Abstract for INNP 2026: The meaning of 'acceptance' of a psychiatric diagnosis

The notion that patients should “accept” their psychiatric diagnosis is widely invoked in clinical practice and research, yet both the meaning of psychiatric diagnoses and the concept of acceptance remain conceptually unclear. This study examines how existing theoretical models of diagnosis acceptance correspond to the lived experiences of psychiatric patients.

We conducted an iterative thematic analysis of 30 illness narratives written by (former) psychiatric patients. Analysis proceeded in three phases: (1) review of transcripts for overall narratives and attitudes toward diagnoses, (2) extraction of detailed data using a narrative summary template and (3) refining and comparison of themes across narratives.

Findings suggest that prevailing models of diagnosis acceptance insufficiently capture patient experiences. Attitudes toward diagnoses were multidimensional, dynamic and rarely described in terms of “acceptance.” Participants often emphasised the importance of telling their stories without being defined by diagnostic labels and frequently conflated DSM-5 classifications with broader diagnostic terms, revealing communicative and conceptual ambiguities in psychiatric practice. Importantly, disagreement with a diagnosis did not necessarily undermine therapeutic relationships; collaborative engagement proved more significant than diagnostic consensus.

These findings challenge the assumption that diagnosis acceptance is a necessary therapeutic goal. Instead, they support relational and narrative approaches in which clinicians and patients co-construct meaningful accounts of distress, highlighting the importance of epistemic negotiation and shared meaning-making in psychiatric care.