

Felt understanding as a bridge between social identity and wellbeing among university students

Xinran Du, Dr Andrew Livingstone, & Prof Anna Adlam
Department of Psychology

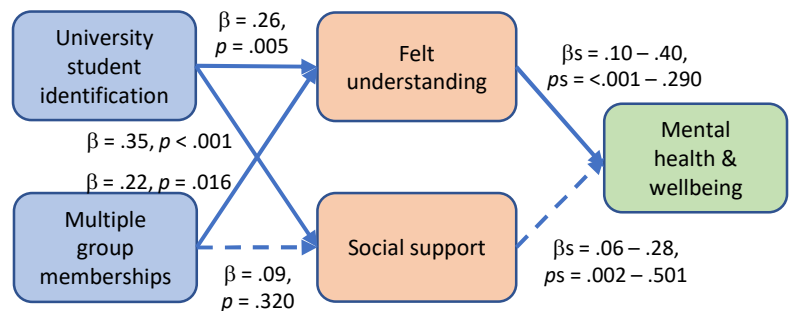
Introduction

- Mental health and wellbeing difficulties among university students have been recognised as a crisis.
- Previous research shows that **felt understanding** (the belief that others understand oneself) and **social identity** (our subjective sense of group memberships) each have a positive effect on wellbeing (e.g., Oishi et al., 2010; Jetten et al., 2017).
- We test an integration of these perspectives by testing whether **felt understanding is an important process through which social identity predicts better wellbeing**.
- Specifically, social identity should predict a greater sense of being understood by others. Felt understanding should in turn predict better wellbeing – even when social support (a more well-established mediator of social identity effects) is taken into account.

Method

- 157 university students (76% female; $M_{age} = 22.7$; range 17-55) completed an online questionnaire including the following sets of measures:
- Wellbeing & mental health** (7 variables: depression; anxiety; loneliness; life satisfaction; self-esteem; stress; imposter syndrome)
- Social identity variables** (2 variables: university student identification; multiple group memberships)
- Process variables** (2 variables: perceived social support; felt understanding)
- Other stressors** (negative experiences during degree; pre-existing mental health condition; impact of Covid-19)

Results



* 7 separate models were run; one for each wellbeing outcome. ** Results are similar when adjusting for other stressors.

Mediator	Predictor	Indirect effect βs (range)	Indirect effect ps (range)
Felt understanding	University student identification	.02 – .11	.022 – .342
	Multiple group memberships	.02 – .09	.043 – .379
Social support	University student identification	.02 – .10	.052 – .529
	Multiple group memberships	.01 – .03	.355 – .678

Indirect effects of social identity variables on mental health & wellbeing outcomes were **mostly significant via felt understanding**, but not via social support

Conclusion

- Results are consistent with the proposition that felt understanding is the primary process through which social identities predict better wellbeing and mental health.**
- Felt understanding is critical because it reflects our concerns for how others understand and evaluate our own inner world, and is thus an important platform for fulfilling interactions.
- Our findings emphasise that (1) social identities can provide an important source of this feeling of being understood by others, and (2) feeling understood is in turn an important, but under-acknowledged **bridge between social identities and wellbeing**.