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# From disabled to differently abled: A psychofortological perspective on first-year students living with disability

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**ABSTRACT:** The aim of this study was to conduct an interpretative phenomenological analysis exploring the experiences of differently abled first-year students from a psychofortological perspective. Ryff's psychological well-being model was used as a theoretical underpinning. Through the course of an academic year, three male participants completed semi-structured interviews and reflective writing exercises. Data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. A cross-case analysis yielded themes related to participants' dynamic processes of finding purpose, direction and independence, as well as belonging, positive relations, self-acceptance and mastery. Collectively, the findings demonstrated how the participants moved from viewing themselves as disabled to differently abled, and that, despite numerous challenges, psychological well-being can be facilitated through the first-year higher education experience.

**KEYWORDS:** living with disability; first-year experience; psychological well-being

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Placing one foot in front of the other, I've climbed to higher lengths. Reaching beyond my own limitations, to show my inner strength. No obstacle too hard for this warrior to overcome. I'm just a man on a mission, to prove my disability hasn't won (Hensel, n.d., My Quotes section)

## Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the experiences of differently abled first-year students from a psychofortological perspective. Psychological research studies investigating the first year of higher education frequently highlight the challenges and difficulties experienced by students living with disability (Devar et al., 2020; Hendry et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; De Beer et al., 2022; Hlengwa & Masuku, 2022). There is thus a need to shift the emphasis to an understanding of student well-being. Rather than a fixation on human limitation and disease, a psychofortological perspective focuses on human strengths, positive qualities and growth processes (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder & Lopez, 2002; Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Ryff, 2018). Consequently, disability can be reframed as a natural and productive human variation or experience containing various strengths and virtues, known to every individual at some point in life, as opposed to a condition or a problem (Swart & Greyling, 2011; Devar et al., 2020). Instead of overemphasising individuals' disabilities, their abilities are nurtured; hence, described as 'differently abled'. This research study thus aimed to gain insight into meaning making in the higher education context through the psychofortological experiences of differently abled first-year students.

## Theoretical perspectives underpinning the study

### *Positive psychology and its changing landscape*

As an alternative to the pathogenic paradigm, positive psychology can be described as 'a movement away from psychological problems, psychopathology, weaknesses, and deficits in human nature towards a focus on positive behaviour, human strengths, virtues and what makes life worth living' (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 13). Well-being is at the core of the subdiscipline of positive psychology and entails two perspectives, hedonia and eudaimonia (Ryan & Deci, 2001; 2006; Ryff, 2014). Hedonia refers to everyday happiness and can be defined as the presence of positive affect, along with the absence of negative affect. The emphasis of eudaimonia, however, is on a life in search of meaningful goals congruent with morals and values, with a focus on growth, optimal functioning, self-realisation and individuals fulfilling their true potential (Ryan & Deci, 2001; 2006; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Wong 2011; Waterman, 2013; Ryff, 2014; 2018). Although variations in definitions of eudaimonia exist, reference is often made to vitality, meaning in life, psychosocial maturity, pro-social growth, and intrinsic motivation (Ryan et al., 2008; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Waterman, 2013; Ryff, 2014).

Since positive psychology's formal introduction in the scholarly environment during the late nineties, the landscape has changed significantly. While the first wave of positive psychology was characterised by the exploration, identification and conceptualisation of the positive aspects of human functioning, the second wave became known to take both the positives and negatives of life into consideration (Van Zyl & Salanova, 2022). The rise of the third wave is characterised by an interdisciplinary focus and emphasis on the cultural and

contextual relevance of the positive aspects of life (Kern et al., 2020; Wissing, 2022). This trajectory aligns with an increasing focus on 'big picture science' (Ryff, 2018).

Another development in the field of positive psychology is a more robust integration of existentialism and the balance of well-being aspects with ancient wisdom and self-transcendence, known as existential positive psychology (Wong & Psych 2021). With the existential dimension of suffering filtered into well-being, Wong (2020) proposes mature happiness as a third type of happiness, separate from hedonic pleasures and eudaimonia, with existential meaning and spiritual understanding as its basis. Further development in the field of positive psychology relates to the more complementary relationship between positive and humanistic psychology (Waterman, 2013). Phenomenological studies of joy facilitated bridges between humanism and positive psychology in the concept of 'a joyful life' (Robbins, 2021). Conceptualisations of a joyful life are consistent with a meaning orientation to happiness, emphasising a higher calling and service as a personal blessing. The joyful life disposition has been related to resilience, post-traumatic growth, as well as relational, spiritual and existential growth.

### ***Disability in higher education***

In the last three to four decades, there has been an increase in the numbers of students with disability entering higher education institutions (Mantsha, 2016; Mutanga & Walker, 2017; Collins et al., 2019; Isaacs, 2020). In keeping with global trends, higher institutions of learning in South Africa embraced the duty towards accessibility and inclusion of students with disabilities (Mutanga & Walker, 2017; Dalton et al., 2019; Lourens & Swartz, 2021; University of the Free State, 2021; McKinney & Swartz, 2022). South Africa is committed to transforming its institutions and the South African Department of Higher Education prides itself in policies indicating political support for the education of learners and students with disabilities. This long overdue legislation were developed following decades of oppression and devaluation. The best documented practical support for students with disability seem to come in the form of disability units, which serve the function of being a central resource for coordinated support to create an inclusive environment that encourages students to be independent and cope with their daily activities on campus (Mutanga, 2018; Edwards et al., 2022).

Despite various attempts, research in the field of disability shows that it remains a long-term endeavour to reach full inclusivity, fairness of access and equal opportunities for students with disability (Titchkosky, 2011; Dolmage, 2017; McKinney & Swartz, 2022).

Research studies repeatedly point towards obstacles such as students being ill-prepared for the demands of higher education, lecturers' lack of awareness and knowledge, disability disclosure issues, physical barriers on campus and a lack of resources (Ndlovu & Walton, 2016; Dolmage, 2017; Mutanga & Walker, 2017; Langørgen & Magnus, 2018; Mutanga, 2018; Collins et al., 2019; Isaacs, 2020; Svendby, 2020; Ferreira-Meyer & Pitikoe, 2021; Lourens & Swartz, 2021; De Beer et al., 2022; Edwards et al., 2022; McKinney & Swartz, 2022). Collectively, these studies recommend a more practical approach to the execution of policies and procedures, an increased effort to include the voices of students with disability, clearer (even obligatory) training for lecturers, the identification of all forms of injustice and the use of a capabilities approach in addressing issues. An approach that

recognises disability as a form of diversity and that challenges ableism and non-disability privilege should be prioritised (Saia, 2022).

### ***Ryff's theory in the context of disability studies in higher education***

Psychological well-being is ingrained in the eudaimonic perspective and served as the theoretical model for this study. Psychological well-being suggests that a good life entails the realisation of one's true potential, as well as the endeavour towards fulfilment (Ryff, 1989; 2018). It emphasises purpose in life and explains that people can thrive despite difficulties and find meaning in existential challenges (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 2018). Psychological well-being is also seen as a protective factor against psychopathology (Keyes et al., 2010; Lamers et al., 2015) and is associated with a longer life span (Ryff, 2014). Ryff (1989; 2018) proposed an innovative and integrative multidimensional model of psychological well-being to define six psychological dimensions of psychological well-being, namely self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth. This model integrates aspects of Allport's (1961) views of maturity, Jahoda's (1958) mental health criteria, Maslow's (1954) self-actualisation theory, Rogers's (1959) fully functioning individual, Jung's (1933) concept of individuation and Erikson's (1963) conceptualisation of autonomy. Ryff's model (1989; 2018) was selected as the theoretical model for the current study, based on its thorough theoretical basis and its empirical evidence to support the practical operationalisation of the model (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff, 2018).

### ***Autonomy***

Autonomy refers to the ability to make one's decisions independently, without relying on the approval of others (Ryff, 1989; 2018). Individuals with low levels of autonomy will be overly concerned with the evaluations of others and will depend on the opinions of others to make choices (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Autonomy also involves the evaluation of oneself by personal standards and resistance against social pressures to behave and think in certain ways. Put differently, autonomy refers to a sense of self-determination, self-direction, inner control, internal regulation of behaviour and independence (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Keyes et al., 2002; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Gallagher & Lopez, 2009; Žižek et al., 2015). Tronto (1993) describes the relational concept of autonomy and notes that individuals can never be completely independent of others; consequently, only a notion of autonomy can be experienced. Furthermore, Verkerk (2001) elaborates on autonomy and notes that it cannot be viewed in isolation, but is a result of a relationship between the giver and receiver.

In considering disability literature, autonomy is mostly researched in relation to the contexts and conditions of support. Since autonomy refers to the ability to think and decide for oneself, a person can still receive support and remain autonomous. It is important for differently abled individuals to be granted the opportunity to make their own decisions, and by limiting their choices, the expression of autonomy is hindered (Whitehead et al., 2016; Ravenscroft et al., 2017; Lourens & Swartz, 2021). For example, Warner et al. (2011) found that social support played an essential role in maintaining autonomy in various types of disability. Especially in the higher education environment, where there is less structure than in high school,

social support that allows and promotes autonomy in differently abled students is important.

### *Self-acceptance*

Self-acceptance can be defined as a positive evaluation of oneself and one's life (Ryff, 1989; 2018; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Žižek et al., 2015) and is regarded as the most recurrent criterion of well-being (Ryff, 1989; Fava & Ruini, 2003). Gallagher and Lopez (2009) note that self-acceptance includes self-understanding and insight, which in return leads to a realistic, although subjective, awareness of strengths and weaknesses. The awareness of areas of growth and acceptance of unchangeable traits create a feeling of self-worth. Individuals with low levels of self-acceptance will have difficulty accepting certain aspects of themselves and the past (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Keyes, 2006; Ryff & Singer, 2008). To be self-determined, individuals need to accept themselves and believe that they have the right to persevere towards their desires.

Living with a disability can be life changing, as differently abled individuals often have less access and opportunities to pursue education, gain employment and engage in intimate relationships (Chen et al., 2015). Acceptance of disability is crucial to building self-esteem and confidence and an integral part of well-being (De Nardo et al., 2016; Sniatecki et al., 2019). Various researchers have referred to the interrelated nature of acceptance of disability and skills such as understanding how disability affects learning, accessing relevant support services, hope and the determination to overcome challenges (Getzel, 2008; Chen et al., 2015). Inclusive educational programmes and peer mentors can have a positive effect on the self-acceptance and self-esteem of students living with disability (Hendrickson et al., 2013; Ackles et al., 2014; Dalton et al., 2019).

### *Purpose in life*

Purpose in life refers to having clear goals, a sense of direction and the belief that one's life is meaningful (Ryff, 1989; 2018; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 2008; Talbot, 2012). Purpose in life is associated with psychological, physical and social well-being (King et al., 2006; Abdul Kadir & Mohd, 2021). Several researchers (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Etezadi & Pushkar, 2013; Abdul Kadir & Mohd, 2021) have reported links between having a purpose in life and life satisfaction, positive affect, self-esteem and mastery. These factors are buffers against adversity, especially for vulnerable population groups such as individuals living with disabilities. For example, Terrill et al. (2015) found that individuals living with disabilities experience increased levels of happiness when exposed to psychological interventions focusing on purpose in life and meaning. According to Lee et al. (2016), purpose serves a vital role in the rehabilitation of differently abled individuals. Research studies with individuals living with various forms of disability show how a sense of purpose can be associated with participating in recreational, physical and social activities as these provide meaning, stimulation and opportunities for creativity, self-discovery, self-expression and social acceptance (Nimrod et al., 2012; Iwasaki et al., 2015).

### *Positive relations with others*

Positive relations with others refers to the ability to form warm, satisfying and caring relationships with others (Ryff & Singer, 2008). It also includes the capability to develop intimacy and to display empathy with others (Ryff, 1989; 2018). In other words,

it can be described as the ability to develop and maintain trusting and rewarding interpersonal relationships (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Keyes et al., 2002). Positive relations with others are also associated with social benefits such as social support, companionship and the creation of shared experiences, all of which can be utilised as coping mechanisms (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Positive interpersonal relationships are both protective factors and indicators of quality of life in differently abled individuals (Power & Green, 2010; Sivadasan & Narayanan, 2016). Furthermore, positive relations with others can serve as a buffer against negative outcomes such as stigma, as well as physical and mental health problems (Sullivan et al., 2013). However, differently abled individuals' relationships and social interactions are often more restricted than those of the general population, possibly due to limited opportunities, lack of societal acceptance and communication challenges (Sachs & Schreuer, 2011; Devine et al., 2015; Sniatecki et al., 2019; Hendry et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021).

### *Environmental mastery*

Environmental mastery refers to the ability to manage, mould, or choose environments that align with one's needs and values, as well as the optimisation of opportunities (Ryff, 1989; 2018; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Keyes, 2006; Ryff & Singer, 2008). It furthermore refers to a sense of competence and capacity to manage one's external environment and the reality of one's life effectively (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Talbot, 2012). Fava and Ruini (2003) also note that environmental mastery involves the feeling of being able to modify or improve undesirable surroundings, which results in a sense of competence.

Individuals living with disability might require assistance with certain tasks, which often leads to feelings of being overprotected. This, in turn, limits their motivation to master challenging tasks independently and competently (Cimarolli et al., 2006; Morgan et al., 2009). Morgan et al. (2009) argue that a lack of skills to master the academic environment might be one of the contributing factors for the unsatisfactory performance of students. In this regard, Watson et al. (2012) suggest that the educators of students living with disabilities should focus on teaching foundational skills to improve students' levels of mastery.

### *Personal growth*

Personal growth includes a sense of continued growth and development of one's full potential as an individual (Ryff, 1989; 2018), as well as persistent progress when confronted with new challenges (Levine et al., 2006). Personal growth implies an awareness of one's feelings, thoughts, strengths and limitations, as well as the utilisation of this personal knowledge to behave in line with one's potential and values (Levine et al., 2006; Wright et al., 2006). Furthermore, Taubman-Ben-Ari et al. (2011) associate personal growth with hardships, since individuals can exhibit tenacious resilience and eventually experience personal growth when faced with difficulties. Personal growth can also be promoted by a pursuit of life goals (Deci & Ryan, 2008), openness to experiences and the nurturance of creativity (Kashdan et al., 2004).

Personal growth is connected to goal-directed behaviour. Skinner (2004) argued that goal-directedness, perseverance and social support contributed to a positive higher education

experience among students living with learning disabilities. Grigal et al. (2012) found that differently abled students grew towards achieving what they initially considered impossible and redefined their life decisions.

Despite overwhelming evidence of the challenges and difficulties faced by students with disability in higher education, very little is known about these students' coping mechanisms, adaptive strategies and strengths. For example, Li et al. (2021), found that students with disability in China adopt more positive solution strategies (e.g. seeking support and problem-solving) compared to negative avoidance strategies (e.g. distancing and internalising) when they are faced with exclusion practices. In a South African study, Naudé et al. (2022) focused on the meaning that students with disability can construct in their social relationships and with significant others. More research is needed regarding the psychosocial experiences of differently abled first-year students.

## Research methodology

### *Research paradigm and design*

Since this study was focused on discovering and describing the meaning-making experiences of the participants in context, an interpretivist phenomenological paradigm was employed. This enabled us to engage with the participants' world of personal experience and to explore, understand and communicate how participants make sense of their worlds by investigating their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith, 2017). A multiple case study design was utilised to reach a deep understanding of a small group of individuals in their real world (Yin, 2009). A multiple case study design is employed when a number of cases are explored individually. A detailed description of themes in each case is presented. After the individual case analysis has been completed, themes are identified across cases (Yin, 2009). This design was deemed to be the most appropriate, since it enabled us to study the phenomenon in a specific bounded real-world setting (i.e. disability in the first year of higher education).

### *Ethical considerations*

This research study forms part of a larger research project focused on the experiences of differently abled first-year students at a specific higher education institution. The Dean of Students and the Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support at the higher education institution provided ethical authorisation for the study to be conducted. Owing to the vulnerability of the particular population group, the careful consideration of ethical aspects was of utmost importance. We were cognisant of possible imbalances in the researcher-participant relationship and the importance of not crossing a boundary into a psychologist-client relationship. During recruitment, participants were informed about the purpose and nature of the study and that their participation was entirely voluntary (with the freedom to withdraw at any time). Furthermore, the participants were reassured that any information they shared during the interviews would be kept confidential. Informed consent was obtained. Due to the sensitive nature and possible emotional effect of participation, participants could be referred for psychological services if the need arose.

### *Research participants and sampling procedures*

Differently abled students were recruited by means of purposive sampling. Participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) be a student living with a disability; (2) be in the first year of attending a higher education institution; (3) have basic English or Afrikaans proficiency; and (4) be able to give informed consent. Three participants were selected, with the Centre for Universal Access and Disability Support at the higher education institution acting as gatekeeper. Biographic information of the participants is summarised in Table 1.

### *Data collection*

To gain an understanding of the holistic experience, data were collected during the course of the students' first year, on several occasions (February, April, July and October). Four interviews were conducted with each participant, and each of them was also requested to write a reflective report on their experiences at the four time points. The prolonged contact in the field made it more likely for the students to feel comfortable with the researcher and the research process. The interviews were structured around participants' immediate first-year experiences. Active listening skills were used to reflect on the participants' responses and to clarify words or phrases. Although some of the participants in this study had communication difficulties, the interviewer minimised the effect of these difficulties by respecting the pace and location of the interview. Each participant was also requested to participate in reflective writing as it may have been difficult for some participants to express themselves fully during the face-to-face interviews. In Table 2, a summary is provided of the data collected from the three participants.

### *Data analysis*

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) entails a dual process where the participants try to make sense of their worlds, while the researcher tries to make sense of participants' experiences (Smith, 2019). In these dual processes, the importance of maintaining awareness of the cultural and contextual background against which the data are produced and analysed is emphasised. Furthermore, IPA is also idiographic and thus flexible enough to permit unanticipated themes to surface (Smith, 2019; Smith & Eatough, 2019). Following the guidelines of Smith and Osborn (2008), analysis started with the repeated reading of transcripts to become familiar with the data, after which themes in each case were identified to establish patterns of meaning. During this process, connections were drawn between different aspects of the participants' reactions, initial interpretations and psychological theory (which resulted in a higher level of abstraction). The final themes produced an in-depth description of the core experiences of each participant. Following this, themes from the different cases were compared, and contradictions, variances and commonalities across all cases were identified. These were integrated and interpreted using Ryff's (1989; 2018) psychological well-being model as a theoretical framework. Throughout the process, a meaning-discovery orientation (Smith, 2019) was maintained. We were reflective and recognised that the data are interpretations of reality, represented (and bracketed) through the lens of our personal understanding, values, beliefs, knowledge and experiences.

## Results

In this section, the research results are presented individually, followed by a cross-case analysis. To stay true to the participants' voices, verbatim quotations are included.

### Case 1: P\* 'I choose independence'

P\* is an 18-year-old male student. For the first two years of his life, P\* was able to see, but soon after this, he lost the ability to distinguish between light and dark. His current vision is limited to the extent that he uses a cane to familiarise himself with his environment. He previously attended a school for learners living with visual impairments. He had to relocate to attend university, resulting in a limited social support network at the onset of his first year. He resides in a campus residence and is a member of an athletics team. P\* reported academic difficulties mainly due to him underestimating the requirements of higher education. His prominent sense of humour was noticeable during the interviews.

P\*'s first year of higher education was marked by a journey towards greater independence, regardless of the challenges he experienced. For him, making a success of higher education was a crucial step towards becoming an independent adult: *'...I study now to get a good job one day and in this way be able to get by independently'*. His need for independence served as a constant motivator to face challenges and to persevere: *'It is the will to be independent...that helps you to do it...so if you have a goal...then you just have to attack and do it'*, and: *'Uh, it is the perseverance and the realisation to work...maybe also the will to achieve something'*.

Along his journey towards independence, P\* discovered certain strengths, of which humour and the ability to normalise situations were most evident. Humour enabled P\* to deal with stressful situations: *'I was able to laugh at myself when [I] got lost the other day'*. He also utilised humour to form friendships and to make others feel more comfortable around him: *'So many people say I'm very chilled and I'm humorous...Then I just take it from there and, yes, and just live it out'*. Through this, he managed to make others comfortable: *'After I started talking to them, they realised that I was a normal person like them'*. In addition to this, the realisation that his peers are also experiencing difficulties helped P\* normalise his own challenges: *'Maybe the fact that I know that there are other children also struggling...'*. Being aware of others' struggles made him more accepting of himself. He also learned to recognise and take ownership of his accomplishments: *'So, yes, it is quite a big adjustment for any human being. So, I feel pretty good about getting through the first year'*.

As the year progressed, P\*'s confidence in his ability to perform academically increased: *'I feel positive that this semester will go much better academically than the previous semester, because I know now who to ask if I need work and how long in advance I should ask'*. This contributed positively to his overall sense of independence: *'...At this stage, I can cope a lot better on my own. I have learnt to be independent'*. While feeling this independence, he also experienced a sense of belonging: *'I am part of a big first-year family and we all do very well together'*. All this strengthened his commitment to his future dreams: *'I have also now taken my first step in determining my future'*.

### Case 2: J\* 'I have a purpose'

J\* is a 19-year-old male, born with a visual impairment. He uses a cane to guide himself. He previously attended a mainstream school in a small town. His parents are unemployed and financially dependent on his disability grant. Upon hearing that he was offered an academic bursary, he decided to further his studies. J\* resides in a residence on campus and participates in cricket for the visually impaired. J\*'s sense of responsibility was evident in his commitment to the research process.

J\* expressed a deep appreciation for his family and his upbringing and wanted to reciprocate by making a meaningful contribution to the education of individuals living with a visual impairment. Although he initially wanted to study law, he realised the value of education: *'But then I was kinda influenced by my teacher: "No, just study education and plough back to the students here..."I'm from a small town, so there they are really struggling with educators...especially for blind learners. So, they told me: "No, just do what you can do, your Bachelor of Education and come and contribute. Come and give back"'*. This sense of purpose motivated J\* to work hard: *'Me being at university level means that I as an individual have reached half my goal. This is a sign that I am well on my way to reach my full potential and to ensure a better future for me and my family...'*.

J\* regarded his intrinsic motivation as the primary driver of success in higher education: *'I have also learned that being internally driven towards your goals is the key to your success'*. His intrinsic motivation was reinforced by the strength he found in overcoming difficulties: *'I just have this belief that nothing in life is impossible. Even if it is the most difficult thing, even if it seems as the most difficult thing ever...I just have this belief that...there is something and that is something that you can conquer'*. This also resulted in a more positive self-perception and increased confidence: *'Taking all the challenges I overcame throughout the year into consideration, I can truly say that I have become a more confident person...'* and *'...being more independent and self-reliant has given my confidence a boost'*.

Forging social relationships on campus created a sense of belonging: *'I feel at home...'* and a confidence in his abilities: *'It is clear that we as disabled people have no reason not to participate on the same level with sighted or able-bodied individuals, because of environmental constraints. This can change anyone's attitude as it changed mine'*. Discovering his true potential strengthened his autonomy: *'I always thought, you know, being totally dependent is one of the things that we have to deal with, but then, I just proved myself wrong, because I'm quite independent. I do a lot of things for myself. I go to a lot of places by myself'*. Towards the end of the year, he also expressed the intention to follow his dream: *'But in terms of academics...I'm actually thinking I want to...you know...start with law...'*.

### Case 3: S\* 'Finding a healthy balance'

S\* is an 18-year-old male with radial dysplasia and congenital talipes equinovarus (deviation and shortening of the wrist, forearm, and lower limbs). The functionality of S\*'s hands is limited, and he uses a walker to move around independently. He previously attended a small rural school for learners living with physical disabilities. He is an engaged student who participates in chess, cycling, pool and the national wheelchair basketball team, while simultaneously coping with the challenges of academic life. Despite English being S\*'s second language, he

was motivated to express his experiences during the research interviews.

S\* was intensely aware of the privilege, but also the expectations associated with higher education: *'...they [parents] always told me: "Son, I could not get to where you are now, so this is your chance to promote this family – to take it as a higher level, standard"'*. He accepted this responsibility and the importance of academic performance: *'...to get good marks on my education, that would be the first one. To get the best marks, ja, to come all the way'*. He also realised that academic success requires a strong investment: *'...if I don't work hard right now, I won't make it. So, it is basically right now, hard work, hard work, hard work'*. Although S\*'s clear goal resulted in a sense of purpose and direction, as well as the motivation to make the most of his opportunities, his exclusive focus on academic performance created a lack of balance. At times, he refrained from social and sport activities to cope with academic demands and also neglected his personal needs.

Sport participation provided a platform for S\* to find confidence and a sense of freedom from his disability: *'...I found out that there is nothing that can limit you. It is only yourself that can limit yourself. So, in wheelchair basketball I get to be free when I'm there, pushing, playing, you know, ja, it's motivating me'*. The substantial contribution of sport to his emotional well-being was summarised in the following statement: *'Just by playing other sports makes me feel good. And just to forget easily about what happened. And just focus on going forward'*.

S\* could reflect on the new insights he reached and growth he experienced on his journey to reach a healthier equilibrium. This included the importance of discipline and time management: *'And I do well with my time. I don't sit around and watch TV, even if I just sit and try to expand my knowledge to just keep on doing better'*. In addition, S\* argued that he no longer used his disability as an excuse: *'...disabled people...always get to take advantage of their disabilities: "No I'm disabled, I can't do everything"'*. Through a renewed sense of self, S\* managed to acquire academic success, while maintaining a healthy balance. He reflected on his first year of studies in the following quote:

*Out of all things that had happened this year, I would like to say this university...has shown me how one should be able to look out for himself, of studies, friends, etc. Also, that I should always be open minded and be responsible and do my best at all times with whatever I put my mind to, because most of the time there are no second chances in life. So, I should do the most out of what I have.*

### Cross-case analysis

Upon a cross-case analysis, it was evident that certain overarching experiences contributed to the psychofortological experiences of the three differently abled first-year participants. All three participants expressed a *strong sense of purpose and direction*. Related to this, the drive to become *responsible independent adults* and the *drive to succeed* with their studies served as motivators towards perseverance and countered a victim mentality. P\* was driven to find independence and function as an autonomous individual. For J\*, his aspirations to make a meaningful contribution to his family's financial well-being and the education of visually impaired individuals served as a source of internal motivation and perseverance. S\*,

recognising the privilege of opportunities in higher education, regarded his academic performance as a manner to honour his family. The participants had to be proactive in creating motivating and positive outcomes for themselves.

For all three participants, it was important to experience a *sense of belonging*, in P\*'s words: *'a first-year family'*. For both J\* and S\*, participation in sport served as an important vehicle to meet students, make friends and realise their own potential. Social interaction and *positive relations with others* provided an opportunity for the participants to reflect on other students' challenges and to normalise their own experiences. Through navigating the challenges and opportunities of the first year successfully, all three participants learned to see beyond the limitations of their disabilities and discovered *personal qualities and strengths* that helped them succeed. P\* valued his sense of humour as a strength that can alleviate the intensity of the challenges he experienced, as well as reduce initial tension in peer relationships. In believing that *"nothing is impossible"*, J\* reflected on the importance of intrinsic motivation to address difficulties proactively. S\* found strength in self-discipline and time management. Increased *self-acceptance* countered the feeling of being unworthy of participating in higher education, along with the discovery of their true potential and the drive to continue growing in pursuit of their dreams.

*Feelings of mastering the first year in higher education* and achieving academic success during the first year of studies contributed prominently to participants' self-acceptance and motivation to persevere. In this regard, P\* said: *'It just means to me that I'm able to cope at university and that I had the perseverance to complete a year. Although many people say it's your easiest year, the adaptation is often very difficult for any person'*. J\* said: *'Being at the end of the year, well, basically, I made it up to this far. I'm that much closer to graduating and receiving my degree'*. S\* said: *'Okay, it means that I was able to adapt to the university situation. It means I'm fully equipped with what the university has to offer to me. I'm ready to tackle any challenges...that come to me. Ja, I'm ready for the university'*.

## Discussion

The findings of this study offer a reflection on the growth processes of three differently abled students during their first year of higher education. Themes that were developed from the cross-case analysis provide evidence of the dimensions of psychological well-being as proposed by Ryff (1989; 2018) in the participants' lives.

### Living a purpose-driven and autonomous life

Persistence is facilitated by *purpose-driven activity* and was evident in the participants' sense of responsibility towards themselves and others, which provided the necessary direction towards autonomy. Individuals who regard their lives as meaningful and purpose driven live a life marked by intentionality (Ryff, 1989; 2018; Lee et al., 2016; Robbins, 2021). Lourens (2015) highlights the importance of differently abled individuals taking responsibility to successfully address their difficulties in the higher education setting. In this study, determining their personal value, becoming independent and feeling responsible enhanced proactive behaviour. These purpose-driven activities included the identification and use of strengths (P\*), setting

clear goals based on a need to support family (J\*) and finding a healthy balance between different priorities (S\*). These activities were pivotal in approaching academic difficulties and related decisions. A sense of purposeful living was interrelated with participants fulfilling their potential. Scholars agree that self-determination correlates positively with enhanced opportunity seeking tendencies of further education (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Serdiuk & Baranuskienė, 2017) as was the case with the three participants of his study.

### ***Finding self-acceptance through discovering strength and belonging***

Across the cases, *greater self-acceptance* was facilitated through successfully facing challenges and a sense of belonging to the campus community. Once the participants realised that most of their hardships are in fact the norm as other students face the same challenges, they were more capable of approaching their difficulties and doing so in a more dynamic manner. Both the hardship and the opportunities (e.g. sports participation) in the higher education setting aided the participants to discover various positive qualities and personal strengths (such as humour and intrinsic motivation). Moran (2003) notes that *humour* is an effective distraction coping strategy for differently abled individuals, while Vorhaus (2015) found that humour could be utilised to discover differently abled individuals' capabilities. Dunn and Brody (2008) also found humour and being humorous to be contributing factors in the quest to define the good life following a physical disability. Deci and Ryan (2000) note that intrinsically motivated individuals exhibit more interest, confidence and excitement to complete (challenging) tasks. Finding strength through hardship is also associated with Wong's (2020; Wong & Psych 2021) perspectives on mature happiness.

Awareness of one's strengths contribute to overall self-knowledge and is an important prerequisite for self-acceptance, which, in turn, draws parallel with psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989; 2018). Being 'successful' and the *self-confidence* of the individuals participating in this study proved to be reciprocally related. Through persisting, completing tasks and intentionally facing obstacles, success was achieved. The more the participants faced higher education challenges, the more they realised that they have the qualities needed to achieve in higher education. These repeated processes consolidated their self-acceptance.

A sense of belonging through positive relations with others was essential for the participants' well-being. Belonging was facilitated through processes such as sports participation, social interaction and the use of interpersonal strategies (e. g. humour). This strengthened participants' confidence in their ability to succeed and to make a unique and meaningful contribution. This is in accordance with Ryff's (2018; Ryff & Singer, 2008) conceptualisation of positive relations with others.

### ***Personal growth through mastering the higher education environment***

A commitment to personal growth informed by true potential and realistic goals are evident in the psychological well-being of students living with disability. Autonomy, as well as a sense of control are also indicative of the competence to create an environment that is in alignment with one's condition (Ryff, 1989, 2018; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Taubman-Ben-Ari et al., 2011).

However, experiencing the world as beyond their control may prevent individuals from making adaptive changes. In this study, the differently abled students showed that small changes indeed resulted in a sense of greater independence. Personal growth was the outcome of a combination of processes and ranged from making meaningful social connections to reformulating career dreams. This aligns with Devar et al. (2020), who have argued for the promotion of positive representations of disability. Finally, the experiences of the differently abled first-year students led to a reframing and the formation of a new life perspective in which the students viewed themselves as differently abled, rather than disabled. Wasserman et al. (2016), Dolmage (2017) and Saia (2022) also noted the necessity of accepting the full range of human variations (in terms of physical and social practices) to challenge ableism and the disadvantages differently abled individuals often face.

### ***Reflections on the current study, implications and recommendations for the future***

The participants' experiences, so generously shared during this process, evoked a profound sense of respect in us, both for the distinctive challenges these students endured and the psychological strength and growth they portrayed. Through a process of reflexivity, our positionality was bracketed. Still, the co-constructed nature of meaning-making in this research process is acknowledged.

The aim of this study was to explore and understand rather than to predict and explain the psychofortological experiences of differently abled individuals. The small sample size was deliberate, with the intention of focusing on in-depth data and participants' lived experience. This is in accordance with the IPA process (Smith, 2017). In an attempt to keep the study as focused as possible, three rich cases were selected. All three participants were male. The homogenous nature of the sample may be considered a limitation. Future research should consider including a larger, more heterogeneous sample involving different gender identifications and various types of disabilities to ensure different and nuanced perspectives. The inclusion of participants from various higher education institutions will make results more transferrable.

This study aimed to make a unique contribution to the existing body of knowledge by focusing on the psychofortological experiences of differently abled first-year students, and utilising Ryff's (1989; 2018) psychological well-being model as a theoretical lens. Challenges were explored in conjunction with positive experiences. In viewing the experiences of differently abled individuals from a psychofortological perspective, it became clear how much these individuals have to offer in terms of their unique strengths to grow and find purpose through the challenges posed by higher education. In moving forward, the intersection of psychofortology and disability needs to be explored in more detail to enhance the understanding of life beyond disability. Recognising the experiences of students with disabilities from a positive and well-being approach might result in a stronger realisation of what these students may offer to educational and peer support programmes. It is essential to look beyond disability and encourage full participation of differently abled individuals in all spheres of life. By nurturing these experiences and realising these strengths, higher education institutions can contribute towards a more inclusive learning environment and a just society for all.



## Conclusion – from disabled to differently abled

Ryff (2018) emphasises the importance of science in the pursuit of human potential. This study responded to the call for socially relevant research and aimed to contribute to the understanding of meaningful living, purposeful engagement and self-realisation in the specific life domain of psychological well-being and in the context of disability. In the current study, participants reframed the hardship they experienced during their first year of higher education and noted that the challenges they endured enhanced their personal development. The participants regarded the success resulting from their personal growth as evidence of positive future prospects in the higher education environment. An important realisation during participants' first year was the discovery that challenges are, in fact, ubiquitous to the higher education experience. The participants' newly found insight and strengths, as well as sense of belonging contributed noticeably to their levels of self-acceptance. It was important for the differently abled students participating in this study to have realistic expectations with regard to the challenges that could be addressed and those that had to be accepted. In other words, it was necessary for them to accept themselves in a holistic manner, with a mature meaning orientation and with a disposition towards existential growth. In essence, the participants' first year of higher education motivated them to regard themselves (and others) as differently abled rather than disabled.

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