

**Intercultural competence, Inclusion, and Psychological Well-being Among First-year
Psychology Students**

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Abstract

With the increasing globalization, societies have become more multicultural than ever before. To be able to adapt to, engage in, and interact with culturally different others, one should be aware of cultural values. This is called intercultural competence, ICC for short, and it has been an increasingly important factor in the work environment. However, little is known about ICC during the transition to higher education. Studies have suggested that ICC can help with integration and inclusion. In the current study, we are interested in whether ICC predicts inclusion and psychological well-being in first-year students. We suggest that ICC will positively relate to perceived inclusion and well-being and that it also moderates the relationship between the latter two. A sample of 166 first-year students filled in several questionnaires. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with three students to gain more insight into the found relationships. Results show that there is a significant relationship between ICC and well-being, and no moderation of ICC on the relation between inclusion and well-being was found. The paper concludes with discussing implications and several suggestions for future research, stressing the importance of ICC during early stages of one's education.

Keywords: intercultural competence, cultural metacognition, psychological well-being, inclusion, intercultural communication competence

Intercultural competence, Inclusion, and Psychological Well-being Among First-year Psychology Students

If you think about culture, what is the first thing that comes to mind? For some people, it just means identifying with the norms of the country they were born in. For others, it might be their religious beliefs. An important note about culture is that it is complex. Although the country/region one originates from and their religion can have a big impact on how one identifies, there is more to it. Culture also encompasses other dimensions like social habits, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and age groups (Pappas et al., 2021). While one's behavior and mental processes influence their cultural norms, these cultural norms in turn influence one's behavior and mental processes. For example, research has shown significant cultural influences on interpersonal communication, self-regulation, self-worth, and a lot of other dimensions (Lehman et al., 2004).

Intercultural competence

Having sufficient knowledge of cultures has become increasingly important in today's day and age. Ever since the end of the previous century, migration rates have been increasing every year and they are currently at an all-time high (IOM, 2020). This has resulted in a significant increase in multi-cultural societies all around the world. Because of this, many organizations have focused on training their employees and interventions for more inclusive and effective performance (Landis et al., 2004).

Erin Meyer wrote a book on overcoming intercultural difficulties, called *The Culture Map* (Meyer, 2016). In this book, a lot of situations are described that one might encounter while working together with people from different cultures. One example of these intercultural difficulties is as follows: an Israeli manager working overseas at a Russian location might prefer an egalitarian leadership style, while in Russia, in general people are used to a hierarchical style. This could lead to the subordinates feeling like their leader is not taking enough action, resulting in a cultural misunderstanding. This situation could have been overcome by more cultural knowledge from both sides. To solve this problem, cultural

differences should be pointed out. Expectations should be discussed, and eventually, a general agreement can be made. This is one of many examples of how cultural skills (and knowledge) can be of help in today's world. Adapting to and understanding cultural differences is part of a skill known as intercultural competence, ICC for short.

ICC can be defined as "the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2006). Barrett (2013) specified this definition as "a set of values, attitudes, knowledge, understanding, skills, and behaviors", not only for understanding and respecting people from different cultures but also for having effective interactions with those people and creating strong relationships. There are plentiful other theories and models besides ICC. For example, one could call it "cultural effectiveness", "cultural intelligence", or "intercultural communication competence". Although there are slight differences in how these models are defined, there is a consensus that the focus is on effective and appropriate interaction across differing cultures (Bennett, 2014).

Becoming interculturally competent is a lifelong cycle of thinking, performing, and reflecting (Strohmeier et al., 2017), which is similar to Kolb's learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), in which there are four stages of learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. This means that with experience, ICC will increase. Thus, training ICC will require a lot of real-life experiences. For one to reach a high level of ICC, it will take a lot of time and effort.

ICC has been an important skill in the working field and is applied in selection and training procedures. As described earlier, expatriates need to be prepared for the country they are going to be living in. Due to the increase in cultural diversity in many countries, ICC is not only crucial for expatriates but for anyone who gets in touch with culturally different people. For example, a lot of university students will have to work together with culturally different people (Leung et al., 2014). A large body of research has been dedicated to concepts and models of ICC (e.g., Bird et al., 2010; Javidan et al., 2011; Van der Zee et al.,

2000; Hammer et al., 1998; Ang et al., 2007), to measure and increase ICC in the work environment.

A lot of articles exploring ICC focus on business settings (e.g., multinationals, global leadership, expatriates (e.g., Bird et al., 2010; Inceoglu et al., 2012; Lloyd et al., 2010)), but, as noted above, the importance of ICC extending beyond business life should not be underestimated. For example, in a study done in Tanzania, it is shown that interaction with and understanding of different cultures will lead to more peace within the country. It was found that participants who had more cross-cultural involvement were getting along better with culturally different people, and experienced increased self-efficacy. This shows the ubiquitous importance of cross-cultural exchanges among the younger generations.

(Johnson et al., 2012).

At this point, it is clear that intercultural competence is an all-encompassing factor in life that should not be overlooked, especially with the increasing globalization of the past few decades. Some more influencing factors will be discussed below. These will highlight the complexity of ICC.

Cultural metacognition

Researchers noticed a lack of research on ICC among individuals. They wanted to investigate the individual differences within ICC, so they developed the cultural intelligence scale (CQS, Earley et al., 2003), which is a meaningful predictor of psychological, behavioral, and performance outcomes (for a more detailed review, see Leung et al., 2014). A lot of overlap can be seen between ICC and CQ, and some (but not all) researchers use these terms interchangeably (Kwantes et al., 2017). Thus, in this paper, while the research is mostly focused on ICC, some results will be drawn from research on CQ.

One of the subscales of CQS is metacognitive intelligence (MCQ). Metacognition is the ability to monitor and control one's thought processes (Nelson et al., 1994), and it is a higher-order cognitive process. Cultural metacognition is an important factor in acquiring and understanding cultural knowledge, and it provides control over one's culture-related thinking processes (Ang et al., 2006). John Flavell, an educational psychologist, is one of the first to

do research on this topic (Flavell, 1971) and notes that metacognition is intentional, conscious, and goal directed. It helps one perform tasks, both on one's own and in a group. A recent study investigated what role metacognition plays in intercultural learning, and the results showed that participants with increased levels of cultural metacognition were able to adapt faster to new cultures, knowing how to behave and interact better than participants with lower levels of cultural metacognition (Morris et al., 2019). Cultural metacognition was even called a "new frontier in cross-cultural competence research" (Chiu et al., 2013). Furthermore, it was found that metacognitive cultural intelligence predicts, among others, cultural acuity, decision making, and achievement (Ang et al., 2007). Thus, it seems that cultural metacognition is an important asset for developing ICC.

Inclusion and loneliness

Recently, the Dutch government proposed national plans for more diversity and inclusion within academic education (Rijksoverheid, 2020). They note that it is important to create a learning and working environment that provides safety and room for personal development. The motivation for this plan is to foster the quality of academic education and research.

For students just starting out on their academic journey, it is important that they feel included in their social environment. According to the self-determination theory (Deci et al., 1991), humans have a need for growth and are motivated to fulfill their needs. Two types of these needs are relatedness and autonomy. These needs are, among others, used to define inclusion (Jansen et al., 2014): a two-dimensional concept with on one side 'perceived belonging' and on the other 'perceived authenticity'. This means that, to feel maximally included, one has to feel connected as a part of a group, while at the same time being able to be their authentic selves. Not feeling included can significantly impact one's mental health (Macdonald et al., 2005) and emotions (Twenge et al., 2001) in a negative way.

Research on international students in the UK shows that many first-year international students have struggled with feelings of loneliness (Wawera et al., 2020), and an Australian study showed that more than two-thirds of the participants have struggled with loneliness

and/or feelings of isolation (Sawir et al., 2008). Weiss (1973) notes that students who lose contact with their family members and personal networks experience personal and social loneliness, respectively. In the Australian study, a third type of loneliness was identified: cultural loneliness. This can set in when one experiences a lack of their preferred cultural norms and values in their immediate environment. This is yet another important aspect where culture plays a large role, and it is thus crucial to get insight into whether being interculturally competent can help with feeling included with one's peers.

Linking culture and loneliness, it was found that people who identify as individualistic tend to experience more feelings of loneliness than people who identify with a collectivistic culture (Barreto et al., 2021). It is thus expected that being interculturally competent can help one overcome a lack of social ties and reduce feelings of loneliness.

A recent study done on Cape Verdean immigrants found that feelings of loneliness decreased with more successful integration and higher identification with one's ethnicity (Neto et al., 2022). Considering the definition, it is expected that having a high level of intercultural competence will foster the success of one's integration within a new environment. Furthermore, research on the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI, Hammer et al., 1998), a model measuring ICC, shows a positive relationship between the level of intercultural competence and the number of friends with different cultural backgrounds (Hammer, 2005). From these results, it can be expected that, on average, interculturally competent people also feel more included and less lonely.

Inclusion and ICC seem to be related in several other ways. By being aware of cultural differences, organisations can adapt their interviewing styles to promote diversity and inclusion (Bennett, 2014). More ways of how ICC plays a role in inclusion are, for example, recruiting members of ethnical minority groups, managing diverse teams, planning events and meetings, coaching, et cetera. Within all these activities, whenever there are members with different cultural backgrounds, one should be aware of these differences.

As noted above, it is expected that people with high ICC also feel more included. This is seen as a bottom-up process, but it is also expected that this relationship works in a top-

down situation: when the members of a(n) (academic) group are more interculturally competent, new members should also feel more included because of the collective awareness of one's cultural identity.

Psychological well-being

Considering inclusion and loneliness affect well-being, with ICC possibly being an influencing factor, exploring the existence of a direct relationship between ICC and well-being would be the next step in this research. The effect of cultural intelligence as a moderator on the relationship between life satisfaction and social connections has been investigated (Chen et al., 2021). A positive relationship between social connectedness and cultural intelligence was found, with cultural intelligence playing a mediating role in life satisfaction.

How well one copes with life stresses depends on their level of well-being. Students migrating to start their academic careers might experience acculturation stress (Williams et al., 1991). Intercultural competence can be helpful in overcoming or decreasing the amount of strain one feels. Research on students in India has shown that cultural intelligence is negatively related to acculturation stress, and it has a positive influence on psychological well-being (Ayoob et al., 2015).

It is shown that intercultural communication is an influencing factor in decreasing anxiety and discomfort when interacting with different cultures (Neuliep, 2019). Furthermore, intercultural interactions promote confidence and feelings of equity (Yeasmin et al., 2019). It can be expected that a higher level of ICC will lead to more effective interactions between cultures, and thus result in higher psychological well-being.

The current study

The current study explores the relationship between intercultural competence, cultural metacognition, perceived inclusion, and psychological well-being in first-year students. The main question that is being explored is to what extent first-year students feel included within their academic environment, and whether their level of intercultural competence is of significant influence. The study is focused on students studying at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. In the last few decades, research on intercultural competence,

diversity, and inclusion has increased but mostly lays emphasis on expatriates. Therefore, a lot of exploratory research can be done by studying students, and their transition into higher education. This is important, as university students will have a lot of cross-cultural interactions, and a high level of ICC will promote the effectiveness of said interactions. The following hypotheses will be tested:

1. Students reporting relatively high levels of cultural metacognition will have a significantly higher sense of intercultural competence.
2. Intercultural competence will significantly predict perceived inclusion in first-year students.
3. Intercultural competence will moderate the relationship between inclusion and psychological well-being, such that a higher level of intercultural competence will strengthen the relationship between the other two variables.

Methods

Study One (quantitative)

Participants and procedure

For study one, the sample consisted of first-year psychology students. They signed up using the recruitment platform of the University of Groningen. In total 166 students participated in the study, 95 of which indicated that they followed the Dutch program of the bachelor's degree, while 71 indicated they followed the English program. Of the participants, 130 were female, 35 were male and one participant preferred not to say. The average age of the participants was 19.74 ($SD = 2.25$). For the country of origin, 104 reported being from the Netherlands, 29 from Germany, 28 from the EU, and 5 were from non-EU countries.

The students were asked to complete seven questionnaires with a total of 112 items and were compensated in form of points that count towards a required module, a part of the curriculum.

Materials

Psychological Wellbeing Scale (PWS)

The Psychological Wellbeing Scale (Ryff et al., 2007) is designed to measure six dimensions of well-being and happiness. On a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree), respondents show to what extent they either agree or disagree with the statements on the questionnaire. The original scale has 42 items for measuring psychological well-being. For the current study, a shorter version has been used, consisting of 18 items (Ryff et al., 1995). This version is less reliable but takes less time to administer. Example questions on the questionnaire are “The demands of everyday life often get me down”, “I am good at managing the responsibilities of daily life”, and “I gave up trying to make big improvements or changes in my life a long time ago”. Ryff’s Psychological Wellbeing Scale is shown to have test-retest reliability of .82, with all subscales being statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), thus being valid and reliable enough in assessing psychological well-being (Bayani et al., 2008).

Inclusion scale (PGIS)

This questionnaire is designed to measure the perceived group inclusion using the perceived group inclusion scale (PGIS, Jansen et al., 2014). The PGIS consists of 16 items questioning the sense of belonging and authenticity. According to the optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer & Roccas, 2001), which the questionnaire is based on, people have contrary fundamental needs for belongingness and uniqueness. Example statements for belongingness and authenticity on the questionnaire are “This group treats me as an insider” and “This group encourages me to be who I am”, respectively. On a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), respondents rate to what extent they agree or disagree with the statements that are being mentioned. The PGIS has a Cronbach’s α larger than 0.96, with all its components being statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), thus being valid and reliable to assess inclusion.

Due to an unforeseen technical error, this questionnaire’s data were lost. To still be able to examine the relationship between ICC and inclusion, the ‘Loneliness’ variable was

used. Participants were asked to rate their emotions on a slider scale (1 = not lonely at all; 100 = extremely lonely).

Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS)

The Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS; Chen & Starosta, 2000) is a 24-item scale with five factors: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. The questions are answered on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) The scale has a Cronbach's α larger than .86, thus is reliable enough to assess intercultural sensitivity. In this study, this scale is used to assess ICC.

Openness to Diversity

For measuring openness to diversity, part of the College Students Experiences Questionnaire was used (CSEQ, Kuh et al., 2003). Results were measured on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Example items are *"The courses I enjoy the most are those that make me think about things from a different perspective"*, and *"I enjoy talking to people who have values different from mine because it helps me understand myself and my values better"*.

Study Two (qualitative)

Participants

Three participants have been interviewed for the qualitative part of the study. They volunteered after being contacted by e-mail. Two are second-year psychology students, following the English track. The other is a first-year student, following the Dutch psychology track. Ages range from 19 to 22.

Materials

In addition to quantitative data, which were obtained by using multiple questionnaires, an interview script (Appendix B) was created to gather qualitative data. In the script, 24 main questions were included, along with 24 sub questions. They were divided into 8 parts, each of which had a different role, with some investigating different variables, including intercultural competence, inclusion, well-being, and cultural metacognition. The questions

included were mainly open-ended and required the participant's description (e.g., "In what way would you say your overall mood has changed during the past year?"). However, there also were some closed-ended ones, most of which required the use of a scale to obtain a specific answer (e.g., "On a scale from 1 to 10, how good are you feeling right now?").

To record the audio of the interviews, mobile phones were used, and to transcribe the interviews, temi.com was used, which is an online program.

Intercultural Competence

Three domains were used for coding ICC: Approach, Analyze and Act. Approach deals with an individual's attitudes, curiosity toward other cultures and their tendency to engage in intercultural communication (Griffith, 2016). The 'Analyze' aspect deals with cognitive aspects such as cultural self-awareness and knowledge. Finally, the 'Act' dimension deals with behavior and emotional regulation. In total, 5 open questions were used in the interview to measure ICC.

Well-being

The first question investigating the subjective well-being of the participants asked them to describe their overall mood in one word ("If you had to describe it in one word, what would you say your overall mood has been lately?"). Furthermore, the follow-up sub-question was concerned with rating their mood on a scale from 1 to 10 ("On a scale from 1 to 10, how good are you feeling right now?"). Therefore, rating their well-being was done based on the answers to the first question: a positive one-word description pointed to higher well-being than a negative one. Similarly, a higher number in the second question pointed to higher well-being than a lower one. These questions were then followed by one main question and two sub-questions, but these mainly indicated the reasons for the answers given before.

Inclusion

The first question related to the perceived sense of inclusion included a scale ("On a scale from 1 to 10, how much do you feel like you are part of your Learning Community?"). Therefore, similarly to well-being, the numerical answer was used to rate inclusion - a higher number referred to higher perceived inclusion, while a lower number referred to lower

perceived inclusion. Furthermore, three open-ended follow-up questions provided reasons as to why a specific number was given.

Cultural Metacognition

To code the answers referring to cultural metacognition, Magnitude Coding was used. The technique includes adding a numeric or symbolic value to the answers to express their intensity or frequency (Saldaña, 2016). The structure of questions 1 and 3 allowed us to introduce such values: Strongly aware/Moderately aware/Moderately unaware/Unaware/Neither aware nor unaware. As question 2 was a closed-ended question, it was coded according to a yes/no response. The questions referring to cultural metacognition were additionally coded according to the metacognitive processes observed in the answers given (e.g., being aware of one's own thoughts during an intercultural interaction).

Procedure

In the beginning, all participants were told that the study was designed to investigate how they perceive their own behavior in comparison to other Psychology students. Moreover, they were given an informed consent form, which they were all asked to read carefully and later indicate whether they consent to participate in the study. After agreeing to take part, participants were generally interviewed for around 45 minutes, using only the questions from the already designed interview script.

Results

The main question to be answered is whether intercultural competence predicts inclusion, and which other variables can be of significant influence in this relationship. Descriptives of, and the correlations between variables used in the current study are summarized (see Table 1). Looking at the means on average, participants scored relatively high on each scale, as they ranged from 1 to 5. Furthermore, participants scored relatively low on loneliness.

The following correlations were explored: cultural metacognition and intercultural sensitivity correlate positively. The same goes for the relationship between openness to

diversity and intercultural sensitivity, and cultural metacognition. A weak but significant correlation was found between openness to diversity and loneliness. Lastly, significant correlations were found between psychological well-being and every other variable, except for openness to diversity.

A comparison between two groups, namely the Dutch and international psychology tracks, reporting the means and standard deviations, is summarized (Table 2). What is noteworthy is that the mean for every variable is higher in the international group than in the Dutch group. For intercultural sensitivity, the mean is 11.11% higher, which is a significant difference, $t(163) = -5.65, p < .001$. For cultural metacognition, there was also a significant difference of 14.04%, $t(163) = -4.42, p < .001$. For loneliness, a non-significant difference of 73.67% was found, $t(161) = -.14, p = .444$. For openness to diversity the difference was 23.10%, $t(163) = -8.16, p < .001$. Lastly, for psychological well-being, we saw a non-significant 3.59% difference between the Dutch and the English group, $t(164) = 1.01, p = .16$.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of the Explored Variables

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4
1. Intercultural Sensitivity	165	3.96	0.51	—			
2. Cultural Metacognition	165	3.70	0.73	0.584**	—		
3. Loneliness	164	33.41	30.01	0.001	0.035	—	
4. Openness to Diversity	165	3.75	0.73	0.587**	0.567**	0.154*	—
5. Psychological Wellbeing	166	3.74	0.47	0.339**	0.215**	0.392**	0.132

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Cultural metacognition was expected to significantly predict intercultural sensitivity. Running a Shapiro-Wilk test, the normality assumption seems to be violated, $W(165) = .982$,

$p = .034$. Yet, after a visual check, normality is assumed (Appendix A, Figure 1). The assumptions for linearity and homoscedasticity were not violated (Appendix A, Figure 2). Regression analysis shows a significant relationship, $b = .411$, $t(163) = 9.19$, $p < .001$, thus showing that, on average, students with a high level of cultural metacognition tend to also have a high level of intercultural sensitivity. Cultural metacognition also explained a significant proportion of variance in intercultural sensitivity, $R^2 = .34$, $F(1, 163) = 84.50$, $p < .001$.

Table 2

Side-by-side comparisons of the variables split by academic track

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Psychology track (Dutch or English)</i>			
	<i>M(D)</i>	<i>M(E)</i>	<i>SD(D)</i>	<i>SD(E)</i>
Intercultural Sensitivity	3.78	4.20**	.46	.49
Cultural Metacognition	3.49	3.98**	.66	.73
Loneliness	25.33	43.99	25.97	31.79
Openness to Diversity	3.42	4.21**	.66	.55
Psychological Wellbeing	2.23	2.31	.45	.51

Note. ** $p < .001$, compared between other groups. On the left: Dutch psychology track. On the right: English psychology track.

We used a regression analysis to test the hypothesis that intercultural sensitivity will predict loneliness among first-year students. The assumption of normal distribution was violated. After transforming the variable (Templeton, 2011), normality was assumed (Appendix A, Figure 3). Furthermore, homoscedasticity was assumed (Appendix A, Figure 4). There was no relationship found between intercultural sensitivity and loneliness, $b = .06$, $t(162) = .01$, $p = .99$, thus not supporting our hypothesis.

To test the third hypothesis, predicting intercultural sensitivity to be a moderating variable in the relationship between loneliness and well-being, moderation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013). A simple moderation model was explored. First, all assumptions were tested. No significant outliers were found. Because of the low correlation between intercultural sensitivity and loneliness, there is no multicollinearity between the independent variables. Running a Shapiro-Wilk test, we found the normality assumption to be violated, $W(166) = .983, p = .045$. However, after a visual check using a Q-Q plot (Appendix A, Figure 5), we assume the normality to not be violated. A visual check for linearity and homoscedasticity displays no obvious pattern that would violate the assumptions (Appendix A, Figure 6). Running the model for moderation, the following results were found. Loneliness and intercultural sensitivity were included, $b = .01, t(158) = .57, p = .57$; and $b = .37, t(158) = 3.45, p < .001$, respectively. The variables together accounted for a significant amount of variance in psychological well-being, $R^2 = .26, F(3, 158) = 18.15, p < .001$. No moderation effect was found for intercultural sensitivity and loneliness, $b = -.003, t(158) = -1.18, p = .24$. When running the model for the Dutch and international groups separately, no significant interaction effect was found either, but there were slight differences, $b = -.003, t(88) = -.64, p = .52$; $b = -.01, t(64) = -1.25, p = .22$, for the Dutch and English programs, respectively.

The results of the second qualitative study will be described and applied during the discussion section of the paper.

Discussion

The question that is being investigated in this research is whether intercultural competence is a crucial factor in perceived inclusion within an academic context during transition to university. Furthermore, the relationships between intercultural competence and several other factors were explored to investigate whether and to what extent these variables influence ICC. As mentioned in the methods section, loneliness was measured as a substituting variable for inclusion.

Our results showed that intercultural sensitivity did not significantly predict loneliness. No significant moderating effect was found between loneliness and intercultural sensitivity in predicting well-being. Separately, these variables did predict well-being significantly. The results further indicate that cultural metacognition is a strong predictor of intercultural sensitivity.

Contrary to our hypothesis, intercultural sensitivity was not significantly related to loneliness. This means that, according to our results, it does not matter how high a first-year student scores on intercultural sensitivity for it to influence their level of loneliness. However, we still expect that intercultural sensitivity can be related to loneliness.

In the introduction, cultural loneliness was described as a type of loneliness that sets in when one experiences a lack of their preferred cultural norms and values within their immediate environment (Sawir et al., 2008). It is expected that when one has a large amount of cultural knowledge and can adapt to different cultural norms, they will be more likely to socialize with culturally different people. This way, they will be able to create ties and possibly experience fewer feelings of loneliness. This can also be supported by the idea that intercultural competence can help one with integrating into a new culture, and it was found that the ease of integration into a new culture can influence the level of perceived loneliness (Neto et al., 2022).

However, one must be cautious about these claims. No concrete evidence for this has been found during our study, and it is highly recommended to expand the amount of research into the relationship between intercultural competence and (different types of) loneliness. For instance, we were not able to explore the variable of cultural loneliness, as it was not included in the dataset. This might turn out to be an important variable explaining psychological well-being among first-year students.

In one of the conducted interviews, a participant described how, when coming to the Netherlands, it was hard to initially create social ties as she was culturally different from most of her peers. For her, these feelings of loneliness were mediated by the fact that her sister was already living in the Netherlands, whom she shared her cultural values with.

Furthermore, in our research we did not take personality characteristics into account. One of the interviewees told us that she “did not feel a need to be included”, and this was partly because she described herself as a rather introverted person. This could also be of influence in the relationship between inclusion and well-being, as someone who does not feel the need to be included would not experience impairments in their well-being, except for when they are specially excluded from a group that they would like to identify with. These findings are all drawn from the interviews. Of course, more research should be done as only three interviews were conducted. Yet, we found the things these three participants told us very helpful, as they gave more insight into the relationships we found during our quantitative analyses.

Focusing on the last hypothesis, suggesting intercultural competence to be a moderating factor within the relationship between loneliness and well-being, we did not find results supporting the hypothesis. This means that we did not find a significant interaction effect between loneliness and intercultural competence, implying that the level of intercultural competence does not affect the relationship between loneliness and psychological well-being. This could also be explained by our previous hypothesis, showing that intercultural competence was not significantly related to loneliness in our sample.

After analyzing our results, we suggest that loneliness was not a valid variable to substitute for perceived inclusion. This could be due to several factors. First, the reliability of the loneliness variable used in this study is expected to be quite low, as we used a one-item slider. The responses on this variable were right skewed with a mean of 33.41. This could be due to the problem of the participant not really knowing what value to report, so most end up reporting a value that is not at the level of ‘no loneliness at all’, but rather a bit more, resulting in the distribution we found. Using an existing questionnaire to measure loneliness could have led to more results than those at hand. Second, we think that loneliness is a very different social aspect than perceived inclusion. For example, when students feel included within their academic cohort, it is still possible that they experience feelings of loneliness outside of the academic context. This could be due to their personality characteristics,

willingness to go out and meet other people, their home environment, and many other factors. Thus, it is expected that perceived inclusion and loneliness will not measure the same outcomes. Further research is needed to measure the relationship between these two variables.

We found cultural metacognition to be a strong predictor of intercultural competence. This is in line with our hypothesis, showing that cultural metacognition could indeed be an important factor in acquiring and understanding cultural knowledge as previous research has shown (Ang et al., 2006). However, in our study, the direction of the relationship between the variables was not tested, and it could thus be possible that a high level of intercultural competence could lead to an increase in cultural metacognition. Further experimental research could give more insight into the direction of this relationship, however, considering the need for metacognition in communicating and behaving effectively with people from different cultures (Sieck, 2017; Ang et al., 2007), it would be safe to say that metacognition improves intercultural competence.

Apart from our hypotheses, some exploratory findings were reported. These should not go unmentioned as they might lead to important implications. First, we found significant differences between a few variables when comparing the Dutch psychology track with the international one. It is important to think about why this might be the case. One of the most logical reasons would be that students who moved from abroad have had more intercultural contact than most Dutch students. This could lead to the former group being more culturally aware and open for new experiences and more diversity (Sousa et al., 2019). Considering the importance of ICC, it is crucial to also think about interventions for non-international students, so that they can develop their intercultural skills. This could be done in several ways: universities could stimulate studying abroad for a semester, set up buddy programs with culturally different students, organize events focusing on cultural differences, etc. Furthermore, future research could replicate these results to gain more insight into this problem.

Lastly, the significant correlation between ICC and psychological well-being is notable. If ICC can indeed lead to increased well-being, there should be more focus on developing this skill. Students endure a lot of stress during transitioning to university, which can heavily impact their well-being (Cage et al., 2021). Furthermore, because of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, a significant decrease in mental well-being was found among people between the ages of 12 and 25 (HOP, 2021). Future research could look more into the relationship between ICC and psychological well-being, specifically ICC could turn out to be a mediating factor between study stress and well-being among students. As discussed in the previous paragraph, if this relationship is found to be significant in further studies, there are a plethora of possible interventions to be set up to foster ICC.

Before concluding this thesis, a few limitations should be noted. Of course, some have already been discussed, but it is important to note possible new approaches for future research. First, for measuring intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity was used. While this is a skill required for effective communication between culturally different people (Chen, 2010), it is only one of the three components of intercultural competence. Intercultural sensitivity being the affective component, the behavioral and cognitive components are not being measured. In the future this could be done by including intercultural awareness and intercultural effectiveness (Chen et al., 2003; 2005) to create a more complete measure of intercultural competence.

Furthermore, the data were all obtained from questionnaires, which are all self-report measures. We should be aware of the problems that could arise from that. Self-reports are subject to several biases and considering the participants might have had extrinsic motivation (participation credits), these biases could be present in the current study. The validity of the results could be undermined due to low levels of focus or effort from participants, or even due to response bias. As an example, looking at the means for intercultural sensitivity, they are around 4 for both the Dutch and international cohorts. This is quite high, considering 5 was the maximum for this variable. Intercultural competence being a lifelong process (Deardorff, 2006), we expect the first-year students in our sample to have

rated themselves higher than reality. Trying to measure the same variables in another, more reliable way will be less efficient and more time consuming, but important to investigate, nonetheless. This way, one could obtain a more realistic understanding of the level of ICC within first-year university students.

Lastly, we conducted interviews to get a better understanding of the underlying causes for some of the relationships we found. Due to some unexpected obstacles in our research, we were not able to get as many participants as we initially wanted. The small sample size of three has given us some interesting results to back some of our findings, but the sample is not big enough to look for correlations within these results. Interviewing more participants would have led to better results, and we would have gained more insight into the relationships we found within the quantitative study. We recommend future research in this field to focus more on qualitative research, as the results seem very promising.

Conclusion

There is no conclusive answer to the research question on whether intercultural competence is significantly related to inclusion among first-year students. However, it is expected that there will be a significant relationship between these two variables, thus further research is highly recommended. Some new knowledge that has come to light. In our sample, ICC was significantly related to psychological well-being. We recommend future research to focus more on this relationship, and on how this can help students in overcoming stress, loneliness, and other psychological strains that students must cope with. Lastly, the finding that the participants in the international psychology track scoring higher on all culture-related variables than the ones in the Dutch track is very insightful. This raises the question of how we can get non-international students the means to develop their intercultural skills.

This research has shown the importance of intercultural competence among first-year students in many ways, and it adds to the already existing literature on this topic. Intercultural competence and communication are getting more and more important these days. The increase in immigration rates and multicultural societies ask for a proper way to handle different cultures currently, and we should teach people ways to communicate, behave,

adapt, and understand properly among different cultures. Especially the students who are transitioning to higher education, requiring a need for more cultural awareness.

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Appendix A: Figures

Figure 1
Normality check for Intercultural Sensitivity

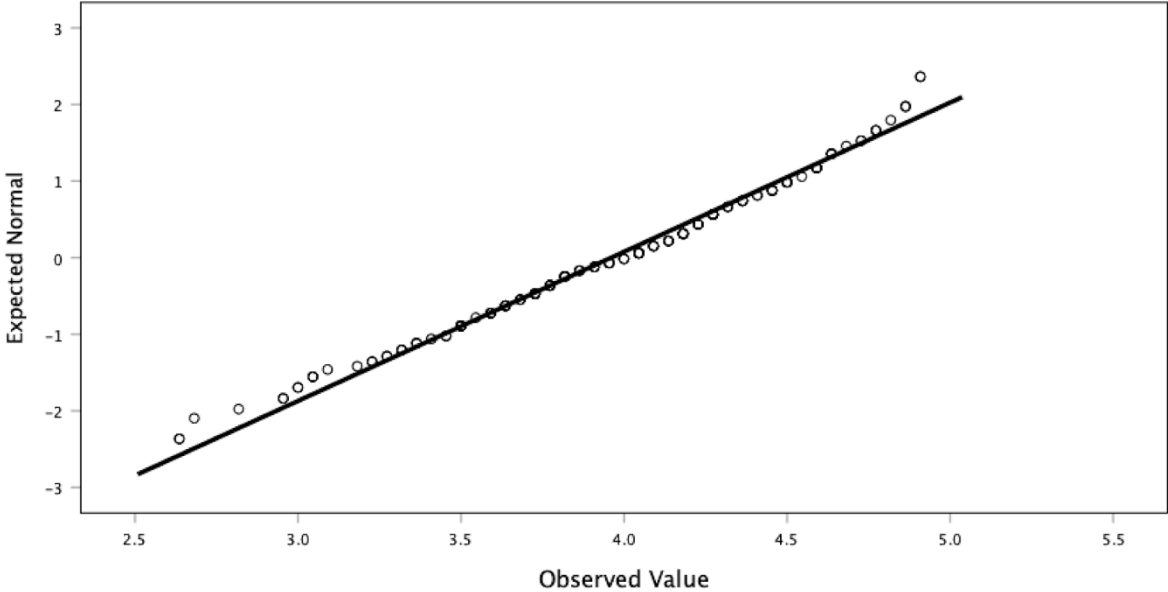


Figure 2
Residual plot for Intercultural Sensitivity

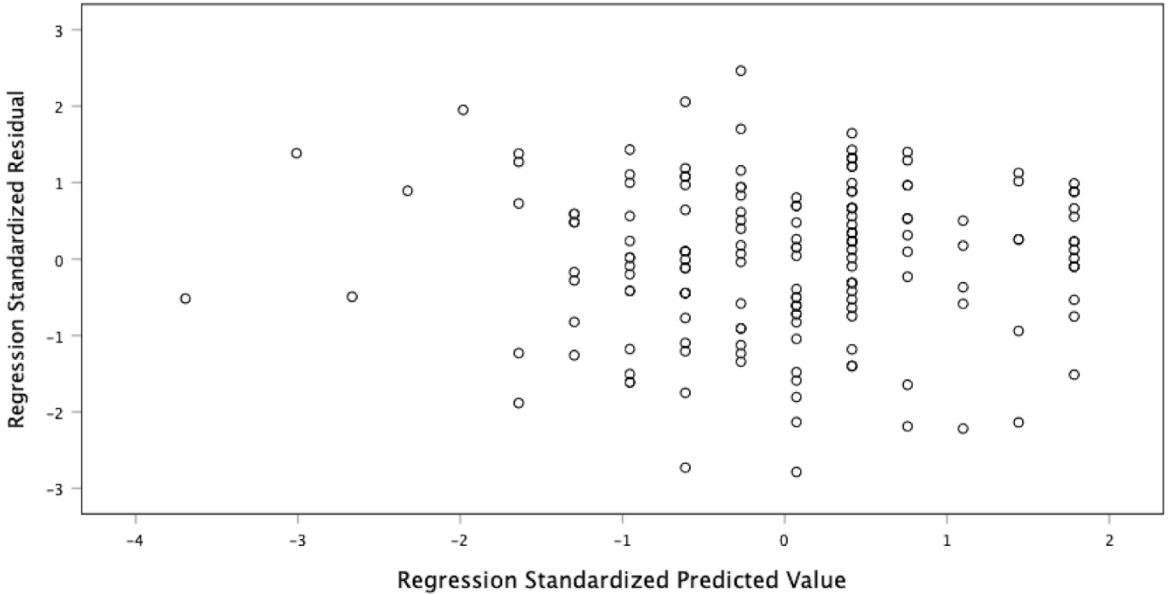
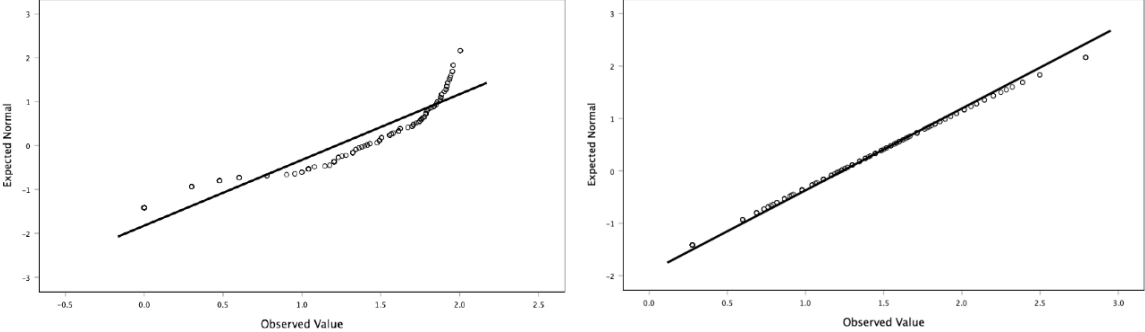
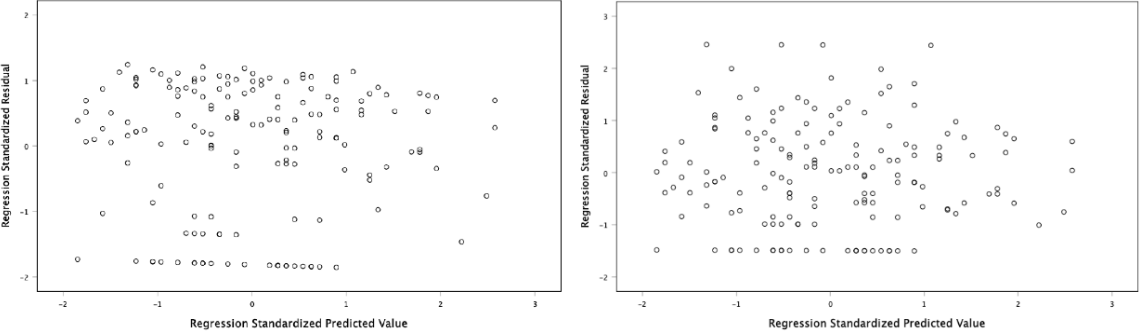


Figure 3
Normality distributions for Loneliness



Note. Left: before transformation ($W(164) = .854, p < .001$). Right: after transformation ($W(164) = .965, p < .001$).

Figure 4
Residual plots for Loneliness



Note. Left: before transformation. Right: after transformation.

Figure 5
Normality check for Psychological Well-being

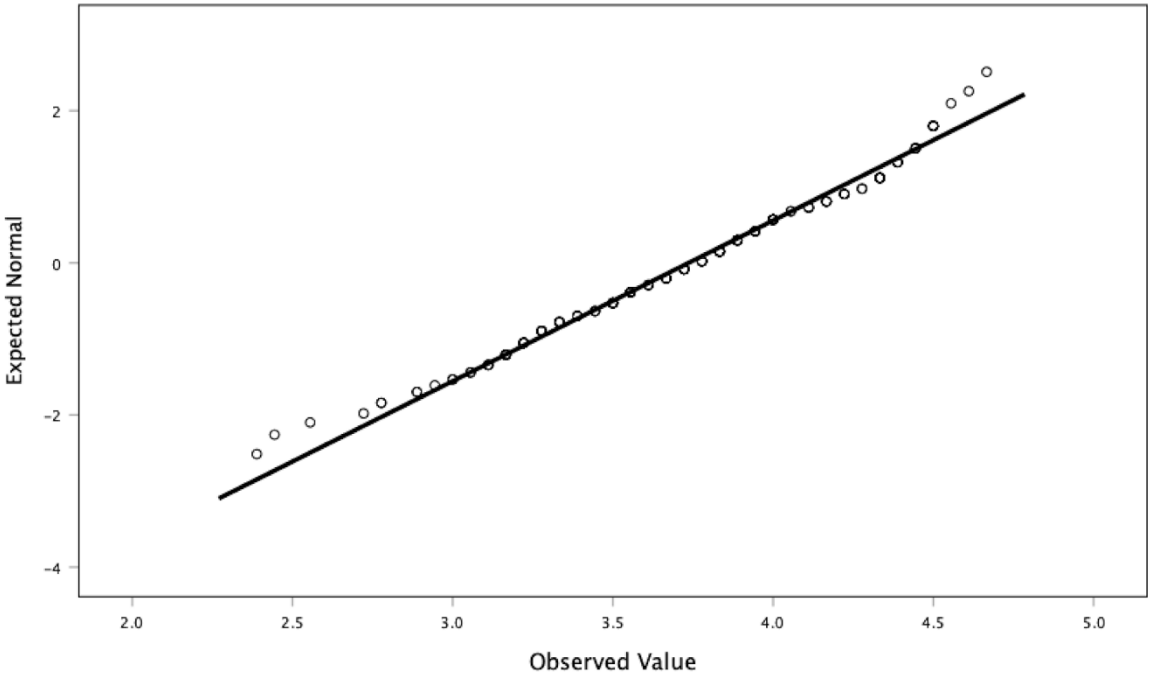
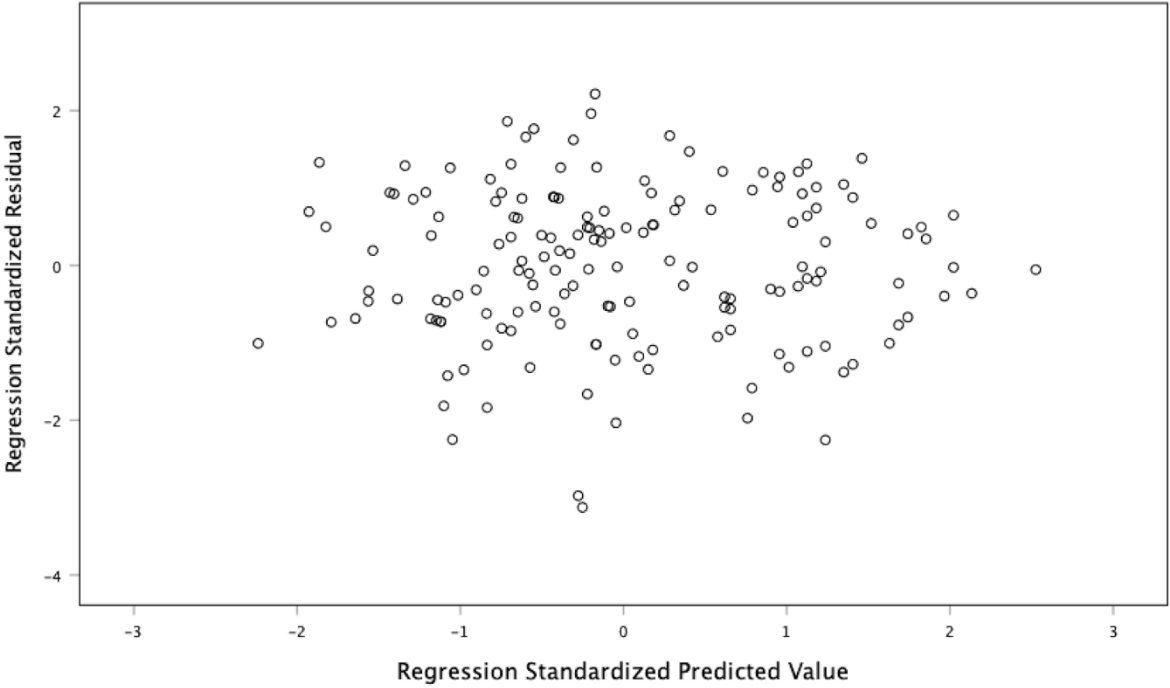


Figure 6
Residual plot for Psychological Well-being



Appendix B: Interview Script

Introduction (before recording)

Welcome/ice breaker: "Welcome, thank you for participating in this interview. [add some kind of ice breaker: was the location easy to find/anything else]"

Introduce yourself: "My name is [...], I'm a third/fourth-year student and this interview is part of our research for our Bachelor thesis."

Goal of the interview and check whether they filled in the informed consent: "We are doing this interview because we are interested in how you perceive your behavior compared to other Psychology students. Did you read this in the informed consent hand-out?"

Anonymity: "Your personal information will remain confidential, so we would like to encourage you keep an open mind and be as honest as possible. There are no right and wrong answers. The interview will take around 45 minutes, so every now and then I might have to ask you to round off your answer. This way, we can make sure to discuss everything in the interview."

Consent for recording: "Is it okay if I record the interview?" [If yes, that's great. If no]: "Is it okay to record just the audio?" [If still no, the interview can't be continued].

Check clarity: "Before we begin, do you have any questions?"

START RECORDING

(Tip: try to keep the conversation going. Respond to their answers instead of just crossing off a question and moving on to the next one. Otherwise, the interview might feel very clunky)

Intro questions and demographics

"Could you shortly introduce yourself?"

"Where are you from?"

"Why did you choose to study in Groningen?"

If international:

"Why did you choose to study in the Netherlands?"

"What were your expectations when coming to the Netherlands?"

"To what extent were your expectations met?"

Self-Efficacy

"Thank you very much. Now I would like to ask you some questions about your social interaction, so more or less how you behave around other people."

"How do you behave when you know you are going to interact with students from different cultural backgrounds?"

“Maybe you could think back to a specific moment where you had this kind of interaction. Do you remember doing some kind of mental preparation or other things you would have done differently when interacting with people from your own cultural background?”

“How do you perceive yourself when interacting with people from other cultural backgrounds?”

“Are there any specific thoughts going through your mind at those moments?”

“How do you feel when interacting with people from different cultures?”

“How come?”

“Compared to other students you know, how do you perceive your own abilities to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds?”

“Compared to other students, do you think you have sufficient skills to interact with people from different cultural backgrounds?”

“Could you give some examples of why you think that?”

Diversity

“We have talked a bit about how you behave around your peers. I would like to know a bit more about your social circle.”

“Do you feel you have a diverse social circle?”

“In what way is it diverse?”

“How important is social diversity to you?”

“We are talking a lot about different cultures and diversity at the moment. Do you identify with a certain culture?”

“How would you describe your cultural background?”

“Are you actively aware of your culture? In what way?”

Intercultural Competence

“Now that we discussed your cultural background, I would like to dive a bit deeper into your awareness of the cultures around you.”

“How do you feel about different cultures in comparison to your own?”

“How have you experienced interactions with different cultures before you moved to Groningen?”

“If you compare your present intercultural interactions with the beginning of the academic year, what has changed?”

“When you first meet with a group of unknown people, how do you go about it? For example, maybe you mentally prepare yourself, or you act differently than around your close friends?”

“Could you give me an example?”

[If no example can be given] “Imagine you enter a class for the Academic Skills course. How would you interact with others? For example: who do you talk to first? Are you drawn to people who share your cultural background?”

“If you think about all the knowledge and skills you have gained by interacting with other cultures, how do you see yourself implementing them in the future?”

Cultural Metacognition

“Let’s return to the situation you just mentioned [Q4A/B]. Can you describe what is going through your head at that moment?”

“How aware are you of your own thoughts during a situation like this?”

“Is this different for a group of people with or without your own cultural background?”

“What makes it (not) different?”

“In such a situation, how aware are you of cultural differences between you and your peers?”

“Could you give an example?”

Social Inclusion

“Finally, I want to talk to you about how you have perceived your inclusivity within your peer groups.”

“To what extent do you feel like you are a part of your Academic Learning Community? That is, the group of students you share the practical courses with, like Academic Skills or Dialogue and Group Skills.”

“On a scale from 1 to 10, how much do you feel like you are part of your Learning Community?”

“What is the reason you gave that number?”

“Did you also experience situations wherein you felt excluded from your academic community? If so, can you give an example?”

“What was it that made you feel excluded in that situation?”

“Could you give an example of a time where you felt especially included as a member of your academic community?”

“What was it that made you feel included in that situation?”

“To what extent do you think that the use of humor by your fellow students and yourself determines the degree of inclusion?”

“Could you recall a moment where the use of humor made you feel included?”

“If so, what kind of humor makes you feel included? (rude, sarcastic, constructive, affiliative)”

Well-Being

“In what way would you say your overall mood has changed during the past year?”

“Do you have any possible explanations for this change?”

Finishing

“We are reaching the end of the interview. Before we finish, is there anything you would like to ask or say in addition? Anything you would like to share?”

“I would like to thank you very much for your time and honesty! Your opinions and experiences are very valuable to us. As I said before, your data will be analyzed anonymously, so everything will remain confidential. Thanks again.”

“Have a good day!”