

**THE SILENCE BEHIND ACHIEVEMENT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY
ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF OUTSTANDING STUDENTS**

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Abstract

High-achieving students are often seen as strong and successful figures, but in reality, many of them experience hidden psychological stress. This study is important to reveal the silent side behind academic achievement that is often overlooked, especially related to mental health. This study aims to understand the subjective experiences of high-achieving students in dealing with academic and social pressure and how they respond to mental health conditions that arise as a result. The method used in this study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 15 active students at the State Islamic University who had a GPA ≥ 3.5 and had achieved academic or non-academic achievements. Data analysis was carried out using a thematic approach based on the Braun and Clarke procedure. The results of the study showed five main themes: achievement pressure and academic anxiety, social loneliness and alienation, coping strategies for stress, the need for social support, and the role of perfectionism in influencing mental conditions. High-achieving students were shown to experience high stress but had varying coping mechanisms. This study aims to emphasize the importance of the role of educational institutions in providing a safe and inclusive psychological support space for high-achieving students so that achievement can go hand in hand with mental well-being.

Keywords: Mental health, high-achieving students, academic pressure, perfectionism, phenomenology.

Abstrak

Mahasiswa berprestasi sering kali dipandang sebagai sosok yang kuat dan sukses, namun kenyataannya tidak sedikit dari mereka yang mengalami tekanan psikologis tersembunyi. Penelitian ini penting dilakukan untuk mengungkap sisi sunyi di balik prestasi akademik yang sering terabaikan, khususnya terkait kesehatan mental. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami pengalaman subjektif mahasiswa berprestasi dalam menghadapi tekanan akademik dan sosial, serta bagaimana mereka menyikapi kondisi kesehatan mental yang muncul sebagai dampaknya. Metode yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi fenomenologis. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam

terhadap 15 mahasiswa aktif di Universitas Islam Negeri yang memiliki IPK $\geq 3,5$ dan pernah meraih prestasi akademik atau non-akademik. Analisis data dilakukan menggunakan pendekatan tematik berdasarkan prosedur Braun dan Clarke. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan lima tema utama: tekanan prestasi dan kecemasan akademik, kesepian sosial dan keterasingan, strategi penyikapan terhadap tekanan, kebutuhan dukungan sosial, serta peran perfeksionisme dalam mempengaruhi kondisi mental. Mahasiswa berprestasi terbukti mengalami stres tinggi, namun memiliki mekanisme koping yang bervariasi. Dengan dilakukannya penelitian ini agar dapat menekankan pentingnya peran institusi pendidikan dalam menyediakan ruang dukungan psikologis yang aman dan inklusif bagi mahasiswa berprestasi, agar prestasi dapat berjalan seiring dengan kesejahteraan mental.

Kata Kunci: Kesehatan mental, siswa berprestasi, tekanan akademis, perfeksionisme, fenomenologi.

Introduction

Outstanding students are often seen as ideal figures who are able to balance academic achievements, organizational activities, and healthy social relationships. In various fields of education, they are considered a reflection of the success of the learning system, as well as role models for their peers. This forms the expectation that outstanding students must always appear strong, productive, and free from psychological problems (Mutmainnah, 2020). Educational institutions, families, and society indirectly put outstanding students in positions that demand that students must succeed in education. These pressures often go unnoticed, as their successes are more often celebrated than studied in depth. Some students do not even get the slightest appreciation. In this ideal, the aspect of psychological well-being is often overlooked or hidden behind achievements.

Many of the outstanding college students out there seem to be successful but hide the psychological distress they are experiencing. The high expectations placed on them often add to the emotional burden, cause constant stress, and increase the risk of mental disorders such as burnout, anxiety, and even depression (Wulandari & Suryadi 2022). In addition, high-achieving students often find it difficult to share their feelings, for fear of being perceived as dramatic or excessive. This reality is further complicated by the evolving social stigma regarding mental health. In an academic setting, talking about mental issues is often considered a sign of weakness or incompetence. Therefore, many outstanding students choose to suppress their feelings, which actually worsens their mental state (Sari & Mulyani 2021). As a result, some students choose self-harm as a form of channeling the pain experienced.

Accomplished college students often appear to be academically and socially stable, but they may show some signs of neglected mental health disorders. Accomplished college students often feel anxious about their future, academic grades, or other people's perceptions of them. This anxiety

can be seen in the form of excessive worry that causes their activities to be disrupted. According to Safitri & Hidayat (2019), the pressure to always look perfect can lead to chronic anxiety that disrupts emotional balance. Many high-achieving students tend to avoid social interaction because they feel they don't have time or feel alienated from their peers who don't have the same achievements. This can lead to feelings of loneliness and self-confinement that end up making the student depressed. Sari & Mulyani (2021) mentioned that this can worsen loneliness and trigger more serious psychological problems.

Symptoms of Depression are also felt by some students. Signs of depression, such as constant feelings of tiredness, loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities, reduced focus on academic activities, and sleep disturbances or eating disorders, often happen to students who feel pressured to continue to excel. Wulandari and Suryadi (2022) noted that students with high academic pressure have a greater risk of experiencing mild to moderate depression. Facing the reality of mental health experienced by outstanding students requires an approach that involves various parties such as educational institutions, families, and students themselves. Here are some solutions that can be implemented:

- Campuses need to provide counseling services that are easily accessible, friendly, and free, and *sharing* sessions is also important to build collective awareness. According to Nugroho and Lestari (2021), the existence of professional counselors and a supportive system can reduce students' resistance to seeking psychological help.
- Students need to be taught about skills in managing emotions, stress, and academic stress through specialized training or courses on mental health. Research by Shapiro et al. (2008) shows that *mindfulness* can reduce anxiety, increase self-awareness, and improve emotional balance.
- Campuses must get rid of the thought that having mental problems is not a weakness. This can be done by spreading positive information about the importance of taking care of mental health, especially among outstanding students who are prone to harboring pressure.
- Discussion groups, support communities, can be a safe place for students to share stories with each other so that they don't feel alone. The role of peers is very important as a source of emotional support.
- Lecturers and their staff can play a role in balancing the academic load, as well as providing relief that allows students to maintain a work-life balance and their personal health. Maslach and Leiter (2016) suggest the importance of workload balance to prevent burnout in the work and educational environment.

- Students need to be involved in campus policymaking related to their welfare so that the solutions taken are really in accordance with their needs.

To delve deeper into the experiences of outstanding students related to mental health, this study formulated the following questions:

1. What is the emotional experience of outstanding students in the midst of academic demands?
2. Do outstanding college students experience loneliness or hidden stress?
3. What factors help or worsen the mental health of outstanding students?

This study refers to burnout proposed by Maslach and Leiter (1997), explaining that burnout is a condition of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a decline in personal achievement due to constant pressure. In the context of outstanding students, the demands to maintain high academic achievement and social image can cause psychological fatigue that has an impact on academic performance and overall mental well-being. Then this research also refers to the theory of anxiety according to Spielberger (1972), which distinguishes between state anxiety that arises due to certain situations and trait anxiety, which is anxiety inherent in the individual's personality. Outstanding students often experience academic anxiety, which is anxiety that focuses on exam results, grades, or expectations from the surrounding environment. This anxiety can develop into chronic and impact emotional stability.

This research also refers to the Depression theory from Beck (1967) through a cognitive approach, stating that depression is caused by a negative mindset about oneself, the environment, and the future (cognitive triad). Outstanding students who fail to meet high expectations can experience deep disappointment that leads to feelings of worthlessness, loss of motivation, and the appearance of depressive symptoms.

Although the issue of mental health among students has been widely discussed, studies that specifically highlight the subjective experiences of outstanding students in the face of psychological pressure are still very limited, especially in the context of academic culture in Indonesia. This research has novelty because it uses a phenomenological approach to explore the hidden meanings behind academic achievement, as well as uncover the rarely heard emotional and psychological side of students who externally seem successful. Not only looking at psychological symptoms such as anxiety, burnout, and depression, this study also emphasizes the importance of a humanistic perspective in understanding the internal struggles of outstanding students. The urgency of this research lies in the increasing expectations and competitive pressures in the higher education environment, which indirectly encourage students to suppress their emotional vulnerability in

order to maintain their achievements. This condition, if left unattended without adequate psychological support, risks exacerbating mental health crises among high-achieving students and widening the gap in understanding of the true meaning of academic success.

Method

This research uses a qualitative approach that aims to understand the subjective experience of outstanding students in dealing with psychological pressure during higher education. A phenomenological approach was chosen so that researchers can delve deeply into the hidden meanings behind academic achievements, especially related to issues of anxiety, burnout, and emotional distress. The data in this study was collected through in-depth interviews conducted in a semi-structured manner. The interview guidelines were prepared based on the purpose of the research to explore the subjective experiences of outstanding students related to academic stress and mental health conditions.

The data sources in this study are undergraduate program students in Indonesia who have a minimum GPA of 3.5 and have obtained academic or non-academic achievements at the faculty, university, and external levels. Participant selection was carried out by purposive sampling technique, which is deliberately selecting subjects based on certain characteristics that are relevant to the focus of the research. The main criteria used were their status as an active student, their track record of achievement, and their willingness to share their experiences openly regarding academic and mental health pressure. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, with open coding steps, categorization, and the discovery of the main themes that represent the essence of the participant's experience. To maintain the validity of the data, member checking and triangulation were carried out by matching the interview results with field notes. The research was carried out on Thursday, May 8, 2025, at the Syekh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary State Islamic University Padangsidempuan, involving 15 participants from the Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training (FTIK).

Results and Discussion

This study involved 15 participants, keeping their identities confidential. Based on interviews with 15 participants, the study identified several key themes that describe their experiences related to academic stress, anxiety, and mental health. These themes reflect the challenges that outstanding students often face, as well as how they manage these conditions in their daily lives. The following is a further discussion of the themes found:

Key Theme 1: Meaning and Feelings of Performance

- Theme: Pride and Gratitude, but with Its Own Burden
- Respondents: All respondents felt pride, gratitude, and even motivation from their accomplishments. However, some also mention psychological burdens, such as having to maintain achievements (Syafa, Ihda, Fadilah, Hani).
- Key Quote: "I feel quite happy and grateful... But sometimes I also feel overwhelmed..." (Syafa). "Being an outstanding student is quite proud because I can share my knowledge..." (Hani)

Key Theme 2: Academic Stress and Stress

- Theme: Stress comes from oneself and the environment around
- Respondents: All respondents, except Dewi, mentioned that there was pressure. Sources of pressure include exams, expectations of self and others, and the burden of maintaining achievement.
- Key Quotes: "Very likely... feel pressure to maintain or even improve on those achievements." (Ihda). "Of course there is, because from there will arise hatred from friends..." (Hani)

Key Theme 3: Time and Task Management Strategies

- Theme: Time Management as the Key to Survival
- Respondents: All respondents tried to manage their time as effectively as possible, but some remained exhausted and overwhelmed (Syafa, Fadilah, Hani).
- Key Quote: "I keep a diary, but when activities are too busy... feeling overwhelmed." (Syafa). "Developing time management skills is key." (Fadilah)

Key Theme 4: Feeling Isolated or Misunderstood

- Theme: Loneliness and Lack of Empathy
- Respondents: The majority feel that they are not always understood. They highlight that people only see results, not processes and mental burdens.
- Key Quote: "I feel misunderstood... They only look at the side of achievements." (Syafa). "Even if you look successful from the outside, you can experience loneliness." (Ihda)

Key Theme 5: Recognition of Process vs Outcome

- Theme: Lack of Appreciation for Process

- Respondents: Almost all respondents stated that many people only see results, not struggles (Syafa, Ihda, Fadilah, Hani).
- Key Quote: "Others may just see the end result without realizing the effort..." (Ihda)

Key Theme 6: Expectations for Environmental Support

- Theme: The Need for Genuine Emotional Support
- Respondent: There is diversity. Syafa and Ihda want to be heard without being judged. Hani and Dewi tend not to expect too much emotional support.
- Key Quote: "Sometimes I need a place to tell a story... But not everyone is willing to listen." (Syafa)

Main Theme 7: The Impact of Achievement on Social Relations

- Theme: Social Relationships Can Be Strengthened or Eroded
- Respondents: There is a good influence (networking, respect), but also the risk of social jealousy or isolation.
- Key Quotes: "Achievements... It can also cause envy or distance." (Ihda)

Main Theme 8: Achievement as a Burden

- Theme: Burdens due to Expectations and Shortcomings in Other Areas
- Respondents: Almost everyone has felt that their achievements are a burden, especially when they feel that they have to excel in everything, including practices that are not their field (Hani).
- Key Quote: "My achievements in theory alone... Practice is a burden because it's not my basics." (Hani)

Key Theme 9: Managing Expectations and Failures

- Theme: Learning to Accept and Adjust Expectations
- Respondents: All showed a reflective attitude. Some try to keep realistic expectations (Ihda, Dewi), and learn from failure.
- Key Quote: "I always have high expectations, but failure is not a big deal." (Dewi)

Key Theme 10: Message to Others

- Theme: Appreciation of Struggle, Not Just Results

- Respondents: All convey that achievement is not everything, and people need to understand the difficult process behind achievement.
- Key Quote: "If you only see the results, you should try it out for yourself." (Fadilah)

Students who excel during academic demands experience a complex spectrum of emotions. In general, they show pride and satisfaction over academic achievements, but these emotions are often overshadowed by anxiety, fatigue, and constant stress. One of the participants stated, "It feels good if the score is good, but after that I immediately think about the next task. I don't think I have time to enjoy it." (P4), which shows how positive emotions are quickly replaced with new stresses. Anxiety is also often present, as shown by another participant: "Sometimes I wake up in the morning feeling nervous, afraid that someone will forget or not prepare for the exam." (P6). This shows the daily mental stress they experience. While recognition from lecturers can be a source of encouragement, it is also a new burden. "The lecturer often praises me in class; it makes me happy, but I also feel like I have always been perfect." (P10). Some students even experience sleep and emotional disturbances due to excessive academic pressure, as expressed by P3, "If there are many deadlines, I get angry easily and have trouble sleeping." On the other hand, feelings of depression can culminate in the form of an explosion of hidden emotions, as told by P2, "I used to cry in the middle of the night because I felt so tired, but I couldn't stop studying." These findings show that the emotional experience of outstanding students is not only happiness over achievement but also colored by mental tension due to internal and external expectations.

Furthermore, this study reveals that loneliness and hidden pressure are an inseparable part of the lives of outstanding students. Many of them feel that they have to hide their emotions to maintain their image as strong individuals. P1 said, "People think I'm fine because I always get a high GPA, even though I often feel empty." This emotional loneliness often arises due to the lack of space to show vulnerability. The same thing was expressed by P7, "I rarely tell my friends because I am afraid, they will think of me as lebay," indicating the pressure to keep one's own feelings. P12 adds a description of loneliness in academic struggles: "Loneliness is real, especially when I study alone at night and think I'm the only one who works hard like this." This feeling of isolation is reinforced by the demands of the family, as shown by P8, "I don't want to make my parents worry, so I just bear all the stress myself." In addition, emotional relationships with peers are not always balanced. "I once had a friend tell me about the problem, and I helped. But when I needed it, I felt like there was no place for a story." (P5). This situation shows the presence of social pressure and hidden emotional burdens that are invisible to the outside but have a significant impact on their psychological well-being.

Regarding the factors that help or worsen the mental health of outstanding students, the results of the study show that there is an interaction between protective factors and risk. Spiritual support appears to be one of the effective coping mechanisms. "If I regularly write a personal journal and confide in Allah, it feels lighter." (P11). In addition, the role of a supportive supervisor also helps students maintain their mental health. "My supervisor always told me not to be too myself; it made me feel supported." (P9). However, there are also behaviors that worsen mental conditions, such as neglecting basic needs. "When I was too focused on grades, I often forgot to eat and sleep." (P6). On the contrary, having peers who support each other is a source of strength. "Friends who are on the same frequency as me, who both have learning goals, that's really important." (P4). One of the most dominant risk factors is perfectionism, as P2 revealed, "I feel like I'm failing if I don't get an A, and it makes me overthink for days." Therefore, a balance between social support, spirituality, a healthy lifestyle, and the ability to accept imperfections is an important key in maintaining the mental health of outstanding students.

It can be concluded that the emotional experiences of outstanding students are greatly influenced by the dynamics between academic demands and their psychological state. The emotions they experience are not only pride but also include stress and mental fatigue that are often invisible. They also experience loneliness and hidden pressure due to social and internal expectations to continue to perform perfectly. Factors that affect their mental health include a combination of protective aspects such as social support, spirituality, and healthy relationships and risk factors such as perfectionism and competitive pressure. These findings reinforce the importance of emotional support and campus policies that are sensitive to mental health, especially for students who are often considered 'strong' just because they excel.

Conclusions

This research indicates that exceptional academic accomplishments are inextricably linked to intricate psychological constraints experienced by excellent pupils. A phenomenological study involving fifteen participants identified five primary themes: achievement pressure and academic anxiety, social loneliness and feelings of isolation, strategies for coping with pressure, the necessity of social support, and the influence of perfectionism on mental distress.

Participants reported significant concern regarding the maintenance of accomplishment, emotional exhaustion, and social isolation that frequently remained unrecognized. While some individuals have successfully employed various ways to mitigate stress, many still require enhanced

social support from family, friends, and campus organizations. Perfectionism serves as an internal component that intensifies stress, highlighting the necessity of balancing ambition with self-acceptance.

Consequently, it is imperative for higher education institutions to not only acknowledge students' academic accomplishments but also to offer secure environments and psychological support services that facilitate the preservation of their mental well-being. This support will enhance students' well-being and promote the sustainability of their overall accomplishment.

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