

Transitions in higher education: what we think, what we expect and what we get

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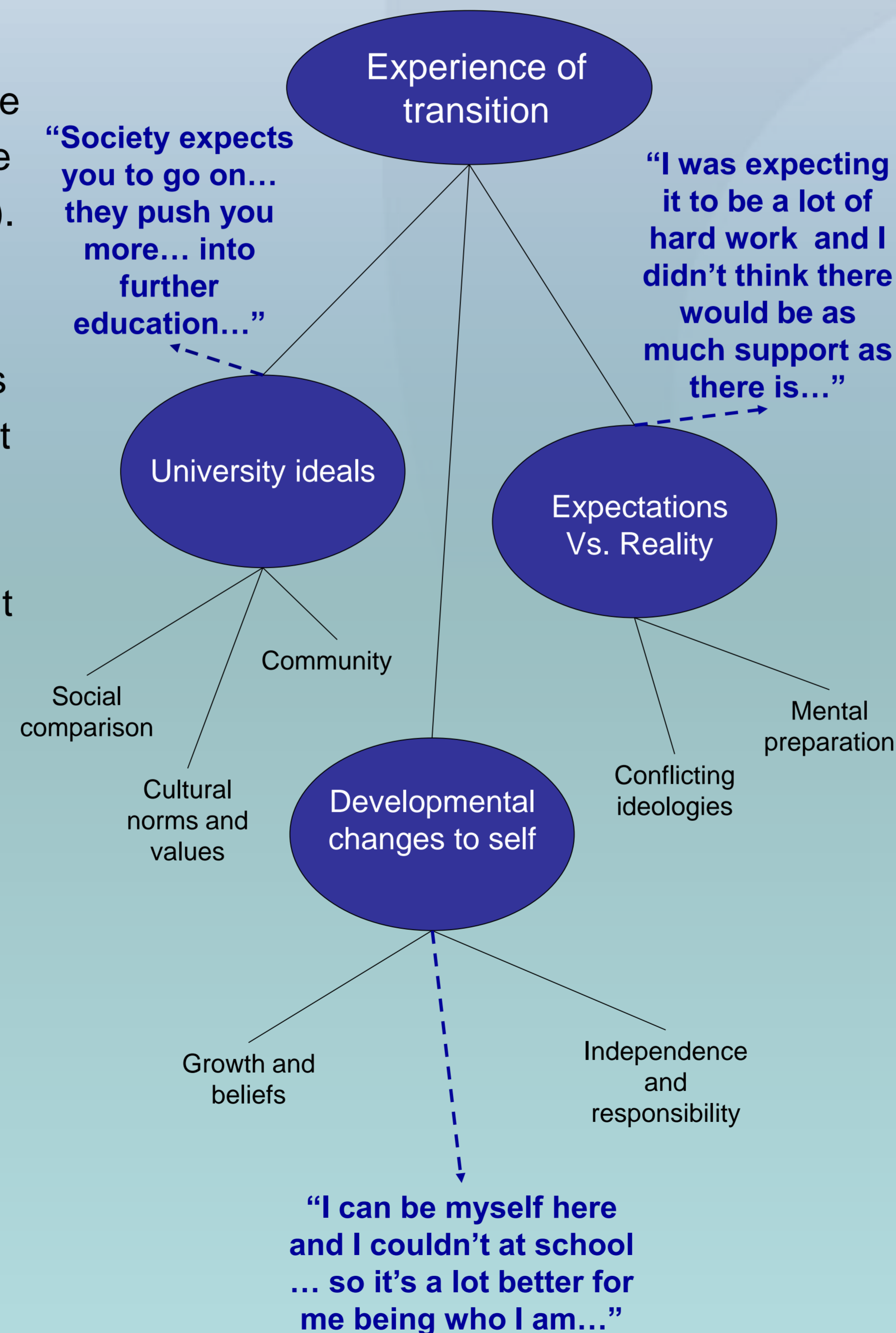
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Introduction

Transitions refer to periods when people experience a change in their everyday routine (Zittoun et al., 2003). In the course of education, such transitions occur as people move into different stages of their learning (Hviid & Zittoun, 2008). Previous investigations of transition in higher education have highlighted aspects such as perceived academic competence, motivation and social and personal identity as important in the process (Fazey & Fazey, 2001; Maunder et al., 2010). Understanding students' higher education transition experiences can 1) provide insight into how learners experience their educational journey and 2) benefit institutions in their induction and support processes. The aim of this investigation therefore was to explore how do undergraduate psychology students talk about their experiences of transition in higher education.

Method

- Qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for obtaining subjective, in-depth experiences of transitions
- Qualitative method: 3 semi-structured interviews; and 3 focus groups with first and second year psychology students (12 participants in total)
- Data was collected by undergraduate student researchers as part of an institutional bursary scheme - providing unique access to the student experience
- Thematic analysis was used to identify themes based on common reoccurring codes



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Analysis

Three themes were drawn from the analysis;

University ideals: when reflecting on motives for studying and their transition experiences, students drew on culturally-grounded idealised notions of university life. They compared themselves to who they deemed to be “normal” students. This comparison process was important in the formation of social relationships, with students identifying ‘in groups’ and ‘out groups’ (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). They expressed a strong need to establish social bonds and feel part of a community.

Developmental changes to self: students reported experiencing personal growth - talking about changes to their understanding of themselves and their abilities as well as their developing autonomy and accountability

Expectations Vs. Reality: there was some dissonance between students' expectations about university (both studying and student identity) and their own experience of it. To manage uncertainty, students talked about wanting to feel ‘mentally prepared’ for university life.

References

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