

**The Influence of Intercultural Competence on Inclusion and Wellbeing among First-
Year Psychology Students**

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Abstract

Intercultural competence refers to a set of values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills required for understanding and engaging appropriately and effectively with people from other cultures. In our study we investigated its relationship with first year students' well-being and subjective sense of inclusion. Additionally, we decided to focus on how it is predicted by the level of cultural metacognition and the language of the program one chooses to follow. In total 166 students completed the required questionnaires. 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). The aim of these questionnaires was to obtain information about the participants' intercultural sensitivity, sense of loneliness, cultural metacognition, well-being, and openness to diversity. Additionally, we conducted 3 interviews, whose aim was to gain quotes to illustrate the variables we investigated. By using correlations, regression analysis, and mediation analysis, we found out that intercultural sensitivity significantly predicted well-being. Moreover, it is significantly predicted by cultural metacognition and the language of the program of choice. However, no significant relationship between intercultural sensitivity and loneliness was found. These results may have been affected by certain limitations, including the fact that the variable loneliness was used instead of inclusion and the variable intercultural sensitivity was used instead of intercultural competence.

Keywords: intercultural competence, well-being, inclusion, cultural metacognition, transition to university

The Influence of Intercultural Competence on Inclusion and Wellbeing among First-Year Psychology Students

The beginning of university is undoubtedly one of the most unique events in the life of every student. Besides developing one's academic abilities, it also allows students to enhance their life skills, mature, and adopt adult responsibilities which they may have not learned before. This happens mainly because, during this time, many people get to experience living on their own for the first time (Jong et al., 2004). What is more, in many cases it happens far away from their family and friends. It can be a productive time, during which students not only develop their knowledge and skills, but also engage in numerous social activities and events, which may make it possible for students to form new friendships or create valuable professional connections. However, while being in a completely new environment does provide an ample number of possibilities for new connections and activities, it may also be a very challenging time for many first-year students (Brooker et al., 2017). Because of the novelty and unfamiliarity of the situation, first-time students may feel overwhelmed and experience a wide range of negative emotions and struggles, which may significantly impact their well-being (Worsley et al., 2021).

First-years students are already a group that is particularly susceptible to dropping out of university - according to research on college students, 30% of total dropout rate is associated with first year students, which is the highest percentage for all the years (Hanson, 2021). While the research has named economic problems as the main reason for the dropouts, it is closely followed by low well-being. As specific examples, participants have named lack of meaningful connections with others, being unprepared for the challenges of university, and having no support after falling behind with studies. Furthermore, according to a study by Douglass & Islam (2009), around 50% of first-year students report feeling "really stressed", while 55% report "poor eating habits". What is more, 40% indicate "need for help with

emotional issues” during their first year of university. It was also discovered that first year students experience a significant increase in anxiety compared to its level before the beginning of university (Denovan & Macaskill, 2017).

Additionally, low sense of belonging was named as a strong predictor of dropping out from a university in first year students (Hoffman et al., 2003). However, this factor is not significant solely because of its direct connection with well-being. It is an important component of a term called inclusion. It refers to “the degree to which individuals experience treatment from the group that satisfies their need for belongingness and uniqueness” (Shore et al., 2011). According to Jansens et al. (2014), inclusion is essential to humans and their well-being. Therefore, by not feeling as a sufficient part of a group, a student’s sense of inclusion may suffer, and so may their well-being.

Existing studies have provided numerous factors affecting first year students’ negative well-being. Douglass and Islam (2009) found that one of such factors is gender. In their study, they discovered that females showed a significantly higher number of negative experiences and mental health problems than males. Moreover, Denovan and Macaskill (2017) found that students’ well-being may be affected by their level of optimism as well as past experiences with studying. Their study showed that the more positive the students were about studying and the better experience they had, the higher their well-being was. Additionally, Hoffman et al. (2003) proved that perceived peer support and valued academic involvement are factors that highly affect students’ level of belonging and well-being. Their study found that students who perceived to receive more support and recognition about their academic work showed higher sense of belonging and well-being.

Another factor which seems to influence the levels of well-being is intercultural competence (Neuliep, 2019; Balakrishan et al., 2021). The term refers to a set of values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills required for understanding and engaging appropriately and

effectively with people from other cultures (Barrett, 2013). What is more, it is becoming increasingly essential in today's world, because globalization is continuously rising, and countries are becoming more and more heterogeneous (Leung, 2014). Naturally, the phenomenon does not only concern nationality, as it is mainly about an increased extent of different cultures blending with each other. With time, the movement of people all around the world has also increased and having colleagues and friends from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds is becoming more widespread than before. Because of this trend, there is an increasing demand for prospective workers or students to possess the ability to positively engage with people from other cultures (Oerlemans, & Peeters, 2010). Besides the already mentioned academic and work benefits associated with it, simply having friends and good acquaintances from various places all around the world may lead to personal enrichment (Williams, & Johnson, 2011). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate the influence of intercultural competence on the feelings of inclusion and well-being of first year students. The research question is: "To what extent does intercultural competence predict well-being and inclusion of first-year students?"

The relationship between students' intercultural competence and their well-being and inclusion have already been explored to an extent in past research. In their paper, Van Oudenhoven and Van der Zee (2002) focus on the developed the multicultural personality model, which can be measured with their Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ). It investigates 5 traits connected with intercultural competence: emotional stability, social initiative, open-mindedness, cultural empathy, and flexibility. Since its introduction, the questionnaire has been used in numerous studies in different countries (e.g. Leung et al., 2007). While all studies investigate cultures that differ from each other, the results seem to point to the same conclusion - MPQ results are significantly and positively associated with psychological well-being and mental health (Leung, 2014). Furthermore, it is important to

investigate the research by Ward et al. (2011), whose goal was to look into students' cultural intelligence. The term refers to a set of capabilities which enable an individual to effectively function in a culturally diverse setting (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Earley & Ang, 2003; Leung, 2014). One of its findings was that a high score on the questions related to motivation is associated with fewer negative psychological symptoms (Ward et al., 2011).

Because of the findings of the above-mentioned research papers and data, the hypothesis for the study is: "Intercultural competence significantly predicts well-being and inclusion of first-year students". To investigate this, an online questionnaire will be distributed among a pool of first year psychology students at the University of Groningen. Moreover, multiple physical interviews will be conducted so as to obtain qualitative data. The university of Groningen is a suitable setting for the study, as the Netherlands in general is known as a very popular destination for international students - according to 2018 data, 11.8% of all students are not of Dutch origin (Eurostat, 2020)

Because of investigating students in the Netherlands, the sample will most likely include students from both English and Dutch study tracks. As research has shown, there are multiple differences between international and domestic students, including differences in their in-class behavior (Khalis et al., 2018). While not much research has been done on the differences in intercultural competence between international and local students, one could speculate that, because of being surrounded by international students and having to move to a different culture, the students in the English track will have higher levels of intercultural competence. In order to test this hypothesis, the additional research question is: "Is there a difference in the levels of intercultural competence between international and domestic students?".

Finally, as mentioned before, the level of intercultural competence is determined by one's skills and knowledge about intercultural contact and interactions. However, there are

also other factors that may influence one's level of intercultural competence. The most prevalent one in literature seems to be the level of metacognition (Sieck, 2017). Firstly, it is essential to highlight the link between intercultural competence and metacognition, which is the ability to control and manage cognitive processes. In their paper, Morris et al.(2019) found that individuals who scored higher on metacognition were faster in learning and adhering to new cultural norms. Therefore, their intercultural competence was higher. Because of these findings, it may be speculated that in the case of first-year students at the University of Groningen, the ones with higher levels of metacognition will have higher levels of intercultural competence. The relation between intercultural competence and cultural metacognition may be investigated with the question: "To what extent is intercultural competence related to cultural metacognition?".

Methods

Quantitative study

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 (N=166) 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 from non-EU. 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. The Psychological Wellbeing Scale (Ryff et al., 2007) was designed to measure six dimensions of well-being and happiness (Stanford SPARQ, n.d.). On a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly agree; 7 = strongly disagree), respondents indicated to what extent they either agreed or disagreed with the statements on the questionnaire. The original scale has 42 items for measuring psychological well-being. For the current study, a shorter version was used, consisting of 18 items (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). This version was less reliable but took less time to administer. Example questions on the questionnaire were “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 has been shown to have test-retest reliability of .82, with all subscales being statistically significant ($p < .001$), thus being valid and reliable enough in assessing psychological well-being. (Bayani et al., 2008).

Inclusion scale/Loneliness. The level of perceived inclusion was supposed to be measured using the Perceived Group Inclusion Scale. However, the data was not collected due to an error. Therefore, we had to substitute it with the data for the perceived feeling of loneliness. To indicate their level of perceived loneliness, participants were supposed to assign it to a number from 1 to 100. Loneliness was chosen as the substitute as out of the variables the survey contained, it seemed to be conceptually closest to inclusion (Kanterman et al., 2021)

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 were answered on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). The internal consistency of the scale has been shown to be high ($\alpha =$

.86). As intercultural sensitivity was chosen as the most conceptually related to intercultural competence, as it is an essential component of intercultural competence (Chang et al., 2013).

Openness to diversity. Openness to diversity was investigated because of being a component of intercultural competence. (Barrett, 2012). It was measured with the use of The Openness to Diversity in College Student Experience Questionnaire (Kuh et al., 2003), which consisted of 8 statements. Participants were supposed to indicate how much they relate to each of them using a number on the scale from 1 to 5.

Qualitative study

Participants

The sample consisted of 3 participants, who were recruited via email and personal contacts. Similarly to the quantitative data ones, all participants were psychology students at the University of Groningen. However, while 2 of them were not first-year students, the questions they were asked were slightly adjusted, to investigate their experience in their first year of university. Originally, the number of participants was supposed to be much higher, but due to limitations of timeframe, it had to be adjusted accordingly.

Materials

In addition to quantitative data, which were obtained by using multiple questionnaires, an interview script was created in order to gather qualitative data. In the script, 24 main questions were included, along with 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 in order to obtain a specific answer (e.g., "On a scale from 1 to 10, how good are you feeling right now?").

Procedure

In the beginning, all the participants were told that the study was designed in order 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 and being recorded during the time of the interview. After agreeing to take part, participants were generally interviewed for around 45 minutes, using only the questions from the already designed interview script. Afterwards, using the recording, transcripts of the interviews were obtained.

Results

The aim of this paper was to investigate the relationship between intercultural competence and well-being and inclusion. According to the findings of existing studies, well-being and inclusion were expected to significantly predict well-being and inclusion. In order to look into intercultural competence, variables intercultural sensitivity and openness to diversity were explored, while to investigate the lack of subjective sense of inclusion, the variable loneliness was explored. Before conducting an analysis, the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity had to be tested. After none of the assumptions were found to be violated, correlation and regression analysis could be performed.

Firstly, a correlation matrix was tested (Table 1), which showed that well-being and intercultural sensitivity were significantly correlated. However, no significant correlation was discovered between loneliness and intercultural sensitivity.

Table 1

		Well-being	Loneliness	Cultural metacognition	Intercultural sensitivity	Openness to diversity
Well-being	Pearson Correlation	--				
	N	166				
Loneliness	Pearson Correlation	.392**	--			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001				

	N	164	164			
Cultural metacognition	Pearson Correlation	-.215**	.035	--		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	.653			
	N	165	163	165		
Intercultural sensitivity	Pearson Correlation	-.339**	.001	.584**	--	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	.990	<.001		
	N	165	163	165	165	
Openness to diversity	Pearson Correlation	-.132	.154*	.567**	.587**	--
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.091	.049	<.001	<.001	
	N	165	163	165	165	165

** . Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

In order to look into intercultural competence, variables intercultural sensitivity and openness to diversity were explored. A strong significant relationship ($b = -.367$, $t(164) = 4.60$, $p < .001$) was found between intercultural sensitivity and well-being. What is more, intercultural sensitivity explains 11.5% of the variance of well-being. However, no significance relationship was found between openness to diversity and well-being and the explained variance value was 1.7%.

As an indicator of subjective sense of inclusion, the variable loneliness was explored. No significant relationship was found between loneliness and intercultural sensitivity. Furthermore, intercultural sensitivity accounted for no variance of loneliness. However, a significant positive relationship was discovered between loneliness and openness to diversity ($b = 1.64$, $t(162) = .12$, $p < .001$), although with low explanation of variance (2.4%).

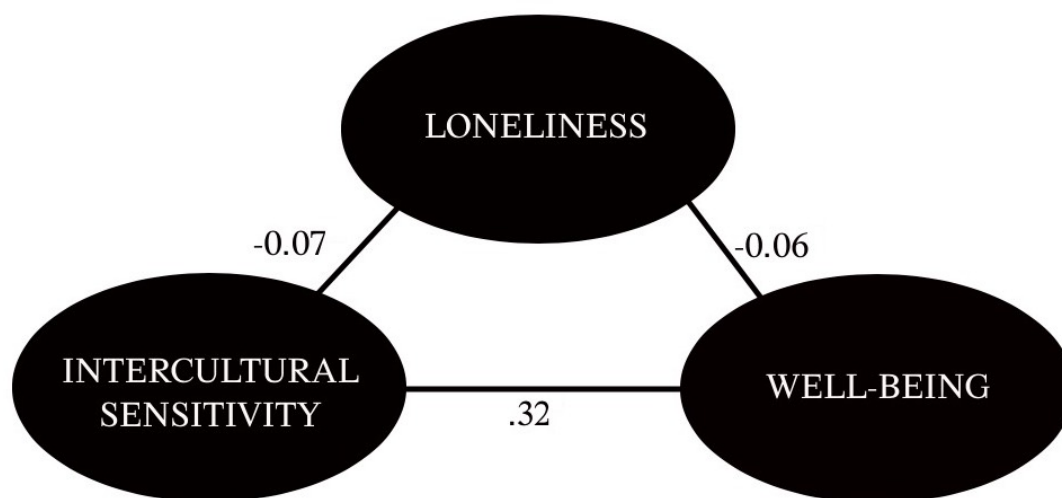
Mediation analysis

To gain more insight into the relationship between well-being, loneliness, and intercultural sensitivity, a mediation analysis was tested. However, loneliness did not act as a mediator and did not influence the relationship between well-being and intercultural competence. Therefore, the mediation was not significant. However, it showed the already examined significant relationship between well-being and intercultural sensitivity. What is

more, it displayed that loneliness and well-being are significantly, negatively related. Finally, it also showed a non-significant relationship between loneliness and intercultural competence.

Figure 1

Mediation analysis



Additional hypothesis – cultural metacognition

Furthermore, the additional hypotheses of cultural metacognition and self-efficacy being related to intercultural competence were investigated. A strong significant relationship was found between intercultural sensitivity and cultural metacognition ($b = .411$, $t(164) = 9.19$, $p < .001$). A similarly strong relationship was discovered between openness to diversity and cultural metacognition ($b = .567$, $t(164) = 8.79$, $p < .001$). What is more, both variables were found to explain a moderately high percentage of variance of cultural metacognition, with intercultural sensitivity explaining 34.1% and openness to diversity 32.1%.

Additional hypothesis – difference between tracks

Finally, the hypothesis of the English track having higher intercultural competence than the Dutch track was tested. Significant differences between the values were found for three variables - intercultural sensitivity, openness to diversity, and cultural metacognition,

with students following the English program scoring higher on all these variables than the ones following the Dutch program.

Table 2

English and Dutch track comparison

Program		Well-being	Cultural		Intercultural	
			metacognition	Loneliness	sensitivity	Openness to diversity
Bachelor Psychologie (Dutch program)	Mean	2.23	3.49*	25.33	3.78*	3.42*
	Std. Deviation	.51	.73	31.79	.49	.55
Bachelor Psychology (English program)	Mean	2.31	3.98*	43.99	4.20*	4.21*
	Std. Deviation	.45	.66	25.97	.46	.66

Note: * $p < .001$

Interview data

Unfortunately, the number of participants who took part in the interviews was not representative enough to generalize about the whole population of first year psychology students in Groningen. However, investigating the interview data and analyzing specific quotes may be used for a more complete understanding of the relationship between intercultural competence and well-being and inclusion. More specifically, one participant, who came from a mixed background and expressed an interest in meeting people from other cultures (*“And the more culturally diverse for me, the better, because I get to learn new information, I get to learn new stuff about other people and the way they live in their own countries.”*), indicated feeling included in their multicultural learning environment. Similarly, another participant who worked in an international environment and also expressed enjoyment when meeting people from other cultures (*“I really enjoy talking to people from different cultures.”*) also expressed a high degree of subjective sense of inclusion. However, the third participant, who reported only interacting with people from one nationality and being unable to integrate into their Dutch-speaking sports team (*“So a lot of the times they're speaking Dutch and sometimes the coaches are also speaking Dutch and I have to just kind of go along*

with it. And sometimes I don't really know what's happening.") indicated that they do not feel particularly included in their social networks.

Discussion

The results of both the regressions and mediation analysis showed that well-being and intercultural sensitivity, an essential part of intercultural competence, are significantly related. More precisely, intercultural sensitivity was found to predict the level of well-being. Moreover, no significant relationship was found between intercultural sensitivity and loneliness. Therefore, only a part of the hypothesis, which states that intercultural competence predicts well-being, was supported by the findings.

These findings could indicate that people who are more interculturally competent are going to feel better on average. More precisely, these are the people who have a better understanding about how to effectively communicate with people from different cultures, have better interpersonal skills and possess more knowledge about different cultures and nationalities. Naturally, it is possible to learn and develop these abilities through different activities (Perry & Southwell, 2011). These may include visits abroad and intercultural dialogue. While not universally effective, they have been shown that they do have a potential to increase one's intercultural competence (Genkova & Kruse, 2020; Perry & Southwell, 2011). Because of the relationship between intercultural competence and well-being, it may be important to stimulate people to engage in such experiences. While it is not necessarily a linear relationship, an increased number of such activities may lead to higher intercultural competence, which could then lead to higher well-being.

Even though no significant connection was discovered between loneliness and intercultural sensitivity, the negative relationship between loneliness and well-being was found. This could mean that people who experience more loneliness experience lower well-being more often than less lonely people. This finding has been supported by past research

(Kearns et al., 2015; Jianfeng et al., 2021). Therefore, it can be concluded that, besides stimulating intercultural activities, basic social contact between people should be encouraged. Because of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, some people experienced even more loneliness than usually (Jianfeng et al., 2021). Because of this fact, while our society is still experiencing the effects of this pandemic, it may be especially important to put emphasis on more interpersonal contact, and therefore reducing loneliness, and ultimately increasing well-being.

The next finding of the study was that there exists a significant relationship between cultural metacognition and intercultural sensitivity, including openness to diversity. This could mean that people who have higher expertise in controlling and managing cognitive processes which are connected with intercultural contact are also more interculturally competent. Combined with the findings regarding well-being, people with higher levels of cultural metacognition may also experience higher well-being, because of being more interculturally competent. This may indicate that besides stimulating intercultural contact, it may be useful to improve students' metacognition. According to past research, this can be done best in class, with the use of lectures and in-class active learning activities, followed by a discussion (Medina et al., 2017).

Finally, it was discovered that students following the English psychology track had significantly higher values of intercultural sensitivity, openness to diversity, and cultural metacognition than those following the Dutch track. Therefore, it may be concluded that students who study a track in a language different than the one mostly spoken in the country where they study would have higher intercultural competence. This could be the result of being in an international environment, as Dutch language is not as widely known as English, and therefore there is a higher probability that international students would choose to be taught in English (Eurostat, 2021). Therefore, a solution for this may be conducting workshops which would combine both tracks, so the Dutch track students would have an

opportunity to also interact with students from other cultures and countries. What is more, this would also bring benefits to English speaking students, who would be presented with an easily accessible opportunity to develop their knowledge of the Dutch culture.

Limitations

Naturally, the study also had its limitations. Firstly, as mentioned before, because of an error, loneliness had to be used instead of inclusion. While these variables are conceptually similar (Kanterman et al., 2021), loneliness is a different variable than inclusion, as it is significantly predicted by genetic influences (Mund et al., 2020). Moreover, loneliness was measured using only one question, while inclusion would have a whole scale dedicated to it. Therefore, in order to investigate loneliness more accurately, it would be more fitting to have more than one survey question.

Secondly, while loneliness already is not the perfect measurement, in the case of our study its levels may have been significantly affected by the pandemic and measurements connected with it, which prevented a lot of social events and gatherings from happening. Being unable to spend time with their colleagues and friends may have impacted many students' loneliness and well-being, and therefore the scores that they indicated on the questionnaires.

Finally, intercultural competence was measured by examining the variables intercultural sensitivity and openness to diversity. While both are essential components of intercultural competence, they do not explain the other components, including the skill component and the awareness component (Günçavdi & Polat, 2016). Because of this, in order to obtain complete understanding of the relationship, investigating the whole term may be required.

Further research

Because of the already mentioned need to substitute inclusion with loneliness and the importance of measuring inclusion as a whole, it would be advised to use inclusion instead of loneliness as a mediator of the relationship between intercultural competence and well-being. What is more, as a significant difference between the intercultural sensitivity and openness to diversity of the English track and the Dutch track was found, it may be a good idea to examine it further, but this time taking a closer look at the specific countries that students come from. Because of the characteristics of our questionnaire this was not possible, as there were not any questions which required the participants to explicitly name their country of origin, but merely the region that they were from (EU/Non-EU). Investigating specific countries could improve the current understandings of intercultural competence and indicate in which areas the focus on improving the skill should be particularly amplified. Lastly, it could be interesting to check whether age has an effect on the relationship. In this research, because of the specificity of the sample, most of the participants were roughly the same age, therefore we could not examine this relationship. However, obtaining a sample with a wider age range may make this possible.

Conclusion

To sum up, while this study, along with other existing ones, was able to support there being a significant relationship between self-reported well-being and the levels of intercultural competence, no relationship between inclusion and intercultural competence was found. This may have happened due to the fact that instead of the full-scale investigating inclusion, we had to use the variable loneliness. Besides these findings, it was discovered that metacognition is significantly related to intercultural competence. Finally, the differences between the intercultural competence in the English and Dutch track students were found. However, while the study provided some significant findings, its numerous limitations need to be taken into consideration. Due to their existence, but also because of the topic's relevance,

new research can and should be carried out about the relationship intercultural competence has with first-years students' well-being and inclusion, as it could improve the understanding of how to successfully facilitate students' transition to university.

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