-reliance; and mental health stigma.

The interviews suggested that Amy and Erin feared the shame of being seen as weak, ignorant or inferior.

> I don't know if it was embarrassment. I think maybe being judged on your academic ability, your intelligence. I felt like I was really below them, so I felt that to ask them for help would make them think that I was, there was something wrong with me (Amy: 93-99).

> And you feel like an idiot [when you ask questions] --- I know I'm not stupid, but other people around me might think that I'm just so stupid, "Look at her, asking that kind of question." So, there's big paranoia there (Erin: 1087-1093).

Sonia was also inhibited by the expectation of shame and embarrassment. It seems reasonable to assume that her fear was linked to primary school experiences of being shamed by a teacher. Her reticence also reflected her uncertainty about whether she was entitled to receive support from her lecturer.

> I want to ask for help but then I'm so far behind, do I really have the right to ask for help? No, let me just deal with it, let me just deal with it myself (Sonia: 269-272). I don't know where the stop is, like, how much until I can say, okay, can you please help me now (Sonia: 306-308). I feel like I should just be able to figure it out. My, when you say it out loud, it just sounds, why am I thinking like that? (Sonia: 488-495).

A second feature of reluctance to seek help was some participants' fierce attachment to being self-reliant. For different reasons, Amy, Lisa and Sam believed they had to overcome adversity on their own.

For Amy, self-reliance was a value she had adopted from her mother. Her confidence was dependent upon her independence, which suggested she saw interdependence and the need for help as evidence of weakness.

> I've adopted her ways of thinking in the sense of not asking for help (Amy: 127-128). I'm used to not being able to ask my lecturers or my teachers like, for help, I'm used to doing things myself (Amy: 71-74). So, for me to not being independent, it was confidence knocked back (Amy: 77-78).

Lisa's history of caring for a mother with mental illness might have created an expectation that she needed to cope by herself as evidenced in her strongly self-reliant approach to dealing with academic obstacles.

> Part of me wasn't completely honest with them [her lecturers]. I said, "No, no, it's okay, I'll be okay, I'm gonna keep on going". --- They did give me the option to redo the third year, I just didn't take it, I just didn't, I just refused to take it (Lisa: 399-405). I don't know why, but I put this pressure on myself that, no, you can do this, just get through it, just get past it (Lisa: 232-234). I suppose I didn't really think to ask anybody. I was 21, so I could do it all and just was really determined that I was going to finish (Lisa: 305-308).

Looking back, Lisa also reflected that she was socially *"immature" (Lisa: 716)* for her age and did not establish relationships outside her family home.

> I think I was quite sheltered, you know, my parents were very strict [cultural reference] parents (Lisa: 717-719). I wasn't doing the things that normal 20-

year-olds were doing, I didn't have relationships, I was quite sort of naïve in that sense as well (Lisa: 1111-1114).

Like Lisa, Sam seemed to have learnt that self-reliance was essential for survival and self-protection.

> I'm the kind of person that's very stubborn about asking for help, so I never really bothered talking about my interests or anything ,how I'm feeling about the pressure and the stress that I'm going through, and I thought that I could manage it all on my own (Sam: 5-16). I think it's just the way I was brought up that,…life wasn't very forgiving for me, I didn't have a lot of nice things going on (Sam: 44-46).

Sam's reference to "*small issue*" was indicative of his self-reliant stance and this, together with his reluctance to seek help, were reinforced by the university counselling services in his first year.

> I spoke to Student Well-Being about a small issue that I had, and they said that they would refer me to counselling. So, they did, but, I was on a waiting list that was 10 months long. ---So, I didn't think much of it. I thought, okay, if I'm on such a long waiting list then my anxiety isn't that bad, or, am I over thinking depression, et cetera, so I just ignored it for a long time and I did my own thing (Sam: 360-370).

A third feature of reluctance to seek help was negative perceptions of mental health issues and counselling. Amy, Erin and Sonia all mentioned the stigma surrounding mental health issues that prevailed in their cultures.

> Counselling for me, at the time had a negative stigma to it, like, it was like, **YOU NEED HELP?** Like something is wrong with me, so I stopped, thinking

that there's nothing wrong with me, why should I need to go to counselling (Amy: 569-576).

[In my culture] you're crazy if you need psychological help. I don't want to say that I believe that, but you hear it from such a young age, and sometimes you don't even hear about it, so it's not like a normal thing. --- It's not for me, it's for other people, but not for me [laughs] (Sonia: 694-702).

Confusing counselling with psychiatric diagnosis and treatment, Erin feared being misdiagnosed and medicated.

It's kind of scary, like, "Oh, you have this, or you don't." --- And then telling me to take medicine because of that, I don't want that (Erin: 1134-1139).

4.6 FINDING A WAY OUT THROUGH PERSONAL GROWTH

This superordinate theme captures participants' experience of overcoming burnout. In all participant accounts, the researcher discerned an interpersonal encounter or event that served as a catalyst for recovery, as presented in the subtheme *Turning Point*.

With the exception of the turning point, which involved intervention from outside, overcoming burnout was characterised by personal change and a sense of personal growth. Three further subthemes show how recovery from burnout involved *Growing Self-Understanding*, *Cultivating Support* and *Developing Self-Regulation*.

4.6.1 Turning Point

In the midst of burnout, participants seemed to turn inward, preoccupied with their concerns and disengaged from their academic and social environment. In all eight interviews the researcher noticed an event or encounter that seemed to arrest

participants' escalating burnout. In all cases this interruption involved someone else and brought their awareness to their deteriorating emotional state and the impact of their behaviour on others.

> I'm not close to my mum, but, she knows me very well and, she was realising that I was becoming even more distant, and she was like: "Is everything all right at university? You don't talk to me about university, you say everything is fine, but you don't actually talk about university study wise." (Amy: 111-117).

Helen's emotional state deteriorated, but she was in "*denial*" (399-406]. The turning point came through close friends who saw that she was breaking down and confronted her about the impact of her destructive behaviour on others.

> I went through a massive personality change, and --- I only had about two friends from school there, and they had to sit me down and be like: "You are not a nice person anymore." (Helen: 400-404).

Erin's disbelief when friends questioned her mood expressed her lack of self-awareness at the time.

> I didn't **KNOW**, and I used to live with my friends in second year, so they actually let me know that I seemed kind of weird: "You're acting like you're in a dark place right now." So, I said: "What do you mean I'm in a dark **PLACE**? (Erin: 92-97).

On the day of graduation, Lisa had a "*proper breakdown" (Lisa: 367)* that necessitated psychiatric intervention and provided her with the psychological support she was unable to access before.

> During the graduation ceremony, I didn't do it, I didn't go, --- I had a mental health breakdown (Lisa: 364-367) I ended up taking an overdose. (Lisa: 379).

I sat on a park bench, so I was quite serious about it; I just thought, God, I can't cope with life, what's going on, why can't I deal with these things (Lisa: 642-645).

Even though Sam followed advice to end a destructive relationship, he continued to juggle too many commitments and his ongoing anxiety culminated in a breakdown.

It was a fundraising shift, and I was on the phone and I started having a panic attack. --- My boss noticed, and she started intervening then (Sam: 29-33).

The analysis suggested that for most participants, awareness of their psychological state was not enough, they also had to be confronted with the need for change. They all responded to the challenge with shifts in attitude that allowed them to do something new and different; something they had found difficult or avoided doing before. These shifts typically involved re-engagement with their academic work or other people, or acknowledgement that they needed help.

[My mother] told me that I needed to ask for help if I'm going to pass this year (Amy: 128-130). That's when I did speak to my personal tutor --- and she advised me to meet up with her more often during the week --- so I started meeting up with her, I think, almost twice a week. --- She was emailing me more often, I was going to university more (Amy: 274-281).

These initial shifts in behaviour, however modest, represented a catalyst for change and could be seen as the start of recovery from burnout.

Me telling someone that I struggled made me feel like, it's okay to tell someone, like you told someone now, so you can go ahead and tell your personal tutor or go ahead and tell your friends, go and tell your partner (Amy: 359-364).

What changed that [her behaviour] around was my health. They were like, Oh, you're not getting enough sunlight, you are not eating well" (Erin: 554-557). I was like, "Where does this come from?" I was shutting down, physically as well, not just mentally. --- That is what made me go, "I have to change, I have to do something about this" (Erin: 397-403). This is not acceptable; my health is the most important thing (Erin: 407-409).

Erin's reference to a "*switch*" indicated an enduring rather than momentary change.

I had to go back to my spiritual side, because I was neglecting it too much. --- So, when I poured it all out I felt quite…the next day I felt better, so it was like a switch, you know (Erin: 608-615).

Frank's girlfriend set him an ultimatum, which challenged him to overcome his despondency about his studies.

We talked about creating a life together --- and she told me that I had to get it [the degree]. I agreed that I had to get it --- so then I came back for the fourth year (Frank: 631-638).

Helen's friends urged her to seek professional help and provided crucial support in the early stages of her recovery. The satisfaction of re-engaging with her course provided motivation for ongoing commitment and self-discipline in attending university.

Something in myself just made me realise, like, "No, I have to do this, you know, I have to do this for my parents, because you know, they paid for this, I **HAVE** to do this" (Helen: 484-488). I **FORCED** myself to go to someone (Helen: 441-442).

The turning point for Lisa was making the choice to engage with counselling and attending restorative activities offered by a mental health clinic following her suicide attempt.

> So, they said we don't want to section you, --- but we'd like you to come in for a little bit, so I did….and actually, you know what, it was probably the best thing I ever did (Lisa: 1011-1017).

Like Frank, Peter was also shaken out of apathy and disengagement by a challenge. His outrage at being treated by a lecturer in a way that was reminiscent of his parents' dismissive attitude, catapulted him out of despondency into action. Moreover, the positive results that followed from his engagement with his studies provided fuel for ongoing motivation.

> He [the lecturer] turned round to me and said --- you are **NOT EVER** going to pass your [course] exam (Peter: 856-858). [I thought] "I value myself enough to do what I need to do to stop you thinking so badly about me, of me, you know. How dare you label me. How dare you be a pseudo-parent at university" (Peter: 931-934). I started going to the library, --- I certainly put 10% into my mark each week, just by doing a little bit of work, engaging with the task. And then, my confidence grew ready for the exam and, yeah… (Peter: 944-951) I passed, first time. He was speechless (Peter: 887-888).

After his breakdown, Sam was inundated with support. At first, he found it stressful to talk about himself and disclose experiences he had never discussed with anyone before: *"For a person that's never asked for help before and always try to self-medicate and self-support, it was very invasive at the beginning" (Sam: 178-181).* However, seeing an empathic assessor turned counselling into a helpful experience.

> The assessor took my frustration and converted it to comfort. --- She did the assessment in a different way that wasn't interrogation like the other thing, and it really helped out a lot (Sam: 403-408).

Sonia's empathic GP noticed her distress and suggested counselling. This meeting constituted a breakthrough as it encouraged Sonia to face unacknowledged issues from the past that contributed to her anxiety and self-doubt. Her reaction to the suggestion of counselling also prompted her to question deeply ingrained prejudices about mental health issues and psychological help, which seemed at odds with her interest in psychology.

> During the break I went to visit my GP because I had a problem with my memory, because things just didn't stick. He was talking to me a lot --- I was like, telling him things and then [he asked], "Have you ever thought about getting psychological help?" I was like "Oh my gosh, help, **ME?"** (Sonia: 669-678).

4.6.2 Growing Self-Understanding

A strong thread of growing self-awareness and self-understanding ran through all the participants' accounts of their experience, contributing to their evolving sense of self. Elements of this thread included their perception of themselves as students, their social sense of self in relation to family and friends, and their awareness and understanding of their emotions and behaviour.

The analysis showed that self-exploration and making sense of their experience of academic burnout was an ongoing pursuit, which motivated several participants to take part in the research interviews.

In contrast with participants' apparent oblivion to their environment in the midst of burnout, overcoming burnout was characterised by the ability to stand back from their experience and gain perspective on the emotions and behaviours that had contributed to their distress and held them captive in a state of burnout.

Erin's experience of burnout shed light on her unhappiness during her first two years at university.

> I was in denial through first and second year that I was depressed (Erin: 89-90). Burnout was bad, but it made me discover what was going on (Erin: 947-948).

However, she also realised that unrecognised and difficult emotions still surfaced in unexpected moments, necessitating ongoing self-enquiry.

> It's like I still have stuff that I still need to work on and understand (Erin: 1148-1149).

Lisa's strict upbringing had shielded her from many social realities. Attending a mental health hospital exposed her to a different reality and broadened her perspective and life experience.

> It was frightening, the stories you heard, but you know what, it was in a way, I know it's frightening and very sad, but it taught me a real lesson, and actually in some respects it made me grow up, you know, because I was quite naïve (Lisa: 1105-1109).

With the help of therapy, Sam came to understand how the defences he had developed by necessity had become obstacles to emotional awareness, and the insight he gained about his anxiety responses enable him to intercept and avoid panic attacks.

I've seen so many new things that I deliberately I believe chose to put aside. ---- I've developed a lot of coping mechanisms growing up, to put things aside and to dissociate myself from a lot of things. I never thought about them that way, I just thought I didn't care, but it was more that I have a blockage system between me and that certain emotion or that certain event and, once [I] came to acknowledge that, I learned more about my anxiety cycles (Sam: 426-438). --- Although it was a horrible experience all in all, I think it was very eye-opening and I learnt a lot (Sam: 679-681).

Over and above general self-understanding, some participants' accounts of recovery also conveyed the evolution of a more realistic and secure sense of themselves as bona fide students. The analysis ascribed their growing confidence and identity as learners to an acceptance of their learning preferences and strengths, a recognition of self-protective behaviours that created obstacles in the learning process - such as avoidance of making mistakes - and an awareness of what motivated them to study.

Peter started to overcome the low self-esteem that plagued him following poor A-level results when he acknowledged the intellectual defences he developed during his school years to protect him from being seen as less able than his peers. Over time, he was able to embrace his own way of learning as valid and useful.

I learnt, somewhere along the line, that if I could intellectualise, I could cover up for being blatantly a bit stupid. I was a bit slow in class, I didn't get things straight away, I had to bring them home and think about them a lot (Peter: 496-501).

For Lisa, the diagnosis of her dyslexia and dyscalculia was empowering: *"It was like a light bulb moment, it really was" (Lisa: 608-609*. Looking at her experience through

the lens of dyslexia explained and normalised the difficulties she encountered with written assignments and restored her confidence in her intellectual abilities.

> [When faced with a written assignment] I just sit there, and I go blank, I literally go blank (Lisa: 859-860). Doing my thesis, I must have been just blanking and being overwhelmed at every single stage (Lisa: 998-1000). [Knowing I have dyslexia] made it so much easier for me to do my PGCE, because I did panic, going back to education (Lisa: 607-611).

Sonia believed her 'slow' learning style, combined with her reluctance to ask for help, contributed to her academic struggles and eventual burnout. At the same time, she still lacked the confidence to reach out for academic support, inhibited by shaming past experiences at school.

> The problem wasn't in what we were learning or anything like that, it was in how I was learning or trying to learn things. I don't think I'm a quick learner, I think I'm quite slow actually. It takes me a while to learn something, or for it to stick and so going from when I am first introduced to [something, to] actually having learnt something, like what happens in between. Sometimes all it takes is someone just explaining it in simpler terms or in another way for me to understand it, but because I didn't ask anyone to explain it in another way or a simpler way…(Sonia: 539-563).

For Amy, overcoming burnout required awareness of how her striving for independence could become an obstacle: *"I knew I was in a situation where I could ask for help, but, I stopped, it was like I was stopping myself, or my ego." (Amy: 145-147)*. Encouraged by her end of year results, she was able to transform her early self-criticism into more realistic expectations of her academic performance.

I just did my best, because whether I knew what was going on or not, I did revise. It was only until --- I came out of my exams, confident, thinking that I understood the questions, I knew what was going on, that I was reassured that I have done okay for the year (Amy: 321-328).

Through counselling, Helen came to understand how she first started to develop burnout during A-levels through relentless and compulsive effort.

I had just worked, like, physically, you know, waking up at that hour in the morning, every single day, you know, I just **COMPLETELY** burned my head out (Helen: 217-220).

Understanding the impact of burnout allowed her let go of the perception that she was lazy. She was more accepting of her difficulty to mobilise herself.

I began to realise this, it wasn't just me being lazy, that's when I found out about burnout (Helen: 444-446). I used to have a lot of self-doubt, but I'm very honest with myself now, I'm like, I know I'm not the cleverest person in the world (Helen: 58-60).

Counselling also helped Helen to gain insight into the powerful need for affirmation, especially recognition from her parents, that drove her striving for outstanding academic performance. Her strong external locus of evaluation confined her enjoyment of positive experiences to her parents' recognition of her achievements.

I still do feed off --- self-validation from my parents, from my peers, and it's how I get my sense of achievement, like, you know, I'm doing this work placement at the moment, and --- something really good happened yesterday, but I could only feel really good about it until I've left work, phoned my parents and let them know how great it is (Helen: 552-560).

Helen was also becoming aware of how her concern about other people's judgements of her work influenced her mood and levels of anxiety and fuelled her tendency to procrastinate.

> If I make a mistake, I will not stop thinking about it for the rest of the day (Helen: 650-652). I overanalyse to the extent that I have to figure out whether they think I made a mistake, you know, and I discovered this thing, I've only noticed it recently, I literally, in art, I won't make something if I don't know it's gonna be good (Helen: 669-674).

When the researcher asked her about her experience of experimentation as part of the artistic process, it turned out that her critical attitude also inhibited her willingness to experiment.

> Experimentation --- I cannot, like, I will not bring myself to do that --- and that's why I leave it to the last minute --- so that, that is all I have in my head, the best idea. I'll overcomplicate it --- and then, if it comes out, and it's bad, then I am so angry with myself, and the guilt is like, "Oh my God, I'm so angry, like, I'm a failure..." (Helen: 678-690).

For Frank, questions about motivation were central to his search for self-understanding and he admitted that he saw the research interview as another opportunity to gain more insight into himself: "*Like I said, me being here helps me to actually understand. I'm trying to just understand myself, so, in a way I would say I'm using you*" *(Frank: 762-765).* Frank's account of burnout conveyed a sense of being inhibited and disempowered. He struggled to articulate his thoughts; to make sense of his feelings; and to assert himself in interaction with others. He wanted to

understand his motivational patterns to help him overcome his tendency towards passivity and procrastination.

> I don't know how to explain. It's just, I feel more focused when I'm angry (Frank: 660-661). Because, I need to get angry, actually, I feel like I need to get **ANGRY** to actually **DO** those things, because if I'm not angry, I'm just, I don't know, I could sit here for example all day and do nothing for 12 hours, no problem, I could listen to music, I could look around, do nothing. (Frank: 648-654).

Like Frank, Peter described a growing awareness of the extent to which his motivation originated from outside.

> I realised that I was responding to an external locus of control all my life, that I would be directed or motivated to please others and never actually myself. More recently, I undertook an analysis of my value set and realised, when I put them down, none of these belong to me, they're all my parents'. Every single value was my parents' value (Peter: 1447-1455).

4.6.3 Cultivating Support

This subtheme describes the cultivation of supportive relationships and increased willingness to seek academic and psychological help. Following their turning point, all participants experienced changes in their relationships with others, whether in existing relationships, the way they approached relationships or their attitude towards taking support from others. These relational changes included the way they engaged with peers, friends and family and an increased willingness to be open with others.

Having isolated themselves during burnout, some participants renewed and renegotiated strained relationships with friends and housemates as part of overcoming burnout. Both Amy and Sam overcame their reticence to share their feelings and concerns with friends. Their willingness to be more open in relationships suggested greater trust and confidence in relationships.

> I told them --- and they were, "Why didn't you say, we could have met up more, we could have like helped you and then I felt even more like, a bit silly, I really could have spoken to all these people, but I didn't (Amy: 370-378).

> I have a lot of caring people around me right now, I learned to maintain a lot of things as well, so I feel like struggling on your own is never going to help (Sam: 692-695). Everything at home is perfectly nice, we have a sense of family going on. I'm close with [my housemates'] parents and things like that, so it's a really nice environment to be in at the moment (Sam: 703-706).

Erin confronted her parents about their critical attitude and shared her need for more open communication and encouragement. This could be interpreted as taking more responsibility for her part in her relationship with her parents, overcoming the emotional inhibition so characteristic of her family culture, and creating a source of future support for herself.

> So, I said if they're not going to do something about it, I'm going to do something about it, so I took the initiative to talk to them --- I told them what's not going good with our relationship and what's going good. So ,I was like "Oh, you're too negative. --- I just want you to encourage me." (Erin: 758-766).

The researcher also perceived a growing independence and social confidence in Erin. Whereas before her relationships were driven by a need to fit in with her peers,

she seemed less sensitive to social pressures and was able to let go of friendships that she believed were not mutual.

> [In the first year] we got along, we had so much in common, but then, when you shift from being that person to needing help, you see what you don't need in your life. --- Right now, I'm alone. I'm just walking back to uni, walking back home. I don't feel any shame in that (Erin: 713-721).

Both Peter's experiences of cultivating support involved establishing relationships that provided him with affirmation. These relationships could be understood as compensation for the affection he craved from his parents but never received. Peter's submission of a voluntary essay to the lecturer who brought about his turning point was reminiscent of his efforts to gain his parents' approval. However, the risk paid off and the lecturer became the source of encouragement he needed.

> In fact, we had a special relationship after [he challenged me]. He gave some lectures for example, and then he set some exam question, and I thought, hmmm, I know about DNA and genetics, I was quite fluent, and I wrote him an essay and I said, "Would you mind just looking at this? It's probably not very good, but I would value your feedback." He came back, and he practically hugged me. He said, "I can't improve it." (Peter: 890-899).

Peter also described how finding a girlfriend encouraged him to re-engage with academic work. The researcher surmised that the relationship provided him with some of the emotional closeness he craved, thereby creating positive effects on his mood and frame of mind.

> So, we were close and VERY strong friends, and we would spend every time we could together. And yeah, that helped with the engagement, because she

would be concerned I wasn't doing enough.--- And of course I didn't particularly want to do any work, I just wanted to spend time with her [laughs], but she was a final year student, so she needed to work, --- so when she was working, I needed to work (Peter: 814-830).

During A-levels and her Foundation year, Helen completely withdrew from others to focus on her academic work. She lost many friendships as a consequence. At the time of the interview, she still tended to close down when she struggled with coursework, but she was also repairing close relationships.

I'm still… I've only [just] recovered from not talking. I've barely spoken to my sister - she was away for nine months - we've spoken only a couple of times, you know, we've only just been repairing our relationship (Helen: 323-327).

Frank continued to find social interaction difficult, but he was not socially isolated. He actively looked for ways to overcome social challenges and tried to engage more with university social activities and his peers on the course. Social connections with other students represented his re-engagement with university and created connections to keep him engaged.

I came back for the fourth year--- thinking that maybe I had to be more connected to the university, with people from the university --- I should have done this since the first year, but I didn't do it (Frank: 637-643).

For several participants, the turning point in their crisis challenged their views on help-seeking. Lisa, Sam and Helen had counselling by necessity, during a crisis period, and all three consequently valued its potential to provide psychological support.

The hospital provided Lisa with routine and containment, "*a very caring environment. I liked that structure, it was…you felt cared for*" (Lisa: 1078-1081). Lisa and her siblings cared for her mentally ill mother from a young age and therefore the hospital environment might have provided her with care she had not received at home. Through psychological care, Lisa developed a high degree of self-awareness and ability to look after herself emotionally, "*because it taught me a lot about myself (Lisa 1019). [Recovering from my breakdown] really made me the person I am*" (Lisa: 1119-1120).

Lisa's positive experience of psychological support during a crisis helped her deal with subsequent difficult times.

> Unfortunately, I had another episode of depression when my mother died (Lisa: 1120-1122). So obviously at that time I plummeted again, but what's interesting now is knowing and recognising that you are needing help and knowing and recognising what to do, and it's much easier (Lisa: 1161-1165).

Although psychological support felt intrusive and unsettling at first, Sam talked about it in terms that indicated a shift in perspective on what it means to ask for and receive help. His experience of receiving formalised support also seemed to increase his willingness to open up to people in his social circle.

> The first thing I learned is that I can actually ask for help and not everyone is going to pity you. Because I did receive, like at the end of the day, I did receive a lot of appropriate help. Maybe it was very invasive at the beginning and exhausting to go through the process, but I feel like it was, that we did reach the appropriate conclusion. My anxiety system's almost disappeared (Sam: 466-474). I think, comparing it, you know how I said talking before was

very difficult, I think it shows how easy it's become now, it's comfortable as well. I feel easier to open up to people (Sam: 786-790).

Helen implied that one of the advantages of counselling was the counsellor's understanding of burnout, which her friends did not have.

It's such, I don't know, the thing is, even with me trying to explain it to someone else, it's very… people don' know about it [burnout] at all (Helen: 718-721). When I try and talk to them about something like this, it can so easily be generalised into, "Oh, I know, I had it too" (Helen: 578-581).

Peter regretted that he had been unable to ask for pastoral help. At the time of burnout, he recognised he needed emotional support: *"…pastoral care, which is what I desperately needed [laughs], even I could see that" (Peter: 706-708).* However, he feared being "***LABELLED***, *as a student about to drop out" (Peter: 748–749)* and therefore only requested academic support from his personal tutor.

He was very embracing of my difficulties, and I thought, oh, I could go on and reveal a lot more of what's going on. But actually, I didn't, and the reason I didn't, is because then I would be marked out. So, it becomes a stigma, because I need special help. And I know I'm a bit slow, but I did not need special help, so all that was going on to consolidate again failure. Oh dear. So, I held that, all the psychological issues, and just simply said, I'm finding it a struggle to keep up with my work (Peter: 742–760).

Amy, Erin and Sonia all grew up with culture-based stigmas around mental health issues and psychological support. They all became more positive about help-seeking, although Erin still sounded ambivalent about professional support.

The experience of working with her personal tutor challenged Amy's negative perceptions of help seeking and seemed to alleviate the shame she associated with needing support.

> I didn't realise how stubborn I was [laughs] --- how high up I put myself, as in I thought that I could do everything, and I thought that I didn't need help. --- I thought I could do everything, but it turns out I can't (Amy: 613-622).

She was able to reframe the meaning of asking for help and came to appreciate the benefits of receiving appropriate support.

> I think that if I had known that it's okay to ask for help, no one is gonna to think less of you, no one's gonna judge your intelligence, then I think I might have taken that step, taken that step to go and ask for help (Amy: 166-170).

Erin's greater willingness to be open about her concerns was evident in the freedom with which she shared her experience of burnout and recovery in the research interview.

> And I did enjoy it [the interview] because it was like, I felt like you're a counsellor --- I thought I could say anything to you (Erin: 1151-1160).

Erin appeared to be ambivalent about professional help. On the one hand, she reflected that greater awareness of her psychological state during burnout would have encouraged her to seek help: *"I would have got in, I don't know, I would have got in other people to help me more"* (Erin: 1075-1076). On the other hand, at the time of the interview, Erin still sounded wary of professional psychological support. She hints at an unspoken fear of being pathologised when she says: "*I have all these thoughts going on and it's…I don't want them to know. I'd rather figure it out myself.*" Erin: 1127-1129).

For Sonia, the visit to her GP and the research interview were important first steps in allowing someone to see her and hear her.

> I did tell my mum parts of it but it wasn't the same as when I told my GP. I thought there really is a difference. Although it wasn't professional psychological help, it did help (Sonia: 760-764).

The following extract suggests a negative judgement of herself and a fear that others might perceive her negatively too.

> I don't really talk to other people, so I just feel like I have to change. I have to find ways to change things; the way I think about myself (Sonia: 824-827).

Sonia conveyed a shift towards more compassion with herself when she questioned people's judgements about what it meant to receive psychological support and voiced the shift in her own prejudice against sharing personal issues and seeking help.

> Just the idea of talking to someone right now, talking to you, I know we're not here for professional help or anything, but it's like I've told you things and now that I've got them off my chest I feel better, I do, and what's so bad about getting psychological help? I just don't understand. It's going to help you (Sonia: 704-712). And now, I just have this really pure vision, perception of, people like yourself, when you go to see them, they have no, like they have, no judgement, like no judgement of me (Sonia: 770-775).

Overall, the analysis pointed to an increased willingness in all participants to draw on some form of support; an awareness of the need to balance their independence with supportive relationships; and an appreciation of the value of talking about concerns.

> It's like the things were there in my head, and they were like poking at me and now that I finally told you they're like they've come out, and now I can put other things there (Sonia: 944-949).

4.6.4 Developing Self-Regulation

From participants' understanding of overcoming burnout the analysis drew out behavioural changes that were conceptualised as self-regulation, i.e., participants' capacity to manage their emotions and behaviour. Behaviours incorporated under self-regulation were: self-direction in academic studies, the exercise of self-discipline, the ability to self-soothe, and the development of future meaning and purpose.

Several participants became more self-directed in their approach to their academic work. They became more adept at organising their work and planning their time to create a healthier balance between their academic studies and the rest of their student life, and they developed more effective learning strategies.

Sam learned time management from his psychotherapist, which helped him to juggle multiple roles more efficiently and eased his anxiety.

> I think if you become so busy, you can't not learn time management. --- I feel like I've perfected it this year, how to fit in things in my schedule. --- You can learn [time management] because no one just knows, it took me three years to figure this out. It's not an easy skill to develop (Sam: 734-758).

Amy's identity and worth as a student was consolidated by learning to manage her studies.

> I'm setting myself more like targets --- so I've got time to make sure that I get done what I need to do (Amy: 539-549). Making myself a plan of when to study, when to read and when to have time for myself (Amy: 286-288). I was a student now, like, this is something that a student would do, so therefore I'm being an active student, I'm going to be okay (Amy: 309-311).

Lisa learnt to anticipate learning obstacles arising from her dyslexia. She developed creative strategies to overcome moments of panic and mental blocks during writing assignments.

> I get that feeling, a little moment of time, which actually lasted a long moment of time in my third year of my degree, but now, it's small pockets, because I know what it's about. --- It's that initial [gasp] and then I get a grip (Lisa: 772-779). I don't like working in sketchbooks that are [plain] white paper, so when I have a sketchbook that is white paper, I'll automatically deface it. I'll paint colour on it or stick some paper (Lisa: 934-938). If there is something already there, a page that you are working with, it's not so intimidating, is it? (Lisa: 978-980).

Lisa followed a similar strategy when using her computer, "*because for me it is also a bit like a blank canvas*" (Lisa: 933-934).

Peter reframed his "*slowness*" as a cognitive preference rather than a failure, with strengths he could harness to his advantage.

> I'm actually using the word slow, to reflect on my preferred style of learning. That I don't want to be rushed (Peter: 1034-1036). I like to be given time to

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digest and find a way through confusing material that makes sense to me that then, I can articulate, not regurgitate. --- If I can make it meaningful to me, I'll probably remember it for the rest of my life (Peter: 1024-1030).

Understanding his learning preference motivated Peter to re-engage with academic work and contributed to his confidence as a student.

I strategised. And because I had made so many mistakes on the journey, I actually knew how to correct them (Peter: 959-961). I was very systematic, and I knew when I came out of the exam, I'd passed (Peter: 979-980).

Several participants referred to the exercise of self-discipline in their accounts of overcoming burnout. Along with self-direction, self-discipline could be seen as a facet of growing self-regulation.

If I didn't get [my academic work] done, then I can't go out (Amy: 549).

It's like a shift in, literally a whole shift in personality as well, from being the craziest person to like, yeah, I just wanna get my work done now (Erin: 721-724).

I left [paid employment] just before my exams. I started to focus a bit more then. A different state of mind (Frank: 279-281). I said to myself, "Okay, you need every week go to your lectures, go to your seminars, get everything done, sorted, and you also need to find a way to [motivate yourself]" (Frank: 644-648).

From Helen's determination to attend university every day, the researcher concluded that the same strong-willed attitude that led to her burnout before, was harnessed to aid her recovery.

The first couple of weeks I really got back into, "Oh I don't have to go in today", "Oh, I'm going to lie in bed today", and then I basically hit a point **AGAIN**, where I was like, "I can't". My attendance actually means something now" whereas last year it meant nothing, so now I was like, "I'm going to go in every single day", and I have, every single day (Helen: 624-630).

Helen appeared to use regular attendance as a source of stability while trying to overcome a cycle of procrastination and last-minute cramming.

I need to find balance, you know, and I think the only way I can do that at the moment is literally by forcing myself to do it. I don't think there's any other way (Helen: 767-770).

Like Helen, Peter implied that the discipline of regular attendance was essential to his re-engagement with academic studies.

I'm a survivor, and I will tell you now that the second year went much more smoothly. I attended every single lecture, I attended every practical class, I passed everything first time. (Peter: 1416-1419).

Alongside self-direction and self-discipline, three participants adopted practices which, on closer examination, focused on managing their emotions. These practices (mindfulness, prayer and fencing) all have meditative and self-soothing qualities.

I'm always worried about what is going to go wrong next, so I'm trying a lot of the time now to do mindfulness exercises to be in the now and not worry too much about what's going to happen after (Sam: 634-638).

Erin rekindled her spiritual practice of praying as a source of self-exploration and self-motivation.

I don't know what I'm feeling right now, oh, and then all these thoughts start

coming up and I am like, oh, this is why, this is why. --- After praying all these

motivations for this tiny happiness comes you. --- I hate organising, you know,

I hate it. --- But once you start praying, you just start loving the things you

never thought you would love (Erin: 1186-1201).

For Erin, prayer also became a way of managing anxiety.

[Prayer] always calms me down. I have a sleep after praying. Sometimes I'm

in the midst of praying and I start sleeping (Erin: 1204-1205).

Prayer seemed *"like meditating, but you are just praying" (Erin: 1216-1217).* Erin

likened prayer to receiving counselling: "*I feel like I did that [speak to a counsellor]*

when I was praying" (Erin: 1182).

Fencing could be seen as Frank's meditative practice. Frank compared the energy

and focus he harnessed in fencing with the qualities he needed to bring to his

studies. His struggle to motivate himself was part of a wider struggle to confront

others and assert himself. However, his description of fencing suggested that it

focused his mind, drew him out of his apathy and possibly provided a practice

ground for assertiveness and self-expression.

I have to be sure that I'm going to hit the other person. If I don't, then I know I

made the wrong choice, I mean, I made the wrong move. So then, when I

know that I made the wrong move and let's say I miss, then I back away, but

now my heart is going faster because, I don't know, adrenaline, whatever it's

called. So now I'm just like: "OK, what now?" And then I can stop thinking and

then I can just do. And I usually hit, usually (Frank: 1100-1109).

The analysis also identified aspects of participants' experiences that represented new-found meaning and purpose. Participants were able to look beyond academic assessments to the meaning of their course of the study and the long-term purpose of graduating.

Whilst recognition from others remained important, Helen also described a more personal sense of fulfilment and self-evaluation through making art. Willing herself to engage with her course rekindled her passion for art and given her a sense of purpose.

> [I get fulfilment] once I've created something useful, or, you know, something, what I wanted to achieve, even better than that, and then, obviously on top of that there's validation from my tutors, my teachers, my parents, and you know, I made this incredible, this beautiful glass piece, I'm incredibly proud of that [Helen: 744-750]. Art has helped, it's a very different sense of satisfaction, something, you know, it's from within, rather than just like an essay (Helen: 842-845).

A close reading of Peter's experience suggested his future became meaningful when he realised his studies aimed to "*[get] somebody who was ill, better*" and that a patient was not "*just an object*" *(Peter: 870).* This realisation allowed Peter to let go of *"the fantasy of being a doctor, and with that, actually, drop the idea of having to please my parents" (Peter: 682-684).*

> It was actually holding me back, while I was holding on, I wasn't moving forward (Peter: 688-690). I was living in a fantasy, so I needed to just come into reality, my reality, which was: you're on this course, what would be so bad in getting through this course and coming out with a degree? (Peter: 672-676).

> The [second] year was extremely hard compared to the first year, but because I was engaged, I didn't fall behind. Third year, again, studied, focused on my work. Actually, I wanted to leave with a degree. Whether I would stay in [the profession] was another matter (Peter: 1421-1427).

Talking about his situation, Sam conveyed his sense of being vulnerable, with no family involvement or support whatsoever. Graduating was crucial to creating his own secure base for the future.

> A lot of people could finish and then just go back to the parents' house, have that one-year gap, travel the world, so be it, whatever it is, or work to save money, they have that small cushion to fall back on that I don't, so I need to make sure I have something planned, so that's why I'm doing as much as I can now (Sam: 611-617). [By graduation] I need to have my new house ready, my savings account ready, --- a lot of things that [a lot of] people wouldn't have to deal with (Sam: 606-610).

When Erin identified a potential future career her anxiety about the future were put to rest.

> [Before] I was finding myself still [worrying that] when I finish uni I wouldn't know what to do --- I **DIDN'T** have any idea (Erin: 815-824). I'm not panicking anymore, because now I've got all that sorted. After uni I'm just going to do that (Erin: 899-901).

The analysis discerned a change in Frank's attitude from disengagement to determination. He saw the pressure from his girlfriend to work towards their future together as a positive motivating force.

> I think she, I think she does that [challenge him] to make me angry, and it helps, that's the thing, it does help. (Frank: 873-875)

Frank also seemed to regard the practice of self-discipline and perseverance as an investment in the future, something that would prepare him for the postgraduate studies he wished to pursue.

> I want to see that I managed to do something that, even though I didn't want to do it, I still managed to do it. Because I know, I know that in life we all do things that we don't want to do anyway. (Frank: 966-970). [My degree is] only temporary. If perseverance is a muscle and if I manage to achieve this f*cking degree, then after that I can be more flexible on my perseverance (Frank: 1319-1323). This is one of the reasons why I need to finish, because, I know to get a PhD…actually, I don't even know, I'm just assuming that it's going to be much harder (Frank: 1033-1036).

Sonya's earlier doubts about her course and the future are conveyed in the following extract.

> For a long time, people would be like: "Why are you studying [course]? What are you going to do when you finish your degree? You're not gonna get a job." I think a part of me, although I would never want to admit it, a part of me believed that when I went into first year. Suddenly I felt like I needed experience, it wasn't what I expected, so I think it just shattered my expectations (Sonia: 614-624).

However, recognising the practical relevance of her course of study ignited her interest and motivation to pursue a career in the field.

I was watching a lot of TV shows focused on [her career direction] --- and I

was like [looks amazed, laughs] (Sonia: 636-646). I took a step back and I

said, "What am I really here for?" and then, "What can I do now to help me get

there?" (Sonia: 624-627). Where am I going? Why am I doing this and what

future goals do I have? Because why did I come here in the first place? Was I

here just to complete these assignments? I wanna finish and get the degree

and go into a job that I like, which is in the field of [her course], not just finish

assignments because lecturers told me to do so (Sonia: 583-591). And now I

can't wait, I just want to learn, now I love this subject and I don't care what

people say, because I thought: "Yes you can, yes you can" (Sonia: 648-651).

4.7 SUMMARY

In the superordinate theme *Falling Behind, Falling Short*, the subtheme *The Weight of Expectations* was represented across all participants. Likewise, all the subthemes of *Getting Stuck* and *Finding A Way Out Through Personal Growth* were represented across all participants. However, the diverse ways in which the subthemes were expressed in each participant's experience provided colourful texture to the overall structure of the findings.

5 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I discuss the findings in the light of the most germane literature reviewed in Chapter 2. I also present a critical evaluation of the methodology, quality and value of the study, discuss the relevance and contribution of the findings and consider the ethical issues that arose during the study.

5.1 REFLECTION ON THE FINDINGS

The findings were developed from the analysis of eight semi-structured interviews using IPA. The analysis yielded three superordinate themes:

- ➢ Falling Behind, Falling Short

- ➢ Getting Stuck

- ➢ Finding a Way Out Through Personal Growth

Alongside the lived experience of overcoming burnout as the primary focus of this study, the findings offer an understanding of the conditions that contributed to participants' burnout and their experience of burnout itself.

The superordinate themes and subthemes are now discussed, with reference to the literature.

5.1.1 Falling Behind, Falling Short

From the interviews, the analysis derived three main obstacles that contributed to participants' burnout: a struggle to balance *Competing Priorities;* difficulties with bridging *The Academic Gap*; and the *Weight of Expectations* from parents, wider family and participants themselves.

5.1.1.1 Competing Priorities

Duru et al. (2014) found that the ability to manage resources in challenging situations offer protection against academic burnout. The findings of my study suggest the reverse also applies, i.e., a student's inability to balance priorities may contribute to burnout.

Half of the participants were in paid employment, a figure slightly lower than the nearly seventy percent of UK undergraduate students who held down a part-time job during term time in 2009 (Robotham, 2009). Both Frank and Sam were financially self-supporting. Sam was acutely aware that he had no "*cushion*" in terms of family support and needed to enhance his experience, employability and financial position through part-time jobs. In his case, part time work provided the potential vocational benefits reported by Robotham (2009). However, in the longer term both Frank and Sam became overwhelmed by the pressure of juggling multiple responsibilities.

I concluded that both Helen and Erin were strongly impacted by the loss of stability previously provided by their boarding school and home respectively. Erin found independent living challenging and "*very different*" from home. It is likely that homesickness contributed to Erin's escape into socialising, to the extent that it compromised her engagement with her studies. Research by Denovan and Macaskill (2013) confirms the negative impact of homesickness on first year students' adjustment to university. Homesickness is also associated with anxiety and depression (Thurber & Walton, 2012), which characterised Erin's experience of burnout.

Financial and employment concerns were part of the struggle to balance priorities experienced by Frank and Sam. Although balancing priorities were not figural in the interviews with Peter and Lisa, both participants mentioned pressures created by

family finances. Not surprisingly, financial concerns have been found to create stress and affect the well-being of students in the UK (NUS UK, 2012; Denovan & Macaskill, 2013). Furthermore, in Lin and Huang's (2014) study, concerns about future professional development and employment partially predicted academic burnout.

5.1.1.2 The Academic Gap

Several participants were unprepared for the academic transition. They were shocked when the learning approaches they employed during A-levels were not effective at university. These participants exemplified concerns expressed by The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education about insufficient preparation for the transition from further to higher education, especially with regards to higher level cognitive skills (Greenbank, 2007). In line with these concerns, Denovan and Macaskill (2013) identified difficulties related to studying as one of the main sources of stress in first year undergraduate students. These difficulties included adapting to the leap from further to higher education and the need for autonomy in disciplining, organising and motivating oneself.

Several participants found it hard to manage their studies. They felt out of control, doubting their academic ability and judgement. These participants lacked two important ingredients of the capacity for autonomous learning: the ability for independent decision-making and self-confidence. Some also lacked intrinsic motivation, another ingredient of autonomous learning (Macaskill & Denovan, 2013). Even Amy and Erin, who had strong academic records, quickly lost the confidence they had before. Their response to the challenges they faced was to focus on negative emotions, which is a negative predictor of university adjustment (Rahat & İlhan, 2016).

Previous studies found negative perfectionism to increase vulnerability to student burnout (Zhang et al., 2007; Chang et al., 2016). In this study, Helen was the only participant whose burnout involved perfectionism. Her striving for affirmation from her parents and others, exceeding competitiveness prior to entering university and self-critical attitude were indicative of maladaptive perfectionism. The latter is characterised by hopelessness, concerns about external judgement, self-critical responses to imperfections and efforts to meet unrealistic external expectations and standards, all of which were evident in the development of Helen's burnout (Chang et al., 2016).

In terms of Farber's (2000, p. 675) categorisation of burnout, I suggest Helen experienced the "classic" form of burnout in which the individual responds to stress by working increasingly hard, whereas all the other participants experienced "wearout", in which the individual becomes depleted by stress and gives up. Helen was the only participant who showed signs of maladaptive perfectionism and the only participant whose burnout followed a 'classic' pattern. It might have been coincidence, but it is also possible that perfectionism is linked to 'classic' burnout rather than the other forms of burnout. The relationship between perfectionism and different forms of burnout could be a focus of future research.

5.1.1.3 The Weight of Expectations

Participants either felt the weight of familial expectations or the lack of parental involvement. Parental expectations seemed to exacerbate participants' fear of failure and increase their inner conflict about their studies. Participants who were the first generation in their family to attend higher education seemed to feel the pressure of expectations most keenly.

The parents of at least five participants did not have a university education and the mother of two participants did not attend secondary school. Seven participants came from minority ethnic groups in the UK. This demographic profile is likely to reflect the government agenda to widen participation from groups that are traditionally under-represented in higher education (Greenbank, 2007). The government's inclusion strategy has led to significant numbers of students entering unknown territory as the first in their family to attend university (NUS UK, 2012).

Several questions arising from the demographic profile of my sample warrant further investigation. Firstly, the demographics of the sample might simply reflect the student populations of the universities from which my participants volunteered, but even then, it seems important to increase our understanding of the relationship between different forms of burnout and the demographic profile of students. Secondly, parents without a university education do not have the vantage point of personal experience and may therefore find it harder to support their undergraduate children. One example was Sonia's mother, who did not attend secondary school and actively questioned her desire to study. The relationship between parental education and student burnout is therefore also worth investigating and likewise, the relationship between socio-economic status and student burnout.

Wintre and Yaffe (2000) found that parental support and relative equality in students' relationships with their parents positively influenced their psychological well-being and social adaptation to university. Not surprisingly then, my findings show how the opposite conditions, i.e., troubled relationships with parents and lack of parental support, contributed to psychological distress and complicated participants' adjustment to university.

The quality of participants' relationships with their parents came to the fore in all eight interviews. Threads running through their experience were: relational distance; lack of communication; lack of understanding; lack of interest and/or support; criticism; rejection; hostility and conflict, and complete estrangement.

Of the eight participants, only Amy received direct parental support, and even Amy was *"not close" (Amy: 111)* to her mother. Helen and Peter, in particular, conveyed a sense of helplessness when they described their futile attempts to gain acceptance and approval from their parents. I also noticed that all three male participants appeared to have authoritarian parents. Wintre and Yaffe (2000) found that an authoritarian parenting style had a negative effect on student adjustment.

In terms of Bowlby's Attachment Theory, I concluded that the majority of participants were insecurely attached to one or both parents (See Holmes, 1993). I also concluded that parental expectations are not problematic in itself but need to be understood in the context of the individual's relational history with caregivers. My assumption is supported by Malach Pines (2004), who suggests that a more secure adult attachment style offers protection against general burnout, whereas an insecure attachment style (avoidant or anxious ambivalent) is associated with poor coping and a higher likelihood of burnout.

Given that insecure attachment to parents and unsupportive parenting can be risk factors for homesickness (Thurber & Walton, 2012), it is possible that Erin's experience of feeling criticised and unsupported by her parents reflected an insecure attachment that contributed to her homesickness.

My findings contradict Lin and Huang (2014) who did not establish a significant relationship between parental expectations and academic burnout. However, they

included parental expectations under a wider concept called family stress, which did not have a strong interpersonal/relational focus and therefore did not consider parental expectations in any depth. Furthermore, the impact of parental expectations in their study might have been moderated by participants' attachments to parents, other contextual factors and their burnout patterns.

5.1.2 Getting Stuck

This superordinate theme, Getting Stuck, captures the subjective experience of burnout as inner turmoil, along with the role of parental expectations and support in psychological distress, coping strategies employed, and attitudes to self-disclosure and help-seeking.

5.1.2.1 *Inner Turmoil*

All participants had medium to high scores for the two dimensions of exhaustion and disengagement on the burnout scale (section 4.1) and the findings agreed with the scores. All participants disengaged from their academic environment and assignments, and whilst only three participants mentioned exhaustion explicitly, fatigue was implied in the other participants' accounts of passivity, non-action and a kind of paralysis. Their experience echoes Karl and Fischer's (2013) description of helplessness and powerlessness as characteristic of general burnout.

Anxiety is not part of the definition of academic burnout, but with the exception of Frank, it was a strong theme in all the interviews. The findings are supported by a systematic review that identified anxiety, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts as characteristics of general burnout (Kakiashvili et al., 2013).

Alongside chronic anxiety and sometimes panic attacks, participants experienced depression, helplessness, despondency, guilt, shame, anger and frustration. In line

with the findings, Constantino et al. (2013) cite loneliness, helplessness and mood swings as symptoms of general burnout, and Robotham and Julian (2006) note the potential for fear of failure to escalate into a range of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological reactions. Likewise, the wide ranging impact of general burnout on an emotional, social, cognitive and physical level is documented by Karl and Fischer (2013). The symptoms they cite reflect the experience of participants in my study: anxiety; low mood; helplessness; avoidance and withdrawal from social contact; deterioration of interpersonal relations; reduced concentration; and deterioration of memory, decision making and problem-solving abilities. For example, several participants mentioned cognitive problems such as difficulty to concentrate (Amy, Frank, Sam) and issues with memory (Erin, Sonia).

Robotham and Julian (2006) also draw attention to burnout sufferers' tendency to engage in unhealthy behaviours, reflected in the way Erin and Peter neglected their health in terms of poor sleep, unhealthy diet, rapid weight gain and lack of exercise. Erin's auto-immune disorder diagnosed in her second year is redolent of the burnout-related risk of immunodeficiencies (Constantino et al., 2013). Along with Helen, the same participants who neglected their health also mentioned substance use, another documented symptom of general burnout (ibid.). All three engaged in excessive drinking and Helen took drugs. Macaskill and Mobach (2011) found that alcohol consumption in first-year students was often a way of masking or coping with negative emotions, although a stronger and more common rationale was social affiliation and 'having a good time'.

Constantino et al. (2013) cite low self-esteem as a symptom of general burnout, but my findings suggest that loss of self-confidence and low self-esteem are also contributors to burnout. Some participants lost their self-confidence early in their first

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year as a consequence of struggling with academic work, and some entered their first year with low self-worth and a negative perception about their ability, as a consequence of either troubled relationships with parents and/or disappointment with their A-level results.

I propose participants' lack of confidence and self-worth undermined their ability to cope with the challenges they faced. Negative perceptions of themselves included lack of academic confidence (Amy, Lisa, Peter), a deeply ingrained lack of personal worth (Helen, Peter) and doubts about their capacity to cope with their responsibilities (Frank, Sam). My assumption is supported by Lin and Huang (2014) who suggest that negative self-perception partially predicts academic burnout.

The transactional model developed by the Lazarus group offers a cognitive perspective on participants' response to the demands of the undergraduate environment. This model maintains that situations and events are not stressors in themselves; stress is created through the person's interpretation of the level of threat or challenge in the situation, followed by and appraisal of whether they have the resources to cope (Everly & Lating, 2013). Participants would, for example, find academic tasks threatening because they believed they lacked the necessary resources, whether an understanding of the material, a strategy for tackling the task, sufficient time, or sufficient motivation.

Furthermore, a strong theme in participants' experience of burnout was a sense of inner conflict underlying their psychological distress. The only references to such a conflict were found in two phenomenological enquiries into general burnout (Ekstedt & Fagerberg, 2005; Gustafsson et al., 2008), which presented burnout as arising from a conflict between stimulating challenges and inner strivings, and external responsibilities and demands.

The literature provides ample support for the findings in terms of the symptoms of general burnout but not academic burnout. This study adds an understanding of the symptoms of academic burnout to the current literature. Moreover, it makes a unique contribution with its detailed interpretation of the different origins and central role of inner conflict in student burnout.

5.1.2.2 Alienation from Studies

Nearly all participants employed coping strategies that involved avoidance of academic tasks in the form of missing lectures, putting off assignments until the last minute and doing only the minimum required. Similarly, Charkhab et al. (2013) found that students with a low sense of self-efficacy, i.e., students who did not believe they would succeed when faced with a challenging situation, employed avoidant strategies in the form of alienation from studies and other people when they encountered difficulties. Like my participants, these students experienced more stress, were less likely to plan and develop useful strategies, and more likely to give up.

Participants all conveyed a sense of helplessness and giving up. Their responses correspond with emotion-focused coping, employed when the individual feels they have no control over a situation and tries to manage the emotional impact through avoidance. In the context of academic challenges, emotion focused coping is associated with burnout (Alarcon et al., 2011).

Martin and Marsh (2006) would suggest that the high level of anxiety in nearly all participants was likely to be at the root of their withdrawal and disengagement. Their study suggests that anxiety accounts for most of the variance in academic buoyancy in adolescents, where anxiety refers to fear of failure in the face of academic

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evaluation, and academic buoyancy refers to the ability to deal with academic setbacks and challenges.

Just as lack of motivation in academic tasks can be a consequence of burnout (Yang & Farn, 2005), Cushman and West (2006) draw attention to the role of low intrinsic motivation in developing and/or perpetuating burnout. In their study, students cited tedium and disinterest as contributors to burnout. For several participants in my study, lack of motivation became a source of distress in itself, especially when it originated from a lack of interest in their course or poor academic results from before.

5.1.2.3 Alienation from Others

Similar to the avoidance of academic work, this subtheme involves withdrawal from participants' social environment as an emotion-focused coping strategy (Alarcon et al., 2011). Avoidance and withdrawal from social contact is a commonly reported symptom of burnout (Ericson-Lidman & Strandberg, 2007; Arman et al., 2011; Putnik et al., 2011; Karl & Fischer, 2013). Ekstedt and Fagerberg (2005, p. 63) refers to participants "cutting off" from their environment and others.

The undergraduate environment can be a source of pressure as well as support, e.g., difficulties with housemates is a common source of stress (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013). It is therefore important to take account of problems with social adjustment prior to burnout and distinguish between lack of social integration from the outset and social withdrawal as a maladaptive coping strategy during the development of burnout.

Four participants seemed to establish a social network at first, but then withdrew from university friends and flatmates in response to academic stressors. One

participant (Lisa) did not experience interpersonal problems, but with hindsight realised that her protected upbringing prevented her from having relationships and doing "*normal*" things like her peers. The other three refrained from establishing social connections from the start, and their isolation was exacerbated by burnout (Helen, Peter, Sonia). These were the three participants who came to university deeply disappointed with their A-level results. I concluded their avoidance of social contact with their peers was linked to fear of judgement and low self-esteem. None of these participants had the sense of belonging and emotional support afforded by friendships, which are a significant predictor of social adjustment at university (Buote et al., 2007).

One can assume that lack of social integration contributed to the development of participants' burnout, since interpersonal difficulties with peers partially predict academic burnout (Lin & Huang, 2014) and loneliness predicts academic burnout (Stolker & Lafreniere, 2012). Furthermore, Tukaev et al. (2013), identified a link between burnout and low motivation for interpersonal cooperation, suggesting that burnout and interpersonal difficulties may be mutually reinforcing. As an example, participants lost the support of housemates when their social withdrawal strained previously positive relationships.

Participants' reluctance to disclose problems and seek help, and social withdrawal as a coping strategy, suggested pre-existing difficulties with interpersonal relationships, even where participants established friendships prior to burnout. For example, in her first year, Erin was at the centre of her social group, but her fear of being seen alone suggested a precarious sense of social acceptance. Another example is Frank, who made friends but experienced difficulties expressing and asserting himself socially. Furthermore, Sonia's disillusionment with social life at

university, and Frank's disillusionment with his peers' superficial attitudes towards the ethics of big business exemplified idealised expectations of others that can hamper undergraduate adjustment (Buote et al., 2007; Denovan & Macaskill, 2013).

5.1.2.4 The Problem With Talking

Several participants were reluctant to communicate their distress to others and could not express their need for emotional support, which contributed to the escalation of their distress. Their experience corresponds with the literature: less effective social strategies and difficulty dealing with social situations at university are predictors of burnout (Salmela-Aro et al., 2011).

Some participants did not have social support and did not access the university support services either, and whilst Amy requested help from her academic mentor, she declined seeing a counsellor. Their behaviour contradicts research by Julal (2016), according to which students' perception of the social support available to them at the start of the academic year was correlated with their use of university support services: if social support was perceived as lower, then the use of support services was higher, and vice versa. The most likely explanation for this difference between the literature and my findings is the stigma that mental health problems and psychotherapeutic help carried in the cultural milieus of the participants in question At the time of the interview, they acknowledged the potential benefits of counselling but were still not willing to seek counselling themselves.

Whilst Karl and Fischer (2013) strongly advocate communication to prevent and treat burnout and prevent relapse after recovery, traditional models of support may not meet the needs of certain student populations. Alternative approaches to service provision based on other forms of communication may be required to reach them. It

is also possible that the barrier to help-seeking is not an aversion to talking therapy per se, but the format or context of service delivery. I noticed that five participants, including those suspicious of counselling, mentioned their appreciation of the opportunity to talk to someone in a contained and confidential setting.

> I got that motivation to ask for help and I've got things off my chest (Sonia: 1031-1032).

> Like I said, me being here helps me to actually understand --- I'm trying to just understand myself, so, in a way I'm… I would say I'm using you (Frank: 762-765).

> That was so interesting, I mean, it's one thing to talk to a counsellor about it, but you know, no-one really gets it (Helen: 868-870).

5.1.3 Finding a Way Out Through Personal Growth

Overcoming burnout involved *Growing Self-Understanding*, *Cultivating Support* and *Developing Self-Regulation*.

Recent perspectives on general burnout tend to emphasise the interplay between environmental and personality factors (Heinemann & Heinemann, 2017; Maslach, 2003; Schaufeli et al., 2009). By contrast, literature on academic burnout has focused primarily on personal factors in the development of student burnout (Zhang et al., 2007; Charkhabi et al., 2013; Duru et al., 2014; Lin & Huang, 2014).

Compared with the latter, the findings of this study reflect a more complex interplay between personal and environmental factors. Amy was the only participant who associated her burnout with purely personal factors. The accounts of the other participants conveyed a sense of burnout arising in the interplay between personal,

familial and wider social factors. At the same time, participants saw their struggle to juggle competing priorities and making the academic transition as individual and personal, rather than shortcomings in their academic or wider undergraduate environment. Even though three participants mentioned negative experiences of their academic environment: an overwhelming workload (Sonia), intimidating lecturers (Sonia) and indifferent lecturers (Frank), they still assumed responsibility for their responses to these challenges. However, they also described the role of situational factors in the development of their burnout, most commonly the emotional impact of troubled relationships with their parents. Examples include constant criticism from parents (Erin), uncompromising paternal expectations (Frank), parental indifference (Helen), maternal mental illness (Lisa), parental rejection (Peter), permanent severance of contact with family (Sam) and traumatic interpersonal experiences (Sonia).

Despite the role of situational factors in the development of student burnout, recovery from burnout had a strong personal focus, in the sense that it was represented by personal and interpersonal change and growth in the form of increasing self-understanding, relational change and self-regulation. Participants did not mention any *changes* in their academic, social or family environment, independent of their own participation, as a condition for or contributor to recovery.

Nevertheless, the external environment played a crucially *supportive* role in participants' recovery from burnout. Firstly, all participants described an intervention from outside that prompted the start of their recovery, and secondly, all participants gave social and/or professional support a central role in their recovery from burnout, as discussed in more detail below.

In the absence of existing literature on recovery from student burnout, the findings on overcoming burnout provide valuable insight into potential avenues for self-help, professional intervention and support of burnout sufferers.

5.1.3.1 Turning Point

All participants reached a moment that served as a catalyst for change and represented a turning of the tide from burnout to recovery. Similar moments are described by phenomenological studies on general burnout from an insider's perspective, using metaphors to capture these turning points, for example, "being forced to surrender in the battle of managing" (Gustafsson et al., 2008), and "reaching the bottom line" (Ekstedt & Fagerberg, 2005). This "bottom line", characterised by acceptance, stopping the struggle and letting go, is similar to Peter saying:

> "I need to drop the fantasy of being a doctor, and with that, actually, drop the idea of having to please my parents --- I just had to process… DROP… Drop this." (Peter: 682-686).

Arman et al., (2011) call such a turning point "the collapse", describing it as a "crossroads" where "the person realises that his/her condition has passed a limit". Similarly, studies by Putnik et al. (2011) and Ericson-Lidman and Strandberg (2007) refer to a "breaking point" and "falling apart" (ibid.). The idea of passing a limit corresponds with the experience of those participants who were confronted with the negative impact of their erratic behaviour or social withdrawal. Frank's crossroads was the ultimatum from his girlfriend to continue with his studies if he wanted a future with her. The metaphor "breaking point" evokes Sam's breakdown as a consequence of overcommitment. According to Karl and Fischer (2013), emotional symptoms of

burnout can also include "thoughts of running away or committing suicide", which corresponds with Lisa' suicide attempt.

The above studies focused on general burnout and did not mention the part that others might have played in these turning points. The findings of my study, however, draw attention to the pivotal role of intervention by others, whether a lecturer, peers, parent or medical practitioner. None of the participants reached a turning point on their own, they all needed someone to notice the signs of their distress and confront them with their situation.

One of the implications of this finding is that mental health professionals, university staff and medical professionals, in short, anyone who have direct contact with students, should know the signs and symptoms of student burnout. Furthermore, students themselves should be educated about academic burnout to detect and intercept the escalation of burnout. Four participants mentioned that my research was their first introduction to the concept of academic burnout; they wanted to participate precisely because they recognised themselves in the brief description of burnout provided in the call for participants.

5.1.3.2 Growing Self-Understanding

The second subtheme in overcoming burnout is increased self-understanding. For the purpose of this discussion, I want to draw a distinction between self-awareness and self-understanding, where self-awareness refers to the ability to notice aspects of one's experience in the moment, such as thoughts, emotions and behaviour, and self-understanding refers to the ability to make sense of one's experience, including one's engagement with the world and other people, over time.

Increased self-awareness and self-understanding offer protection against burnout by facilitating the development of more constructive coping strategies (Gupta et al., 2010). Closely related to self-awareness, self-reflection has protective value too. Holdsworth et al. (2017) found perspective, consisting of goal setting and self-reflection, to be a very strong attribute of resilience in first-year students, especially self-reflection.

It therefore makes sense that participants' *lack* of self-awareness and self-understanding contributed to the development of their burnout. This conclusion is supported by Lin and Huang's (2014) finding that poor self-awareness, as a component of personal identity, partially predicts academic burnout.

In the midst of burnout, participants' perspective on their experience was compromised: they seemed unaware of their psychological state and behaviour and the conditions that held them captive in a state of distress. This is not surprising, since one of the symptoms of burnout is deterioration of cognitive function. Burnout sufferers become oblivious to their condition and unable to identify and communicate their needs to others (Karl & Fischer, 2013). This might explain why all my participants needed outside intervention to bring about a turning point.

The findings highlight the role of self-understanding in overcoming student burnout. Karl and Fischer (2013) recommend the development of self-understanding as an intervention that helps burnout sufferers reframe the experiences that contributed to their burnout. With the exception of Lin and Huang's (2014) study, the existing literature on self-awareness all focused on general burnout. This study complements previous studies by showing that growing self-understanding can play a pivotal role in overcoming student burnout too. The findings draw attention to the changes that came about when participants gained more understanding of the attitudes and

behavioural patterns that contributed to their burnout. For example, Sam gained understanding of the triggers and symptoms of what he called his "cycle of anxiety". This knowledge empowered him to intercept escalating symptoms and offered protection against future burnout. Likewise, participants who gained insight into their learning habits and preferences were able to reframe their understanding of why they struggled with academic work and how they needed to adapt their learning approach.

5.1.3.3 Cultivating Support

Overcoming burnout also involved an increase in participants' sources of social support. Some participants repaired strained relationships, others established new connections and overall, they became more willing to share concerns and seek professional help.

The literature confirms that social support provides protection against burnout. Accepting interdependence and seeking support when needed provide powerful protection against general burnout (Gustafsson & Strandberg, 2009) and a robust social and emotional support network is important for the well-being, adjustment and resilience of undergraduate students (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013; Macaskill, 2013; Rahat & İlhan, 2016; Holdsworth et al., 2017).

This study shows that social support is not only important in preventing burnout but also instrumental in overcoming burnout. The Conservation of Resources theory (Alarcon et al., 2011) provides a useful framework for understanding the value of social support. In terms of this theory, participants created more resources in their environment by investing in social support, which encouraged positive emotions and positive coping. In other words, social support did not only provide participants with

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an outlet for difficult emotions, but also alternative paths for coping with stressful situations.

5.1.3.4 Developing Self-Regulation

In contrast with the helplessness participants experienced during burnout, overcoming burnout was characterised by a growing sense of autonomy in their academic work, an increased ability to manage their thoughts, emotions and behaviour, and the creation of meaning from their studies and purpose for the future.

By gaining insight into their learning preferences and strengths and developing a more structured approach to studying, Amy, Lisa and Peter developed the ability to work on their own, assume responsibility for planning their studies and persevere in the face of difficulties. These are all aspects of autonomous learning as defined by Macaskill and Taylor (2010). Participants' increased autonomy included increased self-efficacy, as seen in Lisa's belief that she would succeed when faced with a challenging task and her novel strategies for overcoming obstacles related to dyslexia (see Charkhabi et al., 2013).

Self-esteem and self-efficacy are ingredients for autonomous learning (Macaskill & Denovan, 2013). Noticeably, all three participants had supportive encounters with academic staff that boosted their self-confidence around the start of their recovery. Participants' self-efficacy appeared to be self-reinforcing, which is not surprising if one considers the cognitive perspective on stress, according to which the outcome of one stressful situation, whether positive or negative, influences the appraisal and management of subsequent stressful situations (Everly & Lating, 2013). As participants' new approaches to learning and managing responsibilities yielded

positive results, they gained self-esteem and self-belief: "*I'm being an active student, I'm going to be okay.*" (Amy: 309-311).

The second dimension of participants' growing self-regulation can be understood as the concept of dispositional self-control, i.e. the ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts and behaviours and resources (e.g. time) in the face of challenging situations and environments (Duru, Duru & Balkis, 2014). Erin's prayer and Frank's fencing were both strategies with a meditative quality that brought calmness to their thoughts and feelings. Time management training alleviated some of Sam's anxiety by teaching him how to juggle multiple responsibilities.

Sam received mindfulness training and persevered with regular practice but admitted that he found it hard and still felt very anxious at times. Research on the effectiveness of mindfulness training in reducing stress in undergraduate students is sparse and inconclusive. A randomised control study of mindfulness training for stress management in medical and psychology students found no statistically significant effect on student burnout, and only female students experienced significant effect on mental distress, study stress and well-being (de Vibe, Solhaug, Tyssen, Friborg, Rosenvinge, Sørlie, & Bjørndal, 2013).

The third dimension of self-regulation was the development of meaning and purpose. Several studies found a positive correlation between concerns about future career prospects and academic burnout (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Tukaev et al., 2013; Lin & Huang, 2014). The findings suggest that the reverse also applies: alleviating concerns about future prospects contributed to recovery from burnout. Resolving uncertainty about career direction (Erin, Peter, Sonia) and securing a future job offer (Helen) contributed to participants' re-engagement with their course.

The literature suggests that general burnout can occur when the individual fails to derive meaning in life through their work, and conversely, that resilience is associated with a sense that life is meaningful (Gustafsson & Strandberg, 2009; Malach Pines, 2000; 20002a; 2002b). According to the findings, this also applies to academic burnout.

Whilst Frank perceived his course as meaningless, he was motivated to continue for the sake of developing self-discipline and perseverance that would stand him in good stead when he continued post-graduate studies. Frank's attitude is reminiscent of the pro-setback dimension of Confucian coping, which regards adversity or stress as an opportunity to develop traits and abilities conducive to future success. Po-setback thinking is also associated with lower depression and anxiety (Lihua, Gui, Yanghua, Liqiong, & Jian, 2017).

As Helen, Peter and Sonia reframed the meaning of their course from dreaded pressure to future purpose, they experienced a shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. Their experience is supported by Ortega-Maldonado and Salanova (2017), who found that meaning-focused coping strategies such as acceptance, positive reframing and adapting goals might enable a student to persevere in meeting academic challenges by increasing their psychological capital.

5.2 CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE METHODOLOGY

5.2.1 Sampling Strategy

In keeping with the guidance for IPA (Smith et al., 2009), purposive sampling was employed to create a homogeneous sample of eight participants based on the selection criteria described in Chapter 3. The sample was sufficiently homogeneous to enable a detailed exploration of burnout and recovery and develop consistent

themes across all participants. At the same time, the sample showed diversity within the boundaries of the selection criteria, most notably with respect to gender, country of origin, race, ethnicity and culture. This diversity was serendipitous in the sense that it contributed to the development of a rich picture of the features of burnout and recovery (see Ritchie et al., 2014).

The demographic profile of the sample raises questions that warrant further investigation. Firstly, the sample represented six countries of origin, seven minority ethnic groups and eight different cultures. To some extent the sample reflected the diverse student populations of three of the four universities in question, but even then, the presence and manifestation of student burnout in different ethnic and cultural groups needs further investigation.

Secondly, the parents of five participants did not have a university education. More understanding is needed of the relationship between parental education and burnout, and the role of parental education in the support they provide during the student's transition to university.

Of the eight participants, six were still at university and two were graduates in paid employment. Even then, the themes between the two groups were consistent.

The sample size of eight was the maximum I planned to recruit. It would have been hard to retain idiographic depth with a larger dataset.

5.2.2 OLBI student burnout measure

The OLBI student burnout measure served its purpose to confirm participant self-diagnosis. All participants had a moderate to severe burnout score on the two dimensions of exhaustion and disengagement. It could be argued that the use of a burnout measure undermined respect for the primacy of my participants' experience.

On the other hand, counselling psychology does not to automatically give precedence to one form of knowing over another (Orlans and Van Scoyoc, 2008). In this instance, screening with the OLBI enhanced the rigour of selecting a homogeneous sample on the core criterion of having suffered burnout.

I did not reveal the burnout scores to participants, although I was ready to do so if a participant asked. However, no-one expressed any interest and I did not observe any signs that the completion of the questionnaire impacted on the experience participants shared with me in the interviews..

5.2.3 Semi-structured interviews

A semi-structured interview format was well suited to the aims of the study and nature of the research question. I kept the interview guide simple and open to give participants ample space to tell their story. At the same time the format allowed me to re-focus the interview or prompt participants when needed and to pursue potentially fruitful avenues in more depth.

Despite marked differences in social identity, which I discuss in section 5.3.2, my experience as student counsellor helped me to quickly establish rapport and encourage participants to reflect openly on their experience. As mentioned before, several participants commented on the benefits of participation, for example, it helped Erin and Frank to make sense of their experience. The potential of a research interview to enrich and provide new insights for participants is noted by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009).

During transcription of the interviews, I noticed aspects of participants' accounts I would have liked to explore in more depth, but this would not have been possible

within the time available, even if I had thought about it at the time. Nevertheless, I believe the interviews yielded rich data with valuable nuances.

I paid attention to the lexical aspect of the interviews (see Willig, 2013) during the actual interviews and subsequent transcription. The participants differed widely in their range of vocabulary, ability to put their thoughts and feelings into words, and non-verbal communication. The younger participants used student lexicon to varying degrees and some spoke very fast, hence I worked hard to follow and clarify their meaning without interrupting the flow of the interview. Some accounts were thoughtful and coherent, whereas other participants jumped back and forth in time and constantly interrupted their own trail of thought. Several participants were bi-lingual or multi-lingual, with English as their everyday language, but brought up in a different mother tongue. I noticed that participants who used a narrower vocabulary tended to employ more non-verbal cues, to which I attended closely. Through summary, reflection and clarification, along with questions and prompts, I strived to help participants articulate their feelings and thoughts. Against expectations, I noticed how linguistically less sophisticated accounts sometimes captured emotion most powerfully through non-verbal gestures and expressions, which I recorded in the transcripts.

5.2.4 IPA

I am satisfied with my choice of a phenomenological enquiry and IPA. Exploring the lived experience of recovering from burnout from a first-person perspective gave a voice to each participant. It also enhanced the contribution of this study to the literature, in the sense that the findings contain nuances of student burnout and recovery I have not encountered in the literature so far. Aspects of participants' experiences have also challenged my earlier assumptions about burnout. I believe

IPA's retention of idiographic features enriched the findings. Within the consistent, overarching themes, the data yielded much variation and strong identities in terms of the embodied, situated and idiosyncratic features of each participant's voice and experience. IPA also allowed me to identify relationships between the themes to create the sense of burnout and recovery as an unfolding narrative within a unique personal context.

IPA's reliance on interpretation is arguably a strength as well as a limitation. On the one hand, interpretation enables the researcher to develop understandings that is not available through other methods. On the other hand, managing the impact of the researcher to illuminate the participant's experience requires diligence and skill. In the words of Larkin et al. (2006, p. 103), "As with so many qualitative methods, IPA can be easy to do badly, and difficult to do well: it demands that a number of rather testing 'balancing acts' are maintained by the researcher." Throughout the research process, but especially during data analysis, I was consciously trying to balance an empathic stance of trying to understand what burnout and recovery was like for participants, with a more critical stance needed to develop a more interpretative account of the participant's experience, moving beyond description to position their experience in a wider social and cultural context. I believe the practice of reflexivity, the practice of the hermeneutic circle during analysis, and the involvement of a co-researcher to test my analysis all contributed to the quality of the process.

Further limitations of IPA are discussed in section 5.5.

5.3 POSITIONALITY OF THE RESEARCHER

As explained in Chapter 3, IPA assumes that the researcher influences and shapes every aspect of the research process and findings. The practice of reflexivity is an

important strategy for managing the researcher's impact and thereby enhancing the quality of the research. One dimension of the researcher's impact is their positionality in relation to the research, in terms of personal characteristics such as gender, race, age, sexual orientation, immigration status, linguistic tradition, knowledge, values, biases, preferences, professional and political beliefs, personal experiences, and emotional responses to the participant (Berger, 2015). In this section, I aim to enhance the transparency of my study by reflecting on the influence my positionality as researcher had on the research process and participants, and how my personal characteristics influenced my interactions with my research participants.

5.3.1 In relation to the research topic

The study was influenced by my personal experience of burnout and my prior knowledge and beliefs about the topic. At first, I saw my position in relation to the research topic as that of an insider. The initial formulation of the question was focused on burnout in middle management, based on my experiences of working in a corporate environment. This experience informed my assumptions of burnout as the consequence of prolonged stress resulting from intense effort, long work hours, ambition and perfectionism in a high-pressure environment. I envisaged recovery as a struggle to let go of excessive ambition and perfectionism.

When the focus of the study shifted to academic burnout, I assumed that burnout would result from a similar intense effort in an academic environment and did not proactively consider alternative possibilities. I also did not appreciate the change in my positionality; that I was in some respects still an insider, but in others had become an outsider because I was familiar with general burnout, not academic burnout. Berger (2015) warns that an insider position can help the researcher shape

the interview with appropriate questions, but also carries the risk that the researcher might impose their own beliefs of the participant's reality and overlook important differences. In this instance, I believed myself to be an insider, having lost sight of the differences between me and my participants, such as stage of life, motivation to work and study, and burnout in a work versus academic environment.

As it happened, the first interview reinforced the preconceptions I held at the time. However, by serendipitous chance, the next interview produced a dramatically different experience of the phenomenon - even though Erin scored highly on the burnout measure - and disrupted all my presuppositions. I was reminded of Willig's (2012) argument that it is not possible to fully bracket preconceptions and assumptions; they only emerge as the researcher tries to understand the phenomenon. Having my preconceptions challenged helped me work on my "negative capability" (Kasket, 2012, p. 65) in terms of tolerating uncertainty and trying to remain open and receptive to new understandings of burnout and recovery.

As the interviews progressed, I came to appreciate that burnout and recovery was more complex and varied than my initial assumptions allowed. Intense effort was not a prerequisite for burnout and the trajectory of recovery depended on the individual's context and circumstances. As discussed before, I saw "classic" burnout (see Farber, 2000, p. 675) in only one of the eight participants. The others experienced burnout as "wearout".

5.3.2 In relation to the research process and participants

The research process is potentially impacted by the identities of both researcher and participants (Bourke, 2014). Several aspects of my personal and professional identity became figural at different times during the conduct of this study.

An advantage of my professional experience of therapeutic practice was sensitisation to ethical risks and issues, especially in my interaction with participants and other areas of the research that impacted directly or indirectly on the participants. I drew on my experience as a student counsellor to build rapport and put participants at ease. With every interview I was more comfortable with the balance between keeping the purpose of the interview in sight and giving the participant some autonomy to bring what was relevant and important to them, thereby allowing room for unexpected material to emerge. Having said that, ingrained aspects of therapeutic practice such as my non-directive stance made it harder to guide the interviews at times.

Just as the researcher brings personal, social and cultural identities to the interview, so does the participant, and the meeting of these identities shape the nature of the researcher-participant relationship. As a middle aged, white woman with a foreign accent who represented a certain socio-economic background, I was aware of the differences as well as shared experience and similarities specific to each interaction.

I knew my pre-knowledge, worldview and social and cultural identity shaped the way in which I used language, asked questions and responded to participants (see Berger, 2015). My sense of the relationship was influenced by multiple dimensions of identity. These include being an older woman with younger female and male participants, a postgraduate student with undergraduate students, and a White immigrant with African, Caribbean and Asian immigrants.

Personal characteristics may also contribute to a power imbalance (Berger, 2015). In this study, I was significantly older than the participants, with a higher academic status and potentially a more privileged socio-economic background than some of the participants. However, I was also mindful that identities play a role not only in

terms of our perception of the other, but also in terms of how we expect the other perceives us (Bourke, 2014). Any power imbalance was therefore construed from my perspective; I could not know how participants perceived me or the differences between us. I might have been experienced as a benign older woman, a teacher or parental figure they felt able to talk to.

Bourke (2014) recommends that the researcher discusses their positionality with each participant to dispel potential myths about the other's perspective. Whilst I would have brought up differences with a client in therapy, I refrained from doing it in the research interviews for fear of challenging participants too much, thereby abusing my power as researcher. However, in retrospect I can see the potential benefit of doing this, especially because my assumptions could only be based on overt differences in physical, social and cultural attributes with no access to more personal, individual factors.

My position as 'insider' with regards to burnout was not known to participants and therefore one of the risks related to shared experience, i.e. that participants might withhold information they assume is obvious to the researcher, did not seem relevant (see Berger, 2015).

5.4 REVIEW OF ETHICAL ISSUES

5.4.1 Disclosure of Sensitive Issues

A common ethical dilemma in qualitative research is the tension between a probing interview that elicits rich data and the researcher's ethical responsibility for not harming their participants (Kvale & Brinkmann (2009). I was aware that my aim to delve into participants' experience, combined with the rapport established in the interviews might encourage participants to reveal information they might afterwards

regret sharing (Willig, 2013), or to talk about issues that are too complex or sensitive to be safely contained within the boundaries of the researcher-participant relationship (McLeod, 2001). In a similar consideration of the ethics of trust and sharing, Mann (2016) describes how a participant allowed him to look "behind the scenes" and how he pro-actively offered and chose not to use the information on ethical grounds, as part of establishing and honouring the participant's trust.

Early in Sonia's interview the following exchange took place:

> Researcher: So that must have been quite difficult, because your mother and father, they haven't studied at university and your brother only started this year, so you went to university and suddenly everybody was focused on you, and you couldn't say "actually I'm struggling".

> Sonia: I couldn't say, but I think [giggle], I think I'm getting deep into everything now.

> Researcher: Are you OK to talk about it? [I felt I needed to check but didn't know what 'deep' referred to].

> Sonia: I'm fine, yeah, because I don't really have the opportunity to kind of talk about things in this way (Sonia: 40-52).

Sonia then proceeded to tell me about losing her older sister when she was 12 and trying to live up to others' expectations of her sister. This seemed appropriate to share and related to her burnout experience. However, later in the interview, when recounting her experience of burnout, she described how she had visited her GP with a memory problem and found herself partially sharing an issue she had never disclosed to anyone before. I intuited this was a highly sensitive issue and guessed

there was a risk she might tell me more, given her earlier comment about the opportunity to talk and the rapport between us. In accordance with the ethical principle of beneficence (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) I needed to respond in a way that would reduce the risk of harm. I was convinced that talking about this issue would result in over-disclosure, so I steered the interview in another direction.

On the other hand, when Lisa revealed her suicide attempt, I was not concerned about over-disclosure.

> Lisa: Okay, so I took an overdose.
>
> Researcher: Do you mind talking about that?
>
> Lisa: No, no, no, not at all, I've had years of therapy (Lisa: 638-641).

In this instance, I knew that Lisa was an older participant with some distance between her and the event, for which she had received psychological support. I wanted to continue with the exploration because the overdose represented the culmination of Lisa's burnout and knowing what happened next was relevant to understanding how Lisa overcame burnout. At the same time, I did not probe into the suicide attempt itself, because it was not relevant to the aims of the research.

Throughout the interviews I was ready to check a participant's willingness to continue if a difficult moment arose. I was also mindful of the participant's right to choose that recorded data should be omitted and destroyed (King & Horrocks, 2010). This became relevant when Sonia said: *"…I don't want to be quoted on it, but I'll say something…" (Sonia: 686-687)*. I respected her wish not to be quoted by omitting her statement from the transcript and therefore from the findings.

5.4.2 Balance of Power

Section 5.3.2 touched on the question of power, which is discussed in more depth here.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) suggest the power asymmetry inherent in the researcher-participant relationship derives from the researcher's knowledge about the subject and their control over the parameters and conduct of the interview, and the researcher's monopoly of interpretation. I recognised that I was in the more powerful position with regards to these factors. However, participants also held power in the sense that they could, for example, withhold information, be evasive or even give a false account, or withdraw from the study. Langdridge (2007) warns against overestimating the risk of harm to participants and McLeod (2001) argues that participants have the option to protect themselves against intrusive questions by, for example, giving evasive or superficial answers. McLeod (2001) also proposes that a well-conducted interview could be a rewarding experience that brings helpful insights to participants.

Even though I was shaping the interview to pursue my research aims, I did not have a hidden agenda and refrained from steering the interviews in directions that participants were reluctant to follow. I was also sensitive to participants' responses in the interviews and watched out for signs that the participant was affected by the interaction between us. When Frank seemed annoyed with one of my questions, I enquired about his response. It transpired that I had misread his body language, but my enquiry encouraged him to share his difficulty with articulating his feelings.

Two of the male participants, Frank and Sam, were more measured and reserved than the others, but they were still very willing to talk about their experience. A few participants spontaneously shared difficult experiences with an ease that did not

indicate discomfort or potential damaging consequences, and several participants mentioned the benefit they had derived from the interview. According to Berger (2015), participants will share their experiences with a researcher whom they perceive as empathic. Moreover, the level of engagement from all participants suggested that they did not feel manipulated or inhibited.

> And I did enjoy it because --- I thought I could say anything to you (Erin: 1151-1158).

5.4.3 Interpretation

Willig (2012) cautions that a responsible researcher takes care with interpreting the experience and behaviour of participants from different social groups and cultures and recognises the limitations of their interpretation. My experience of working in an undergraduate environment as a mental health mentor and counsellor gave me a basic understanding of the context of my research, but also an awareness that many aspects of my participants' frames of reference were not accessible to me.

Reflexivity helped me keep my own position and preconceptions in sight during analysis and recognise my responsibility for creating and communicating a particular "version of social reality" through my interpretation (King & Horrocks, 2010). By exploring the literature, I deepened my theoretical understanding of interpretation to help me grasp the implications of what I was doing. Throughout the analysis of the data, I strived to achieve a balance between empathic and critical interpretation as described in Chapter 3.

5.4.4 Impact of Pre-knowledge

In the call for participants I included the following definition of burnout to help potential participants screen themselves.

Students who suffer from burnout typically feel mentally, emotionally and physically exhausted by academic work. They lose interest in their studies, feel disengaged and may doubt the point of continuing with their studies.

I assumed this pre-knowledge might have some impact on how participants chose to talk about their experiences, but I could not gauge the impact of the advertisement from the interviews. A few participants used the term 'burnout' once, in relation to the advertisement. They did not refer to the dimensions of student burnout. I was careful not to impose the concept on the interviews and refrained from using the term as much as possible to leave more room for the participant's own voice.

5.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Some limitations identified below are implied by the choice of a qualitative approach and IPA, whereas others are related to the conduct of the research.

Phenomenological research does not seek or provide the kind of explanations that studies exploring causal relationships do. However, IPA allowed me to elicit an understanding of the forces that contributed to the development of participants' burnout, and the influences that supported their recovery, through exploring their sense-making, without pre-empting their reasons or asking explicit questions (see Willig, 2013).

The small purposive sample was not statistically representative of the population from which I drew the sample and the aim of the study was not to produce findings that can be generalised on a statistical basis. However, Lewis, Ritchie, Ormston and Morrell (2014) argue that qualitative research reveals a map of the breadth and nature of the phenomenon under investigation that can be generalised to the parent population. So, from this perspective, my study provides a conceptual framework for

understanding further individual variations within the parent population. Furthermore, by dovetailing sampling of IPA studies to previous studies, it would be possible to construct a picture for larger populations (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA produces data about human experience and therefore relies on and is limited by the ability of research participants to "reflectively discern aspects of their own experience and to effectively communicate what they discern through the symbols of language" (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 138). Willig (2013) argues that "language constructs, rather than describes" experience, and that the resulting data represents the way a participant talks about their experience, rather than the experience itself. At the same time, the use of semi-structured interviews contributes to capturing the fullness and variations of experience.

The extent to which a study it is accepted by a wider audience depends on the stakeholder's philosophical stance. Potential stakeholders working in the health and social sciences may give less weight to the findings of a phenomenological inquiry than to studies that aim to establish causal relationships or allow for statistical generalisation to a wider population. Arguably, the rigour of a qualitative study is also more difficult to assess and assert.

Understandings are co-created during the interview. Hence they are dependent upon and limited by the unique relationship and interaction between researcher and participant, as discussed in section 5.3.2 above.

Participation was voluntary, which means individuals who chose to take part may have shared characteristics different to those who did not come forward. Some individuals may be reluctant to reveal a history of burnout for personal or future professional reasons, and some may regard burnout as a failure or weakness.

Moreover, my participants were recruited from universities in Greater London with high ethnic minority populations, as was evident in the sample.

5.6 RELEVANCE AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE FINDINGS

Professional practice in counselling psychology encompasses not only "many different kinds of psychotherapy with diverse populations across a wide variety of settings", but also "management/leadership, supervision, assessment, training, research, writing, policy development, social justice work, and community intervention." (Kasket, 2012, p. 65). As such, counselling psychology encompasses multiple roles and hence shares several competencies with the field of psychotherapy (e.g. psychotherapeutic theory and practice) and with other professional domains, such as clinical psychology (e.g. academic psychological knowledge). Given the wide ranging professional span of counselling psychology, Orlans and Van Scoyoc (2008) argue that the scope of the knowledge underpinning the profession needs to be equally extensive.

The Quality Assurance Agency (2008) expects candidates for professional doctorates to produce a contribution to professional knowledge and practice. Here I address this requirement by evaluating the findings in terms of its contribution to the theory and practice of counselling psychology. Even though some of the theoretical and practical significance of the findings discussed here are aimed at counselling psychology, they will also have relevance for psychotherapy and related fields.

5.6.1 Contribution to Counselling Psychology Theory and Practice

The findings show how individuals overcame burnout through changes in their coping strategies, self-awareness, self-understanding, ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour, ability to disclose problems and gain support from

interpersonal relationships. These are highly appropriate goals and concerns for psychotherapy and point to the part counselling psychologists might play in the prevention and recovery from academic burnout.. Three participants who suffered severe symptoms of anxiety (Helen, Lisa and Sam) received and found therapeutic support instrumental in their recovery.

The findings also draw attention to the importance of a positive attitude towards help-seeking in preventing burnout. Furthermore, the findings offer a basis from which precautionary measures and intervention strategies can be developed, and finally, it offers ideas for future research. Counselling psychologists can use the contribution of this study to directly and indirectly influence the design and delivery of interventions promoting the psychological well-being of students and draw on it for future research.

I use six counselling psychology values, drawn together from a range of texts by Cooper (2009), as a framework for discussing the relevance of the findings to counselling psychology. Cooper regards counselling psychology as an application of these values, which briefly are: a prioritisation of the individual's subjective and intersubjective experience; an appreciation of the individual as a unique being; an understanding of the person as embedded in the social and relational context; a focus on facilitating growth; an intention to empower; and finally, a commitment to a democratic, non-hierarchical relationship.

A prioritisation of the individual's subjective and intersubjective experience

Even though all participants recognised themselves in the description of the two-dimensional construct comprising exhaustion and disengagement, and the OLBI-SS burnout measure was useful to enhance the validity of the study, the findings also

highlight that current theoretical descriptions and definitions of burnout do not represent the full and complex subjective experience of student burnout. Furthermore, first-person experiences of student burnout are markedly absent from the current literature. Hence, the findings offer a valuable insight into the subjective, lived experience of the inner turmoil that embodies burnout and draw attention to the role of high anxiety with its associated risks (panic attacks, suicide attempts), social withdrawal and a paralysing inner conflict.

As such, the findings offer counselling psychologists a conceptual map for exploring a client's world in terms of their vulnerability to burnout, what perpetuates burnout and ways of overcoming the state of burnout. The subjective experience of burnout needs to be acknowledged and included in the picture counselling psychologists have of academic burnout, as a basis for practice and research.

The study also draws attention to the central role and importance of intersubjective experience in the onset, perpetuation, interruption and resolution of burnout. It shows that burnout needs to be understood in its relational context, that the experience of self as a student in relation to academic progress and performance is mutually influenced by the experience of self in relation to other students, teachers, mentors and family members.

Intersubjective factors such as comparison with others, shame and loss of confidence arising from failure and falling behind peers, withdrawal from others, resistance to sharing distress and fear of authority figures all influenced the development of mental and emotional distress. Relational issues within the family environment leading to low self-worth, and behaviours aimed at gaining parental approval also fed into the development of burnout. At the same time, supportive

relationships, whether with lecturers, mentors, counsellors, parents or peers in the social environment made a vital contribution to recovery from burnout.

An appreciation of the individual as a unique being

This value of counselling psychology underscores the validity of first person accounts. This IPA study contributes a unique idiographic perspective on burnout and recovery, which identifies common features but also conveys the richness, diversity and complexity of individual experiences. It is useful for practitioners providing psychological support to undergraduate students to understand not only the academic risk factors but also the unique confluence of circumstantial and personal factors that contribute to the individual's vulnerability to student burnout.

An understanding of the person as embedded in a social and relational context and a striving to demonstrate anti-discriminatory practices appropriate to the pluralistic nature of present society

The findings draw attention to the impact of participants' social and relational context, showing how it could inform unhelpful coping strategies and add to the rationale for current research on developing resilience and positive coping in undergraduate students. Moreover, the findings show how ignorance about counselling (Erin confused it with psychiatry) and negative cultural attitudes towards mental health and illness resulted in unsustainable self-reliance and resistance to help-seeking.

Whilst some participants were ambivalent about counselling, they were very forthcoming in the interview. Afterwards, they all referred to the benefit of talking to me, which suggests they were suitable candidates for counselling. From this I conclude there is a clear role for psycho-education to change negative perceptions

about mental health issues and traditional psychological support. However, many students may not engage with psycho-education and one cannot assume that traditional counselling is better than alternative forms of support. Respecting the diverse nature of the student population requires a pluralistic approach to providing psychological support that gives student choice and speaks to their differing needs and preferred ways of resolving emotional and psychological concerns.

Bearing in mind the rising financial pressures on universities and the overstretching of university counselling service resources, I propose that counselling psychology has a role to play in developing alternative forms of psychological support that will complement rather than increase the existing burden on university counselling services.

As a measure to prevent burnout in counsellors, Lambie (2006) conducted supervision to explore supervisees' personal meaning and life stressors. Drawing on this idea, I propose that supervision could also be employed to prevent academic burnout. Whereas tutorials and lectures focus on course content, counselling psychologists might develop a brief course of small group supervision sessions that cover a range of topics related to students' learning experience. Topics might include, for example, the personal meaning of their studies, their attitude and approach to learning, sources of stress, their coping strategies, and attitudes to help-seeking. In a sense, such supervision sessions would encompass elements of psychological support, psycho-education and academic support and might reach students who need more nuanced support than pure academic skills training.

These topics could also be turned into an online course made available, for example, through the university's counselling services, or as information distributed through the university's website or general online student forums.

The findings also draw attention to the difference between general and academic burnout. So far, the bulk of research on burnout, and nearly all the early research that shaped the concept of burnout and fed into the development of burnout measures, has been conducted on general burnout. The concept of academic burnout is derived from the concept of general burnout and the measuring instruments for general burnout also provided the basis for developing measures for student burnout.

Academic burnout and general burnout have much in common, such as the conflict between perceived demands and perceived resources, concerns with performance, lack of interest and motivation, potential for juggling multiple roles, lack of awareness during the height of their distress, and an inability to break out of distress. At the same time, working adults find themselves in a different life stage to undergraduate students. They have typically made the physical, cognitive and emotional transition from adolescence to young adulthood and their work environment tends to be more structured and controlled than undergraduate environments. These differences must be considered when dealing with burnout in either group.

A focus on facilitating growth and actualising potential

Following on from the previous point, the findings focus attention on the life stage transition from adolescence to adulthood that takes place in parallel with a student's educational and social transition. Counselling psychologists should pay close attention to the complexity and intensity of the mutual impact of these changes. Not surprisingly, participants' accounts of overcoming burnout conveyed a strong sense of maturation.

In the light of this, preventive measures could encourage self-awareness, emotional regulation, greater autonomy in learning, greater overall resilience and the cultivation of mutually supportive relationships. Likewise, where students already experience burnout, targeting stress directly might be less enduring and effective in the longer term than addressing transitional issues.

An intention to empower rather than control

During participant recruitment, I came across several questions about burnout across several forums on a student community website www.thestudentroom.co.uk. Several participants, typically A-level and undergraduate students, suspected they had burnout and were looking for information and advice, but the responses they received were uninformed and unhelpful. This website highlighted the potential for reaching students who could benefit from psycho-educational interventions through online channels.

Given the central role of relationships in burnout, it is unlikely that online intervention will be effective in cases of severe burnout. However, my experience provides support for the importance of current research into online interventions to address a gap in current preventive measures and an opportunity to complement face-to-face psychological support by providing information and guidance regarding next steps for students who are at risk of burnout. The findings suggest topics such as raising awareness of transitional challenges, symptoms of burnout, coping attitudes and strategies for dealing with academic difficulties and obstacles, normalising help seeking and de-stigmatising mental illness.

The recruitment process emphasised the importance of using forms of communication and distribution channels that students frequent. Seven of the eight

participants responded to the advertisement after reading the blog I used to promote my research and which I plan to use in the longer term to share information about stress, anxiety, burnout and related topics.

A commitment to a democratic, non-hierarchical relationship

In this study I gave primacy to the participant's subjective experience and during the interviews I carefully managed the power balance involved in co-creating understanding. Furthermore, this IPA study empowered participants by giving them a voice to share their first-hand experience and therefore creating the potential for their perspectives to challenge, expand and enhance existing theoretical perspectives.

5.6.2 Contribution to Existential Psychotherapy

Whilst the analysis did not aim to produce an existential reading of the data, certain existential themes were tangible in the data and would be of interest to existential psychotherapists.

Freedom, choice and responsibility. The transition to university brought greater social and academic freedom, which presented participants with more choices and more responsibilities. The burden of making choices was keenly felt by those participants who struggled to balance competing priorities. Sartre's view that we are condemned to be free (1969) captures the dilemma of participants who missed the academic direction they received in higher education and found it hard to become more autonomous as students. Their freedom gave rise to uncertainty and anxiety.

Situatedness. As embodied beings, we are situated in place and time, a social, cultural and political context, and in relation to other people. Our situatedness informs our personal perspective and therefore our perception of our situation, other people and the world in general. Hence, the possibilities and therefore solutions we

see in our situation also arise from our individual context and perspective (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). The impact of participants' 'situatedness' could be seen in the powerful role their individual family histories and circumstances played in their emotional well-being, social integration and attitudes to seeking support. It was also evident in their coping strategies, i.e. the possibilities and solutions they saw when under pressure.

Time. According to Macquarrie (1972), the dimensions of temporality is often out of balance, as we give undue emphasis to one or the other. Such an imbalance was present in some participants' preoccupation with disappointing past academic performance, which undermined their confidence and motivation at university. On the other hand, Erin was preoccupied and anxious about future career decisions. Furthermore, transition to university involves a temporal shift from further education with its focus on an immediate future, involving A-level results and entry to university, to higher education involving a future horizon with multiple possibilities and therefore uncertainties.

Meaning. The meanings of our world emerge in an active dialogue between ourselves as subjective, embodied beings and our world. *"[I] discover in this existent before me a certain nature, the notion of which I actively evolve"* (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 430). The transition to university involved changes in the meaning and purpose of participants' academic studies. During A-levels, participants like Helen, Peter and Sonia were single-mindedly focused on the results that would determine their entry to university. For some participants, the meaning of academic studies at university was not so evident. Evolving the meaning and purpose of their studies and their future became part of overcoming burnout.

Sense-of-self. *"Self-consciousness is the very being of mind in action."* (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.432). From an existential perspective, self-awareness develops through our lived, embodied existence. Our self-knowledge and self-perception are not constituted by our consciousness in isolation of the world, it develops from our direct contact with the natural world and our co-existence with others. The experience of burnout and the subsequent turning point confronted participants with the impact of their history, their concerns and coping strategies, and the way they related to others. Hence personal growth and change, and the development of an identity as a student were strong themes in overcoming burnout.

Being-with-others. The experience of existence as "being-with-others" (Macquarrie, 1972, p. 102) was evident in the role that others played in the development of participants' burnout as well as their recovery: family expectations; lack of social support; cultivation of social support; comparison with peers; and attitudes to self-disclosure and help-seeking.

5.6.3 Personal Significance for Practitioners

The insight offered by the findings are relevant to health and mental health care professionals. The high incidence of burnout in the caring professions, including counselling and psychotherapy, underlines the need for practitioners to understand and manage their risk of personal burnout as a form of self-care, which, according to professional guidelines, is an ethical responsibility (Bond, 2004; BPS, 2009; UKCP, 2009). This study could be useful to all practitioners at risk of burnout themselves.

5.6.4 Significance for Other Disciplines

Given the importance of early detection of student burnout, this study is relevant to anyone in direct contact with students, in particular: GPs and nurses at university

based practices; student counselling services and academic support services; and teaching staff in further and higher education.

As highlighted in the literature review, the student services of the universities in the sample did not recognise academic burnout on their websites, with the exception of ICL. However, they all seemed concerned with factors associated with academic burnout. This suggests a need to raise awareness within higher education institutions of the nature and risks of student burnout, including the value of informing students about the symptoms and contributors to burnout.

GPs are particularly well positioned to intercept burnout. Three participants consulted their GP about their burnout symptoms. Lisa's GP prescribed anti-depressants, which she did not find helpful. Erin's GP confronted her about the way her erratic lifestyle was damaging her health. In Erin's case, this intervention constituted a turning point. Sonia's GP sensed that her memory loss was due to anxiety and not only suggested counselling, but also enquired into her past. Albeit brief, Sonia found the experience of talking to a professional profound and although at the time she declined counselling, it broke down the stigma surrounding psychological support.

The findings also underscore the importance of interventions focused on the psycho-education of students, with an emphasis on the development of positive coping strategies and autonomy in learning (see Macaskill & Denovan, 2013; Denovan & Macaskill, 2017). Some participants were understandably focused on the race for a place at university, but the emphasis on achievement and directive learning environment that characterised their higher education did not foster the autonomous, self-directed and exploratory learning approach needed at university.

A risk factor that deserves attention is the potential of dyslexia, whether diagnosed or not, to contribute to academic burnout in students who are used to compensating for their learning disability by working harder than the average student. In this study, both participants who suffered burnout due to excessive effort had dyslexia, one diagnosed and one undiagnosed. I did not find any literature to support a significant connection between dyslexia and burnout, but excessive effort might be used as a warning sign of undiagnosed dyslexia, or if diagnosed, an indication that the student needs support in adapting their approach to learning. It is sobering to notice how the encouragement Helen received from her learning support teacher fuelled the extreme effort that led to her burnout rather than help her develop positive learning habits.

> My learning support teacher was INCREDIBLY proud of me, I mean, it was wonderful. She was, you know, astonished --- suddenly she was like "Oh my God, I'm so proud of you". It really, you know, it wanted me to keep going (Helen: 203-212).

5.7 QUALITY OF THE RESEARCH

For counselling psychology research – especially qualitative studies - to gain recognition and acceptance in the wider field of psychological inquiry, it is necessary that researchers pay attention to well-regarded quality guidelines that encourage qualitative researchers to reflect on the process and reporting of their research (Elliott et al., 1999). Employing a recognised way of evaluating the quality of research is "imperative and unavoidable" if researchers want to make claims regarding the validity and utility of their research to stakeholders (Yardley, 2000, p. 219).

I chose guidelines for evaluating the publishability of qualitative research by Elliott et al. (1999) over the quality criteria proposed by Yardley (2000). For the most part, the two sets of guidelines overlap, but those by Elliott et al. are more detailed and more explicitly compatible with the ethos and process of phenomenological research. The evaluation below broadly follows the order in which criteria are presented by Elliott et al., taking heed of their caution that their guidelines are open to interpretation and should not be implemented as a rigid checklist.

5.7.1 General Criteria

5.7.1.1 *Explicit scientific context and purpose*

The literature review situates the study in the context of relevant opinion and research literature on burnout, recovery and related issues, paying attention to debates and different perspectives on the subject.

5.7.1.2 *Appropriate methods and specification of methods*

Consistency between the researcher's philosophical stance and the methods employed is key to producing better quality work. In the chapter on methodology, I demonstrate consistency between philosophy and methods by setting out the philosophical foundations of IPA, providing a rationale for the selection of IPA as a methodology well suited to the aim of my study, and justifying the choice of purposive sampling and semi-structured interviews in the context of IPA. Mindful that the quality of the participant sample contributes to the quality of the data, I explain the rationale for homogeneity and the selection criteria to generate rich accounts of participants experiences in detail.

5.7.1.3 Respect for participants

In Chapter 3, I explain how I managed the impact of the study on the participants. I discuss ethical considerations and research process with regards to recruitment and selection of participants, the conduct of research interviews and the interpretation of participant accounts. These considerations include communication with participants, provision of information prior to gaining informed consent, and debriefing of participants after the interview.

5.7.1.4 Appropriate discussion, contribution to knowledge

In this chapter, I discuss the implication of the findings with reference to the most salient literature presented in the literature review and reflect on the relevance and contribution of the findings to counselling psychology, existential psychotherapy and other areas of professional practice.

5.7.1.5 Clarity of presentation

I also took care to organise and articulate all chapters as clearly and coherently as I could, with both research standards and potential readers in mind.

5.7.2 Criteria Pertinent to Qualitative Research

5.7.2.1 Owning one's perspective

This criterion required researcher reflexivity throughout the entire research process. In the first chapter, I declare my personal and professional interest in the research question. I explain how an interest in general burnout first arose from my experience of working in a high-pressure corporate environment, how the focus shifted to academic burnout, inspired by working with young people during psychotherapy training and my long term involvement in learning and teaching. In the same chapter I explore the impact of my multiple identities and preference for pluralism in what I

do. I look at how my experience as a psychotherapist and lecturer, and my developing identity as counselling psychologist informed my agenda and decisions about, for example, the research question and aims, and my choice of a phenomenological approach. Throughout the report, I also interrogate and challenge my values, beliefs and assumptions, and preconceptions, and I reflect on how these changed in response to carrying out the research. In Chapters 3 and 5, I pay explicit attention to reflexivity in terms of my personal impact (e.g. social identity) and the actions and decisions I took. In the concluding chapter, I consider how the research changed my initial simplistic perceptions of recovering from burnout and the burnout phenomenon itself, and how I have developed as a scientist-practitioner and reflective-practitioner.

5.7.2.2 Situating the sample

In section 4.2, I summarise the demographic profile of the eight participants. During analysis, I paid close attention to the meaning that participants made of situational factors in relation to their experience as undergraduates, which I included in the findings. In Chapter 5, I demonstrate reflexivity with regards to my social identity and the balance of power between me and my participants during interviews and during analysis, from my position as interpreter of the data. In the same chapter I consider the contribution of the findings to wider theory and practice.

5.7.2.3 Grounding in examples

I illustrate the description of the analytic process in Chapter 3 with a three-page, detailed example from one participant, tracking the analysis from initial noting on the transcript through to the final themes produced (see Appendix H). In the findings, each subtheme is supported with at least one verbatim example from each participant to whom the theme applies, and I include a master table of superordinate

themes and subthemes, each supported by examples of data from all participants linked to the theme.

5.7.2.4 Providing credibility checks

The detailed, condensed example of the analytic process from initial noting to final themes for one participant, presented in Chapter 3, provides an audit trail that allows the reader to judge the rigour of analysis for themselves. I also asked a co-researcher well versed in IPA to check the comments produced during initial noting, and the initial themes, for three of the eight transcripts, and the development of clusters, superordinate and subthemes from the initial themes across these three participants.

5.7.2.5 Coherence

Having worked and reworked the analysis by moving away, contemplating and returning to the clustering, hierarchical and relational mapping, and ongoing revision during write-up, I hope the reader will find the conceptual organisation of the findings engaging and easy to understand. The findings include a table and descriptions showing the relationships between superordinate themes and subthemes, and for one of the themes with strong links between subthemes, a diagram illustrating the links. I also support the themes with data from the transcripts.

5.7.2.6 Accomplishing general versus specific research tasks

A phenomenological study does not aim to generalise to the wider population. The purposive sampling strategy described in Chapter 3 supports IPA's aim to develop consistent themes while also retaining the richness of individual differences.

5.7.2.7 Resonating with readers

I found my encounter with my participants energising and inspiring, and I tried to capture their spirit in the analysis and presentation of the findings. As a foreign language speaker, I sometimes felt restricted in the articulation of the findings, but I hope that my presentation does justice to their experience.

6 CONCLUSION

The findings provide insight into recovery from burnout as a process of growth in self-understanding, supportive relationships and self-regulation It also sheds light on contextual factors that contributed to the development and perpetuation of the state of psychological distress and behaviours that participants associated with burnout.

6.1 ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

My study contributes to the sparse literature on the lived experience of student burnout and recovery. Previous research has shown personal and interpersonal factors such as loneliness, perfectionism and self-efficacy to be predictors of academic burnout (Charkhabi et al, 2013; Tukaev et al., 2013; Duru et al, 2014; Lin and Huang, 2014; Seibert et al., 2016). This study makes a distinctive contribution by offering a first-person perspective on the personal and circumstantial factors that left participants vulnerable to the development of academic burnout, without predefining these factors.

Likewise, a small number of studies have tested the effectiveness of specified measures to prevent general burnout, but no equivalent research was found on the prevention of student burnout. Again, this study contributes to addressing the gap in the literature on academic burnout, by providing a first-person perspective on strategies for overcoming academic burnout.

By not pre-empting the potential areas of vulnerability and strategies for recovery, this research allowed for novel insights to emerge. It also allows for comparison between current assumptions about student burnout and the subjective, lived

experience presented in the findings. As such, the findings complement and extend current understandings

Further salient contributions of the findings are summarised below.

- ➢ The findings raise awareness of the different forms of general burnout as distinguished by Farber (2000, p. 675) and confirm that all three patterns - "classic", "underchallenged" and "wearout"- can occur in student burnout too.

- ➢ The study also suggests a potential link between dyslexia and student burnout, and excessive effort as a sign of undiagnosed dyslexia or the need to adapt the student's learning support.

- ➢ The findings point to ongoing, unresolved inner conflict as a primary trigger and perpetuator of student burnout.

- ➢ The study points to the potential negative impact of thwarted expectations about A-level results on undergraduate students' self-confidence and motivation to study, as a precursor to academic burnout.

- ➢ The findings raise awareness of the potential role of family relationships, especially parental expectations, troubled relationships and lack of support, in the development of student burnout.

- ➢ The study suggests a relationship between student burnout and negative coping strategies, particularly avoidance of negative emotions, and negative attitudes to help seeking and self-disclosure.

- ➢ In addition to the role that increased learner autonomy can play in overcoming burnout, the study shows the importance of students understanding and accepting themselves as learners, in terms of their learning preferences and strengths, vulnerabilities and defensive responses, and sources of motivation.

➢ The findings emphasise the importance of knowledge in overcoming burnout. Such knowledge includes self-understanding, expectations of the transition to university and how to manage the pressures involved, positive approaches to learning and management of academic workload, and perspectives on mental health and professional psychological help.

6.2 FUTURE RESEARCH

Given the dearth of literature on overcoming burnout, I suggest avenues for further exploration below. As a phenomenological researcher, I am more attuned to qualitative research, but as a counselling psychologist I embrace a pluralistic attitude to research that recognises how different research methodologies can contribute to an understanding of recovering from student burnout (see Kasket, 2012). Hence, my suggestions for future research are not confined to phenomenological or qualitative approaches.

Participants were recruited from student populations in Greater London with a diverse demographic profile. This diversity is reflected in the sample, which includes a high percentage of participants from groups traditionally under-represented in higher education. More research is needed to expand our understanding of the development of burnout among students from different backgrounds in terms of culture, ethnicity and level of parental education.

The sample comprised three male and five female participants. I recommend further phenomenological research focusing on male and female students separately, to illuminate characteristics associated with each group.

The study drew attention to the potential for burnout in further education. One participant undoubtedly started to develop burnout during A-levels, even though it

only culminated in a psychological breakdown when she reached university. More research is needed on student burnout in further education and the impact of such burnout on undergraduate students.

I fully analysed the pilot study as a single case before incorporating it with the other seven interviews. This exercise made me appreciate the richness and potential of a single case IPA study and I also realised how some avenues have to remain unexplored when working with a larger sample. I would recommend further single case studies comprising multiple interviews to enable the researcher to drill down into the detail of recovery from burnout in a way that is not possible with multiple participants.

In the light of the strong narrative in some participants' accounts, a narrative analysis on the experience of recovering from academic burnout, for example, on the construction of self in overcoming burnout (see Esin, 2011), would enhance current knowledge.

The link between student burnout and four other areas that invite exploration through phenomenological as well other methods such as correlation research, are attitudes to self-disclosure, attitudes to help-seeking, approaches to learning and students' attachments to primary caregivers.

6.3 IMPACT ON THE RESEARCHER

Willig (2012) maintains that interpretation in phenomenological research changes the way the researcher thinks, feels and looks at the world. I would agree. This reflection on the impact of the study on myself as researcher only touches the surface of what I have learnt and gained from carrying out this project.

6.3.1 Understanding of Student Burnout and Recovery

This study has satisfied some of the curiosity I expressed in the introduction and raised new questions which I look forward to exploring. My knowledge about the research topic was significantly enhanced by carrying out the literature review, which expanded into topics related to burnout but not included in the scope of the study, such as resilience and psychological capital.

The findings have challenged my early, narrow assumptions and pre-understandings about burnout and recovery. I now appreciate how diverse and complex the manifestation of student burnout and recovery can be.

The full extent of my learning is captured in sections 5.6 and 6.1, where I describe the contribution of the findings.

6.3.2 Growth as Scientist-Practitioner

The notion of being restricted to one identity, one role or even one profession does not appeal to me. Instead, I prefer to divide my professional time between related but different activities as lecturer, supervisor, psychotherapist and yoga therapist. I am drawn to Kasket's (2012) description of professional practice in counselling psychology as diverse and multi-faceted, encompassing multiple roles. I believe counselling psychology with its truly holistic view of the person provides a suitable professional umbrella for the different strands of my work portfolio.

This study was not my first experience of conducting research, but the extent and rigour of the project has strengthened my identity as scientist-practitioner alongside my identity as reflective-practitioner. As I went along, I recorded ideas and insights to supplement the material I use for teaching and supervising research. I hope to pass

on to my students some of the skills I have gained, together with my enthusiasm for research in the field of psychotherapy and counselling psychology.

As a consumer of research, I also feel more equipped to evaluate other's work and more motivated to hone my critical capacity.

6.3.3 Writing and Communication

I was intrigued by Lisa's account of how she defaces a blank page or screen to make it less intimidating, because her experience resonated with the paralysis that often sets in when I have to put my thoughts into writing. I have learnt to step away from a blank screen and use pen and paper instead. Even more valuable has been the use of dictation instead of typing. Dictation has turned writing from a self-critical cognitive process into an embodied communication that is helping me find a voice.

During recruitment of participants, I overcame my resistance to engage with social media by creating a blog as part of my call for participants. Although I remain cautious and mindful of the professional implications of online visibility, I see potential value in continuing with the blog to create awareness and disseminate knowledge about student burnout and stress-related topics.

Whereas I had regular moments of feeling inspired and excited about my research, I also went through periods of feeling overwhelmed by the conflicting demands of the project and those arising from my other personal and professional responsibilities. Carrying out this research has confronted me with the unhelpful coping strategies I sometimes employ – not unlike my participants! - and I have been compelled to adopt more constructive ways of managing my workload. Seeing the project through, and seeing the findings take shape, has been a deeply rewarding and enriching experience.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A - RISK ASSESSMENT
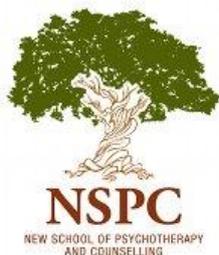
'How do people make sense of their recovery from academic burnout during their undergraduate studies?
An interpretative phenomenological inquiry into the experience of young adults' being carried out by Annemarie Visser as a requirement for a DCPsych in Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy by Professional Studies from NSPC and Middlesex University.

INDEPENDENT FIELD/LOCATION WORK RISK ASSESSMENT   FRA1

This proforma is applicable to, and must be completed in advance for, the following field/location work situations:

1. *All field/location work undertaken independently by individual students, either in the UK or overseas, including in connection with proposition module or dissertations. Supervisor to complete with student(s).*
2. *All field/location work undertaken by postgraduate students. Supervisors to complete with student(s).*
3. *Field/location work undertaken by research students. Student to complete with supervisor.*
4. *Field/location work/visits by research staff. Researcher to complete with Research Centre Head.*
5. *Essential information for students travelling abroad can be found on www.fco.gov.uk*

FIELD/LOCATION WORK DETAILS

Name:	Annemarie Visser	**Student No Research Centre:(staff only)**	M00361146

Supervisor:	Patricia Bonnici	Degree course	DCPsych in Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy by Professional Studies

NEXT OF KIN Telephone numbers and name of next of kin who may be contacted in the event of an accident	Name: Andrie de Vries Phone:+44 7968 065 151
Physical or psychological limitations to carrying out the proposed field/location work	None
Any health problems (full details) Which may be relevant to proposed field/location work activity in case of emergencies.	None
Locality (Country and Region)	London, United Kingdom
Travel Arrangements NB: Comprehensive travel and health insurance must always be obtained for independent overseas field/location work.	Local travel on public transport within Greater London area
Dates of Travel and Field/location work	February 2017 to June 2017

PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION VERY CAREFULLY

Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment

List the localities to be visited or specify routes to be followed **(Col. 1).** For each locality, enter the potential hazards that may be identified beyond those accepted in everyday life. Add details giving cause for concern **(Col. 2).**

Examples of Potential Hazards :
Adverse weather: exposure (heat, sunburn, lightening, wind, hypothermia)
Terrain: rugged, unstable, fall, slip, trip, debris, and remoteness. Traffic: pollution.
Demolition/building sites, assault, getting lost, animals, disease.
Working on/near water: drowning, swept away, disease (weils disease, hepatitis, malaria, etc), parasites', flooding, tides and range.
Lone working: difficult to summon help, alone or in isolation, lone interviews.

Dealing with the public: personal attack, causing offence/intrusion, misinterpreted, political, ethnic, cultural, socio-economic differences/problems. Known or suspected criminal offenders.
Safety Standards (other work organisations, transport, hotels, etc), working at night, areas of high crime.
Ill health: personal considerations or vulnerabilities, pre-determined medical conditions (asthma, allergies, fitting) general fitness, disabilities, persons suited to task.
Articles and equipment: inappropriate type and/or use, failure of equipment, insufficient training for use and repair, injury.
Substances (chemicals, plants, bio- hazards, waste): ill health - poisoning, infection, irritation, burns, cuts, eye-damage.
Manual handling: lifting, carrying, moving large or heavy items, physical unsuitability for task

If no hazard can be identified beyond those of everyday life, enter 'NONE'.

1. LOCALITY/ROUTE (specify here the exact name and address of each locality/organization)	2. POTENTIAL HAZARDS
Private meeting room	Lone working (1-1 interview with participant)

The University Field/location work code of Practice booklet provides practical advice

that should be followed in planning and conducting field/location work.

Risk Minimisation/Control Measures   PLEASE READ VERY CAREFULLY

For each hazard identified **(Col 2),** list the precautions/control measures in place or that will be taken **(Col 3)** to **"reduce the risk to acceptable levels",** and the safety equipment **(Col 5)** that will be employed.

Assuming the safety precautions/control methods that will be adopted **(Col. 3),** categorise the field/location work risk for each location/route as negligible, low, moderate or high **(Col. 4).**
Risk increases with both the increasing likelihood of an accident and the increasing severity of the consequences of an accident.

An acceptable level of risk is: a risk which can be safely controlled by person taking part in the activity using the precautions and control measures noted including the necessary instructions, information and training relevant to that risk. The resultant risk should not be significantly higher than that encountered in everyday life.

Examples of control measures/precautions:
Providing adequate training, information & instructions on field/location work tasks and the safe and correct use of any equipment, substances and personal protective equipment. Inspection and safety check of any equipment prior to use. Assessing individuals fitness and suitability to environment and tasks involved. Appropriate clothing, environmental information consulted and advice followed (weather conditions, tide times etc.). Seek advice on harmful plants, animals & substances that may be encountered, including information and instruction on safe procedures for handling hazardous substances. First aid provisions, inoculations, individual medical requirements, logging of location, route and expected return times of lone workers. Establish emergency procedures (means of raising an alarm, back up arrangements). Working with colleagues (pairs). **Lone working is not permitted where the risk of physical or verbal violence is a realistic possibility.** Training in interview techniques and avoiding /defusing conflict, following advice from local organisations, wearing of clothing unlikely to cause offence or unwanted attention. Interviews in neutral locations. Checks on Health and Safety standards & welfare facilities of travel, accommodation and outside organisations. Seek information on social/cultural/political status of field/location work area.
Examples of Safety Equipment: Hardhats, goggles, gloves, harness, waders, whistles, boots, mobile phone, ear protectors, bright fluorescent clothing (for roadside work), dust mask, etc.

If a proposed locality has not been visited previously, give your authority for the risk assessment stated or indicate that your visit will be preceded by a thorough risk assessment.

3. PRECAUTIONS/CONTROL MEASURES	4. RISK ASSESSMENT (low, moderate, high)	5. SAFETY /EQUIP MENT
I will phone my next of kin before the start of the interview and agree to call them again at the end. If they do not hear from me within an agree window of time, they will alert the security staff at the building or the local police. I will provide them with the necessary contact details beforehand.	Low	Mobile phone

PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION AND SIGN AS APPROPRIATE

DECLARATION: The undersigned have assessed the activity and the associated risks and declare that there is no significant risk or that the risk will be controlled by the method(s) listed above/over. Those participating in the work have read the assessment and will put in place precautions/control measures identified.

NB: Risk should be constantly reassessed during the field/location work period and additional

precautions taken or field/location work discontinued if the risk is seen to be unacceptable.

Signature of Field/location worker (Student/Staff)	*A. Visser*	Date:	27/04/16
Signature of Student Supervisor	Click here to enter text.	Date:	Click here to enter a date.
APPROVAL: (ONE ONLY) Signature of Director of Programmes (undergraduate students only)	Click here to enter text.	Date:	Click here to enter a date.
Signature of Research Degree Co-ordinator or Director of Programmes (Postgraduate)	Click here to enter text.	Date:	Click here to enter a date.
Signature of Research Centre Head (for staff field/location workers)	Click here to enter text.	Date:	Click here to enter a date.

FIELD/LOCATION WORK CHECK LIST

1. Ensure that **all members** of the field party possess the following attributes (where relevant) at a level appropriate to the proposed activity and likely field conditions:

✓ ☐ Safety Knowledge & Training?	✓ ☐ Awareness of cultural, social & political differences?
✓ ☐ Personal clothing & safety equipment?	✓ ☐ Suitability of field/location workers to proposed
✓ ☐ Physical & psychological fitness & disease immunity, protection & awareness?	

2. Have all the necessary arrangements been made and information/instruction gained, and have the relevant authorities been consulted or informed with regard to

☐ Visa, permits?	☐ Weather conditions, tide times and ranges?
☐ Legal access to sites and/or persons?	☐ Suitability of field/location workers to proposed

|	
☐ Vaccinations and other health precaution	✓ ☐ Safety equipment and protective clothing?
✓ ☐ Financial and insurance implications?	☐ Travel and accommodation arrangements?
☐ Health insurance arrangements?	☐ Arrival times after journeys?
☐ Civil unrest and terrorism?	✓ ☐ Emergency procedures?
✓ ☐ Crime risk?	✓ ☐ Transport use?
☐ Political or military sensitivity of the proposed topic, its method or location?	

Important information for retaining evidence of completed risk assessments:

Once the risk assessment is completed and approval gained the **supervisor** should retain this form and issue a copy of it to the field/location worker participating on the field course/work. In addition the **approver** must keep a copy of this risk assessment in an appropriate Health and Safety file.
RP/cc Sept 2010

APPENDIX B - ETHICAL APPROVAL

Annemarie Visser
13 Denleigh Gardens
Thames Ditton
Surrey
KT7 0YL

NSPC

admin@nspc.org.uk
www.nspc.org.uk
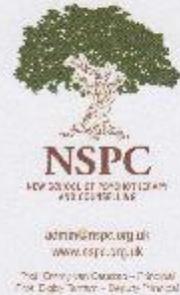
15th June 2016

Dear Annemarie

Re: Ethics Approval

We held an Ethics Board on 14th June 2016 and the following decisions were made.

Ethics Approval
Your application was approved.

Please note that it is a condition of this ethics approval that recruitment, interviewing, or other contact with research participants only takes place when you are enrolled in a research supervision module.
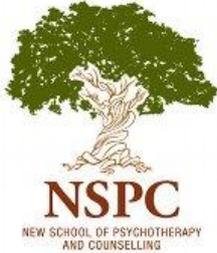
Yours sincerely

Prof Digby Tantam
Chair Ethics Committee
NSPC

existential ACADEMY

61-63 Fortune Green Road, London, NW6 1DR
+44 (0)845 557 7752 | +44 (0)207 435 8067 | office@existential.academy | www.existential.academy

'How do people make sense of their recovery from academic burnout during their undergraduate studies?
An interpretative phenomenological inquiry into the experience of young adults' being carried out by Annemarie Visser as a requirement for a DCPsych in Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy by Professional Studies from NSPC and Middlesex University.

NSPC Ltd

Existential Academy

61-63 Fortune Green Road

London NW6 1DR

Middlesex University

The Burroughs

London NW4 4BT

Dated: [write date information sheet handed out here]

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take your time to read the following information carefully, and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take your time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What is the purpose of the research?

This study is being carried out as part of my studies at NSPC Ltd and Middlesex University. My research is designed to learn more about how students who suffered from burnout during their undergraduate studies, make sense of their recovery from burnout. So far, researchers have investigated burnout itself, but no study has yet looked at people's experiences of

recovering from burnout. Understanding how others recover from burnout might be useful to students at risk of burning out, or who suffer from burnout. Likewise, university teaching staff, counsellors and psychotherapists might be more effective at helping students with burnout if they knew more about the ways in which people recover.

You are being asked to participate because you have replied to my advertisement for people who have recovered from burnout during their undergraduate studies to volunteer for this project.

What will happen to me if I take part?

I would like to interview you at Middlesex University or another venue that is mutually convenient. The interview will last between one and one and a half hours and will be digitally recorded. I will use a qualitative research method to extract the main themes of what you and other people tell me during the interviews about your experience of recovering from burnout.

You will also be asked to complete a short questionnaire about your experience of burnout. The information from the questionnaire will be combined with the information from other participants for statistical analysis.

What will you do with the information that I provide?

I will record the interview on two digital recorders, in case one fails, and will transfer the files to an encrypted USB stick for storage, deleting the files from both recorders. All of the information that you provide me will be identified only with a project code and stored either on the encrypted USB stick, or in a locked filing cabinet. I will keep the key that links your details with the project code in a locked filing cabinet.

The information will be kept at least until 6 months after I graduate, and will be treated as confidential. If my research is published, I will make sure that neither your name or other identifying details are used.

Data will be stored according to the Data Protection Act and the Freedom of Information Act.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

Talking about personal experiences may be distressing. If so, please let me know, and if you wish, I will stop the interview.

Although this is very unlikely, should you tell me something that I am required by law to pass on to a third person, I will have to do so. Otherwise whatever you tell me will be confidential.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Being interviewed about your experience of recovering burnout has no direct benefit, although some people may find it an opportunity to reflect on their experience, and could find this beneficial. It is also possible that a better understanding of recovering from burnout will be helpful for some students, teaching staff, counsellors, psychotherapists and GPs in the future.

Consent

You will be given a copy of this information sheet for your personal records, and if you agree to take part, you will be asked to sign the attached consent form before the study begins. Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you decide to take part, you may withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

Who is organising and funding the research?

This research is completely self-funded.

Who has reviewed the study?

All proposals for research using human participants are reviewed by an Ethics Committee before they can proceed. The NSPC research ethics sub-committee have approved this study

Expenses

I will pay reasonable travel expenses, up to the cost of a one day London Travelcard.

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

If you have any further questions, you can contact me at:

NSPC Ltd
Existential Academy
61-63 Fortune Green Road
London NW6 1DR
Email: AV288@live.mdx.ac.uk

If you any concerns about the conduct of the study, you may contact my supervisor:

Patricia Bonnici

NSPC Ltd

Existential Academy

61-63 Fortune Green Road

London NW6 1DR

pbonnici@gmail.com

Or

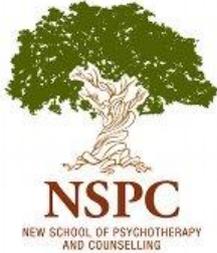The Principal

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Middlesex University

The Burroughs

London NW4 4BT

Written Informed Consent

Title of study:

How do people make sense of their recovery from academic burnout during their undergraduate studies? A phenomenological inquiry into the experience of young adults.

Academic year: 2016-17

Researcher's name: Annemarie Visser

Supervisor's name and email: Patricia Bonnici (pbonnici@gmail.com)

- I have understood the details of the research as explained to me by the researcher, and confirm that I have consented to act as a participant.
- I have been given contact details for the researcher in the information sheet.

- I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary, the data collected during the research will not be identifiable, and I have the right to withdraw from the project at any time without any obligation to explain my reasons for doing so.
- I further understand that the data I provide may be used for analysis and subsequent publication, and I provide my consent that this may occur.

_____   _____

Print name   Sign Name

Date: _____


To the participant: Data may be inspected by the Chair of the Psychology Ethics panel and the Chair of the School of Health and Education Ethics committee of Middlesex University, if required by institutional audits about the correctness of procedures. Although this would happen in strict confidentiality, please tick here if you do not wish your data to be included in audits: _____
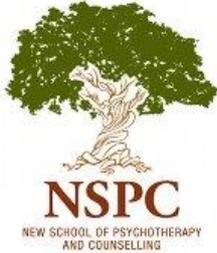
'How do people make sense of their recovery from academic burnout during their undergraduate studies?
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The Burroughs

London NW4 4BT

DEBRIEFING

Researcher: Annemarie Visser

Date:

Title of study: How do people make sense of their recovery from academic burnout during their undergraduate studies? A phenomenological inquiry into the experience of young adults.

Thank you for participating in my research. What you told me in the interview will be combined with what other participants tell me in their interviews. I will use a qualitative research method to extract the main themes from the combined experiences of all the participants to produce the research findings.

If you have any questions regarding the interview or the study in general, please feel free to ask me now, or you may email me later at AV288@live.mdx.ac.uk.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of the study, you may contact my supervisor, Patricia Bonnici, at pbonnici@gmail.com, or the principal of NSPC at Admin@nspc.org.uk or +44 (0) 207 435 8067.

In case you feel psychologically distressed by participation in the study and would like further support, you may want to contact Student Services at your university if you are still a registered student, or use one of the following sources:

Low cost counselling:

https://freepsychotherapynetwork.com/find-an-therapist/

Professional registers:

http://www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/therapists

https://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/find-a-therapist/

http://www.bps.org.uk/psychology-public/find-psychologist/find-psychologist

Thanks again for your participation.

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	I always used to find new and interesting aspects in my studies.	1	2	3	4
2	There were days when I felt tired before I arrived in class or started studying.	1	2	3	4
3	It happened more and more often that I talked about my studies in a negative way.	1	2	3	4
4	After a class or after studying, I tended to need more time than before in order to relax and feel better.	1	2	3	4
5	I could tolerate the pressure of my studies very well.	1	2	3	4
6	Over time, I started to think less and do my academic work almost mechanically.	1	2	3	4
7	I found my studies to be a positive challenge.	1	2	3	4
8	While studying, I often felt emotionally drained.	1	2	3	4
9	Over time, one can become disconnected from academic work.	1	2	3	4
10	After a class or after studying, I had enough	1	2	3	4

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	energy for my leisure activities.				
11	Sometimes I felt sickened by my studies.	1	2	3	4
12	After a class or after studying, I usually felt worn out and weary.	1	2	3	4
13	This was the only field of study that I could imagine myself doing.	1	2	3	4
14	Usually, I could manage my study-related workload well.	1	2	3	4
15	I felt more and more engaged in my studies.	1	2	3	4
16	When I studied, I usually felt energized.	1	2	3	4

APPENDIX G - INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What was it like to be burnt out?

   ➢ What were the symptoms?

   ➢ How did affect your academic work?

   ➢ Social life?

   ➢ Close relationships?

   ➢ Sense of self?

2. How did you overcome burnout?

   ➢ What did you find most helpful?

   ➢ What was difficult?

   ➢ What got in the way?

   ➢ How did you overcome these obstacles?

3. What in your life has changed because of the experience?

   ➢ Academic work?

   ➢ Relationships?

   ➢ Sense of self?

   ➢ Other?

4. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

APPENDIX H - EXAMPLE OF IPA ANALYSIS

This appendix contains an extract from the analysis of Amy's transcript.

Transcript	Exploratory Comments	Emergent Themes	Subthemes
Lines 29-37. Amy: yeah, a lot of them did and I didn't, no, so I felt that that put me at a disadvantage, although… I've done stuff before where I haven't, like had experience and I've done quite well in so it was a bit…of a…shock, I guess, because I'm used to doing well in my studies, and then to come to university and not do well, or feel like I'm not doing well and feel like I'm not understanding…then it was…	D: Compared herself with peers, felt handicapped. D: Expected to cope well as before, drop in performance a shock, unexpected. L: "I'm used to…and then…" - Shaken	Comparison Behind Unexpected Shaken	Academic Gap
Lines 40-43. I didn't do A-levels, I went to college, but I did well in college, I did well in high school, like, in all my academic years before previous to university…	C: She had no reason to expect she would struggle. She repeats "did well" –is she assuring me of her ability?	Unexpected	Academic Gap
Lines 49-55. I found it easy to study before and then I, maybe, because of the different level of studying, but I could…sit in my room and concentrate and focus on what I was trying to revise for, what I was doing extra research for, but in university it was	D: Changed from easy to hard. D: Changed from focused to blank. D: Can't make a start. Doesn't know. C: Sounds lost, overwhelmed, without direction, anxious. What is harder?	Change, difference Harder Overwhelmed Anxious	Academic Gap Inner Turmoil

Transcript	Exploratory Comments	Emergent Themes	*Subthemes*
like, I was like, blank, I didn't know where to even start.			
Lines 61-74. No, as in research-wise, although it was the same thing that I was doing before, just on a different level, as in a higher academic level, so it was more that was expected of me, I don't know if it was the pressure of more being expected of me that made me…not feel like, unsure how to do my studies, but like even...going to lecturers and asking them for help, I didn't do that until like, the very end, because I was still in my, I'm used to doing things on my own, I'm used to not being able to ask my lecturers or my teachers like, for help, I'm used to doing things myself…	C: "Research-wise", so self-study harder. D: Higher academic level, higher expectations, more pressure. Unsure. C: Lacked direction, academic strategies. What worked before didn't any more. L: on her own, "myself" – emphasised independence, self-reliance, sounds proud. L: "used to NOT being able to ask for help". C: Why did she cope without help before? Why only asked for help at the end? What stopped her? Why is self-reliance so important?	Harder Higher expectations Pressure Reluctance to ask for help Self-reliant Independent	*Academic Gap* *The Problem with Talking*
Lines 77-80. Yeah, so for me to not being independent, it was like… [Pause]… Confidence knocked back. I	D: To struggle undermined her confidence. L: "Oh, she needs…".	Loss of confidence Shame	*Inner Turmoil*

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Transcript	Exploratory Comments	Emergent Themes	*Subthemes*
didn't want to ask anyone for them to think: "Oh, she needs…" But, I know it sounds sily but…	C: Needing something had negative connotations, shameful, expected negative judgement from others. What does it mean if someone needs help?	Reluctance to ask for help Fear of judgement	*The Problem with Talking*
Lines 85-89. Not really, like, we all discussed generically, like, if there was an essay coming up, what essay topic we were talking about and things we found difficult but, I never said to them I'm, personally, I'm really struggling.	D: Only voiced difficulties in general discussions where others shared too. Couldn't admit struggle. C: Didn't want to be different. Shame. L: "I'm really struggling" – it was hard	Reluctance to share problems Shame Struggling	*The Problem with Talking* *Inner Turmoil*
Lines 93-104. I don't know if it was embarrassment. I think maybe judged on your academic ability, your intelligence, possibly yeah, embarrassing, for myself as well, to think that… [Pause]… I felt like I was really like, below them, so I felt that to ask them for help would make them think that I was, there was something wrong with me, because they were all understanding and I'm not, but we are all in the same class, we are all… [Pause]…should be on the same level.	D: Embarrassed. Fear of judgement. Asking for help implies something is wrong. L: SHOULD be equal to others. C: Wasn't equal, "below them", falling short C: Dweck's performance vs. learning. No allowance for learning	Embarrassment Shame Below, Falling short Reluctance to share problems/ask for help Fear of judgement Outsider	*Inner Turmoil* *The Problem with Talking* *Alienation from Others*

Falling Behind, Falling Short
Competing Priorities
Erin: There's no mom and dad telling you "Oh, come back at this time" (212-213). Frank: I was not really paying attention to how many hours I was working (243-244). Helen: All I wanted to do was meet as many people as I can, you know, social time (477-479). Sam: I thought that I had to be looking after someone whilst trying to maintain four jobs, a voluntary position, as well as studying (25-28).
The Academic Gap
Amy: I felt that I should have started grasping what was going on (21-22). Erin: I was so shocked when I came and then it wasn't like that [a piece of cake] (158-159). Lisa: Academically it was becoming more and more stressful (20-21).

Sonia: Then suddenly when I have all the pieces and everything I can't keep up (260-262).

The Weight of Expectations

Amy: I did feel the pressure of my family, like, they wanted me to study this and now I'm not, I might not pass (423-425).

Erin: Ah, they [her family] were so disappointed (409-410).

Frank: The degree that I'm still studying now, is not my first choice, this is something that my father wanted me to do (328-330).

Helen: I constantly felt the disinterest which obviously encouraged me even more (297-299).

Lisa: I was the first one in higher education, and, I suppose it was quite a lot of pressure (261-263).

Peter: …my worth, my personal worth was connected with my academic achievements (124-126).

Sam: I need to find opportunities, I need to get the most out of my time here (547-549).

Sonia: I felt some kind of pressure to kind of live up to the standards of going to university (23-24).

Getting Stuck
Inner Turmoil
Amy: A mixture of sad and angry, like, angry at myself because I didn't understand why I couldn't understand (137-139). Erin: I never had panic attacks, but I felt like I was getting anxieties in random places (314-315). Frank: I simply didn't care (475). Helen: I'd lost all hope, I couldn't be bothered with anything (431-432). Lisa: The happier they seemed to be, the worse I was getting inside (84-86). Peter: Actually, I wanted to disengage with life (414-415). Sam: I was feeling helpless most of the time, and, I couldn't focus in class (92-93). Sonia: I hated the thought of just coming here, it felt so overwhelming (522-524).

Alienation from Studies

Amy: If I go to university I'm not going to understand anything anyway, so there's no point in me getting up and going (210-213).

Erin: I would literally only go to my drama lectures, because drama was the only thing I understood at that time (121-123).

Frank: I was ignoring things that makes you want to stay at University (315-316).

Helen: ...art became work, it became my life, and I just, I barely did anything (422-424).

Lisa: The less words I was writing, the more I stayed at home thinking I'm going to catch up, and the less…so it was a horrible Catch-22 (146-151).

Peter: I stopped going to lectures and I tried to remove myself (219-220).

Sam: I started avoiding class because of social anxiety (156-157).

Sonia: I didn't want to go through that [embarrassment], so I didn't go to the seminars (417-418).

Alienation from Others
Amy: I really isolated myself a lot without even realising it (510-511). Erin: Towards second year I locked myself in my room every day (647-648). Frank: In the second year I completely ignored them [social events] (308-309). Helen: I also won't speak to my friends because then I won't have to talk about me (825-827). Lisa: That's the bit I didn't realise, how alone I felt (384-385). Peter: I didn't want to be there, and I didn't want to mix with [course] students (201-203). Sam: During the crisis some mistook me wanting to be alone for a while as me trying to cut them off (153-155). Sonia: I don't really talk to other people (824).
The Problem With Talking
Amy: I'm used to not being able to ask my lecturers or my teachers like, for help, I'm used to doing things myself (71-74).

Erin: I didn't know how they'd take it, so I was trying to bottle it up (520-521).

Frank: I am a shy individual, I need a bit more time to express myself directly and fully (4-5).

Helen: I really struggled with opening up my feelings last year (585-586).

Lisa: I suppose I didn't really think to ask anybody [for help] (305-306).

Peter: I developed a mistrust of others. I couldn't reveal what was really going on in my heart, in my mind (557-559).

Sam: I'm the kind of person that's very stubborn about asking for help (5-6).

Sonia: I've just always suppressed feelings and kept them to myself (61-62).

Finding a Way Out Through Personal Growth

Turning Point

Amy: [My mother] told me that I needed to ask for help if I'm going to pass this year (128-130).

Erin: They actually let me know that I seemed kind of weird (94).

Frank:…she told me that I had to get it [the degree]. I agreed that I had to get it (635-636).

Helen:…they had to sit me down and be like: "You are not a nice person anymore" (403-404).

Lisa: So, they said we don't want to section you --- but we'd like you to come in for a little bit (1011-1013).

Peter: He [the lecturer] turned round to me and said --- you are **NOT EVER** going to pass your [course] exam (856-858).

Sam: My boss noticed, and she started intervening then (32-33).

Sonia: [The GP asked], "Have you ever thought about getting psychological help?" (676-677).

Growing Self-Understanding

Amy: I thought I could do everything, but it turns out I can't (621-622).

Erin: [Burnout] it made me discover what was going on (947-948).

Frank: I'm trying to just understand myself (763-764).

Helen: I began to realise this, it wasn't just me being lazy, that's when I found out about burnout (444-446).

Lisa: [Attending a day clinic] taught me a real lesson, and actually in some respects it made me grow up (1107-1109).

Peter: And because I had made so many mistakes on the journey, I actually knew how to correct them (959-961).

Sam: Although it was a horrible experience all in all, I think it was very eye-opening and I learnt a lot (680-681).

Sonia: The problem wasn't in what we were learning or anything like that, it was in how I was learning (539-541).

Cultivating Support

Amy: I told them and they were, "Why didn't you say, we could have met up more, we could have like helped you (374-376).

Erin: I took the initiative to talk to them --- what's not going good with our relationship and what's going good (760-763).

Frank: I started the year thinking that had to be more connected to the university, with people from the university (638-641).

Helen: We've only just been repairing our relationship (327).

Lisa: What's interesting now is knowing and recognising that you are needing help and --- what to do (1162-1164).

Peter: We would spend every time we could together. And that helped with the [academic] engagement (815-817).

Sam: I have a lot of caring people around me right now, I learned to maintain a lot of things as well (692-694). Sonia: And now I'm going to try and ask for help put my hand up in class (953-954).
Developing Self-Regulation
Amy: Making myself a plan of when to study, when to read and when to have time for myself (286-288). Erin:…a whole shift in personality as well --- I just wanna get my work done now (722-724). Frank: I started to focus a bit more then. A different state of mind (279-281). Helen: I started working hard again, and it was a nice feeling, and it made me feel good (447-449). Lisa: It's that initial [gasp] and then I get a grip (779). Peter: I attended every single lecture, I attended every practical class, I passed everything first time (1418-1419). Sam: I feel like I've perfected it this year, how to fit in things in my schedule (736-738). Sonia: I took a step back and I said, "What am I really here for?" and then, "What can I do now to help me get there?" (624-627).