

Exploring Chinese International students' understanding and experiences of loneliness to inform cultural adaptation of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)

--A qualitative, participatory action research project complemented with imagery

X Liu¹, Y Chau, N Cogan, S Rasmussen, D Tse, S Kelly, A Anderson, C Flynn, Z Tang², J Ren, H Zhao

¹University of Strathclyde ²Imperial College London

Background

- In the 2020-2021 academic year, 157,065 Chinese International Students (CIS) enrolled in universities throughout the UK, making up 26% of the international student (INTL) population (HESA, 2021).
- Research on the common stressors faced by INTL has identified an increased vulnerability to feeling lonely. According to Weiss (1973), students may experience both *personal loneliness* due to the loss of contact with families and *social loneliness* due to the loss of networks. In recent years, a third variation, *cultural loneliness*, has been proposed, which is triggered by the absence of a preferred cultural and/or linguistic environment (Sawir et al., 2007).
- Although research suggests CIS are at higher risk of suffering from the adverse effects of the cultural disparities which exist between their home and host culture (Ching et al., 2017), limited research has focused on understanding what loneliness means to CIS and how they experience this feeling.
- MBCT, as an intervention that addresses maladaptive social cognition, is effective in reducing loneliness in university students (Teoh et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2018). However, whether or how well it works for CIS has not been studied.

Aim

- Using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, we aim:
 - To understand how Chinese International Students experience and understand loneliness in UK universities.
 - To explore how MBCT can be culturally adapted to meet the needs of CIS

Methods



Participants

- N = 15 participants in the interviews (1 participant did not attend the focus group)
- Chinese International Students (CIS) studying in UK universities.
- All students self-identified as having experienced loneliness in the UK.
- Ages 18-32 (M= 21) / 9 females and 6 males.

Results for Interviews

Theme 1: Lack of intimate, authentic and understanding social relationships

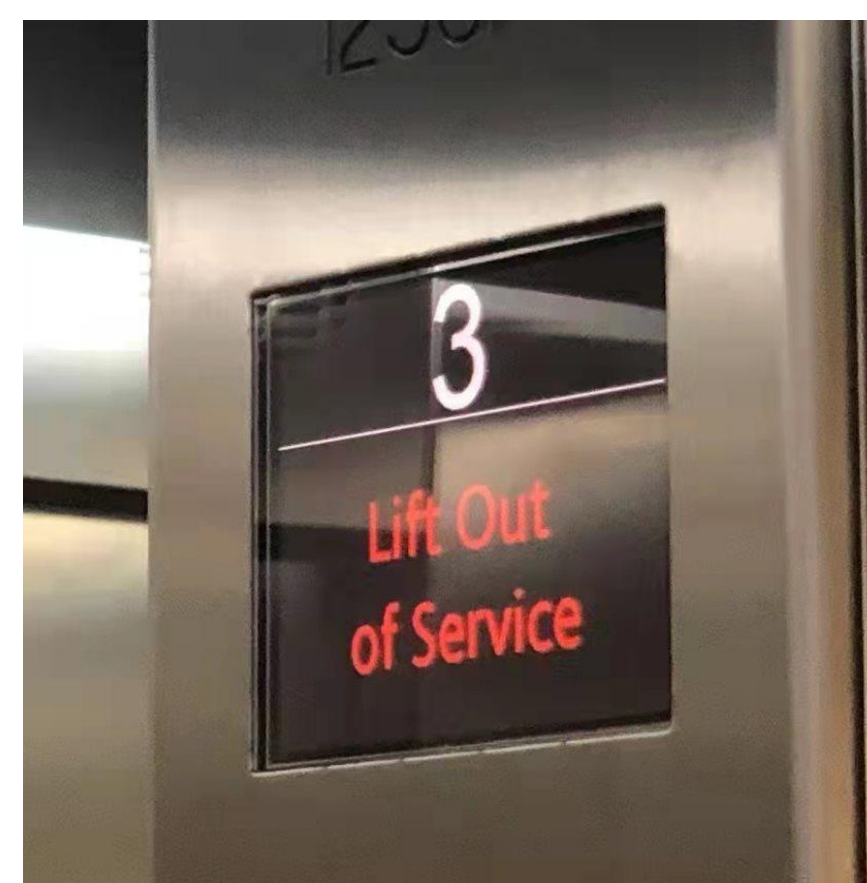
- Subtheme: Absence of close social circles and familiar culture



"I never really experienced snow before I came to this country. That day... I was quite upset and then, then I saw the snow and I was so happy, and I come out to build a snowman. And then I realized, okay, there's no one I can share this picture with... No one is really playing with me... Although this snowman is having two arms like this *raises arms out wide* like being happy, but I think, I was happy when I was building this snowman. But maybe deep inside, I wasn't feeling that happy. Instead, I may be lonely at that time." - Participant

Theme 2: Adaptation process and belongingness

- Subtheme: Disconnection from the academic community and working towards integration
- Subtheme: Challenges of intercultural communication



"I had difficulty integrating with them [fellow students]. So, lots of times, I just go home alone and when I finish my work and go home alone, the elevator does not work, it just increases the loneliness. I think this picture carries something. It's like, how you say, the straw that breaks the camel's back.... At that moment when I saw this warning, for me, I looked a bit, how to say, and it's a shame to say that, but I want to cry at that moment." - Participant

Theme 3: Withholding feelings and preference for self-reliant, problem-focused coping

- Subtheme: Culture and language barriers in support services
- Subtheme: Avoidance or self-care?
- Subtheme: Acceptance, transition and reaching out



"I chose these pictures because Winnie the Pooh is... it's my more close friend to me and you can see in the pictures all those that I'm smiling but Winnie the Pooh is crying in the, in the pictures. In my mind, I think Winnie the Pooh is like me. In a day like many people saw, I'm always smiling, and I have no, I have no sad situations. But I'm pretending everything is okay and I'm not really care about other things." - Participant

Results for Focus Groups

Theme 1: The need to focus on oneself and find "inner peace"

Participant: "I think everybody needs to find like, the time to really get themselves down, clear their mind and really try to listen to themselves, especially their body-mind, their, and their mind in general."

Participant: "It (mindfulness practice) really helped me to focus on myself, withdraw all my attention, pay all my attention to myself, helped me reorganise my inner thoughts, to really help me know who I am and what I'm doing."

Participant: "To some extent, Chinese students or like Asian students were somehow not that willing to discover their true self. It's somehow maybe from the last generation... it's not something nice to really think who you are or what kind of thing you want to do..."

Theme 2: Unfamiliarity of MBCT, and reluctance towards help-seeking

Participant: "I think most students don't know the main content of the courses and they're not sure about the results of these classes."

Participant: "I found that, like, therapy is a word that is a little bit too heavy, or it's like, a little bit too serious... Because for me, when I do need therapy, it is when I feel ill, I have an illness, I'm injured, I'm hurt."

Theme 3: Preference for an efficient, practical and collaborative learning approach

Participant: "...not only the Master's students but also the PhD students we don't have enough time to spend eight weeks to see if it can work."

Participant: "I think it's better if we have lots of people sitting in a room, and some of our therapists, or some researchers, they can read that material, or some guiding language, guiding materials, they can help us to, to have us go through the whole process..."

Implications

For university support services, it might be helpful to:

- Proactively support CIS's adaptation (e.g., managing expectations about staff-student relationships)
- Provide high-quality, accessible self-help material, ideally in Chinese
- Help CIS explore how to balance the needs of self and others
- Provide support programmes that emphasise developing skills and facilitating personal growth (e.g., MBCT)
- Consider changing the term "therapy" in the title, when offering MBCT (e.g., just "Mindfulness for Life")
- Offer shorter versions of MBCT (Halladay et al., 2019; Chiodelli et al., 2020)
- Develop mindfulness teachers' cultural competence so that the interventions can be more culturally sensitive and appropriate (having Chinese-speaking teachers would be especially helpful).

References

- Teoh, S. L., Letchumanan, V., & Lee, L. H. (2021). Can mindfulness help to alleviate loneliness? A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 633319.
- Zhang, N., Fan, F. M., Huang, S. Y., & Rodriguez, M. A. (2018). Mindfulness training for loneliness among Chinese college students: A pilot randomized controlled trial. *International Journal of Psychology, 53*(5), 373-378.
- Halladay, J. E., Dawdy, J. L., McNamara, I. F., Chen, A. J., Vitoroulis, I., McInnes, N., & Munn, C. (2019). Mindfulness for the mental health and well-being of post-secondary students: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Mindfulness, 10*(3), 397-414.
- Sawir, E., Marginson, S., Deumert, A., Nyland, C., & Ramia, G. (2008). Loneliness and International Students: An Australian Study. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 12*(2), 148-180.