They get me: Felt understanding as a critical bridge between social identity and wellbeing

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Introduction

- Mental health and wellbeing are major global issues

- We integrate two social psychological approaches to wellbeing: **social identity** ('social cure'), and **felt understanding**, both of which robustly predict better wellbeing and mental health.

- Research on **social identity and wellbeing** (Haslam et al., 2018; Jetten et al., 2017; Steffens et al., 2019) has focused on predictors such as ingroup identification and membership of multiple groups (Jetten et al., 2017), and mediators such as social support (Haslam et al., 2012)… but has **neglected the importance of felt understanding**

- In contrast, research on the **wellbeing benefits of felt understanding** (the belief that other understand and accept our perspectives, values, identity etc.) has **focused on close relationships** rather than social identities and group memberships (Oishi et al., 2010; Reis et al., 2017).

- Integrating these perspectives, we **hypothesized that felt understanding is the primary process through which social identities predict better wellbeing and mental health**

- Specifically, ingroup identification and multiple group memberships should predict a greater sense of being understood by others (as well as perceived social support). Felt understanding should in turn predict better wellbeing and mental health outcomes – even when social support (a more well-established mediator of social identity effects) is taken into account

Method

Two survey studies assessed (all αs > .81):

- **Wellbeing & mental health** (depression; anxiety; loneliness; life satisfaction; self-esteem; stress)

- **Social identity variables** (ingroup identification as a PhD student or with employer org.; multiple group memberships)

- **Process variables** (perceived social support; felt understanding)

- **Other stressors** (-ve workplace experiences; -ve life events; impact of Covid-19)

Study 1: 633 postgrad research students in the UK (64% female; M_{age} = 32.08; range 22-75)

**Study 2**: 320 employees of organizations in China (50% female; $Mode_{age}$ = 26-30 (49%); range 18-60+)

Indirect effects of social identity variables on mental health & wellbeing were highly-significant via felt understanding…but not via social support

Study 1 (633 postgrad students in UK)[1,2]
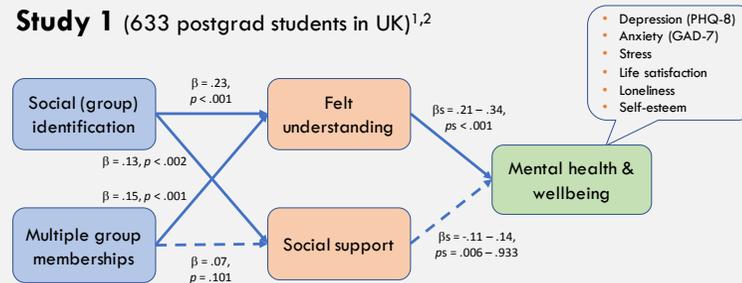
Mediator	Predictor	Indirect effect βs (range)	Indirect effect ps (range)
Felt understanding	Social (group) identification	.05 – .08	All ≤ .001
	Multiple group memberships	.03 – .05	.011 – .001
Social support	Social (group) identification	.00 – .02	.037 – .937
	Multiple group memberships	.00 – .01	.191 – .941

Study 2 (320 employees in China)[1]
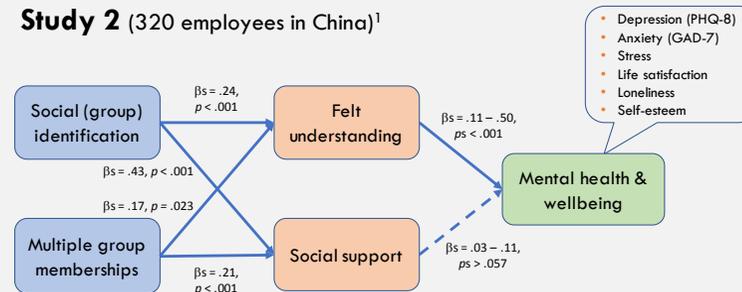
Mediator	Predictor	Indirect effect βs (range)	Indirect effect ps (range)
Felt understanding	Social (group) identification	.03 – .12	.091 – <.001
	Multiple group memberships	.02 – .08	.148 – .026
Social support	Social (group) identification	.02 – .05	.690 – .064
	Multiple group memberships	.01 – .04	.711 – .099

[1]Separate models were run for each outcome (6 in total)   [2]Model also adjusted for other stressors

Discussion

- Social identification and multiple group membership indirectly predicted better wellbeing and mental health via felt understanding, but **not** via social support (a well-established mediator of social identity effects on wellbeing). **This is consistent with the hypothesis 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 (Oishi et al., 2010; Reis et al., 2017). 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.**

- Future research should replicate and extend these findings, focusing on (1) causal relations over time (cf. the current cross-sectional data); (2) the role of felt understanding relative to other processes such as a sense of meaning and purpose (Haslam et al., 2018); and (3) interventions that integrate social identities and felt understanding.