Investigating Differences Between First-Generation and Continuous-Generation Students during their 6-Month Internship: A Diary Study Examining the Role of Feelings of Competence in Challenging Situations

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Abstract

This longitudinal study aimed at examining the different experiences of first-generation students (FGS) and continuous-generation students (CGS) during their compulsory internships before completing their degree programs, addressing documented disparities between the two student groups. The disparities concern financial resources, as well as academic areas and parental social support, leading to overall reduced well-being and reduced performance in FGS who lack these aspects in comparison to their CGS peers. For the current study, the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) was used with weekly diary entries over an average of 22 weeks. The study initially focused on whether FGS report more negative internship experiences than CGS (H1), secondly, whether negative experiences are associated with reduced feelings of competence (H2), and lastly, whether generational status moderates the aforementioned relationship (H3). With a final sample of 63 eligible participants, quantitative data were analysed using a variation of measures, including t-tests, regression and moderation analysis. The results indicated no significant differences between FGS and CGS in the frequency of negative experiences or levels of competence. However, a significant negative relationship was found between negative experiences and levels of competence. Contrary to expectations, it revealed that the negative impact of these experiences on competence was slightly weaker for FGS than for CGS. These findings suggest that while negative experiences during internships diminish students' perceived level of competence, the role of generational status may be more complex than previously assumed. Further research should aim to explore the long-term impacts of differences between FGS and CGS during and beyond the internships to assess their impact on future careers in the professional domain and inform possibilities of improving internship designs for enhanced competence development.

Keywords: First Generation Students, Continuous Generation Students, Compulsory Internship, Competence, Negative Experiences

Introduction

On a global scale, the number of individuals pursuing higher education is rising, with increasingly growing numbers expected in the coming years (Zwaan, 2017). This expanding population is becoming increasingly diverse, as the makeup of the student body includes more diverse dimensions, including socioeconomic background, ethnicity and family educational history (Phillips, 2019). This student population furthermore encompasses both first-generation students (FGS) and continuous-generation students (CGS). FGS typically have no parent who has attended higher education, such as college or university, whereas CGS have at least one parent who has attended higher education and obtained a diploma (Burger & Naude, 2019).

In the literature, significant differences are highlighted in the experiences of these two groups in the transition to university, revealing concerning disparities. Firstly, FGS are more likely to encounter difficulties and challenges concerning well-being and academic inadequacies, specifically lower performance and dropout, than CGS (Barsegyan & Maas, 2024). These challenges often stem from a cultural mismatch between the values and norms of their familial backgrounds and those of tertiary academic institutions (Phillips et al., 2020). FGS are suggested to be more likely to endorse interdependent cultural norms, such as connection and communal obligations. These oftentimes contrast with the independent norms like self-expression and individual academic achievement, emphasised in many universities. This misalignment, further identified in research by Nguyen and Nguyen (2020), has been shown to contribute to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and concerns about belonging, which are experiences that are less frequently reported among CGS. CGS, who are generally observed to be more familiar with academic culture and its consequential expectations, tend to align more easily with the aforementioned independent norms (Yeager et al., 2016).

Additionally, research by Finny et al. (2022) identifies financial constraints as a key stressor for FGS, many of whom come from working-class backgrounds. Amirkhan et al. (2022) argue that perceived challenges in covering academic fees and living expenses, while trying to keep up with the study load and adapting to a new environment, can increase stress and anxiety levels in this student group. Regarding the aspect of social support, it is suggested that FGS seem to receive lower social support compared to others. Research by Barsegyan and Maas (2024) explores how parents from lower-income, working-class backgrounds have limited informational, emotional as well and financial resources to assist their children attending higher education, leading to working-class FGS youth beginning a new journey while adapting to new circumstances more or less on their own. In sharp contrast to these experiences of FGS, CGS are more likely to benefit from continuous parental involvement, including both emotional and financial support, which can facilitate their adaptation to higher education (Barsegyan & Maas, 2024). All together, these findings showcase the disparities experienced between FGS and CGS. In light of such disparities, it can be crucial to explore how these differences continue to shape the students' experiences during later milestones.

While there is extensive research on the differing experiences of FGS and CGS during their transition into higher education, comparatively little effort has been undertaken to examine the transitionary period from university into the workplace when comparing the experiences of the two student groups. A key component of this transition, specifically for students taking part in psychological education, is the completion of a mandatory internship, which acts as a vital bridge between academic learning and practical application, designed to prepare students for their working lives. For many students, gaining practical experiences and using learned skills during the internship often poses the first opportunity to come into contact with the work field, marking an important milestone in their personal and occupational development. It is of major relevance to address the aforementioned research gap in this field, as the transition into the workplace represents a critical period in each student's life, carrying much potential for self-

development as part of the overarching subject of forming and strengthening a professional identity (Jensen & Jetten, 2015). Professional identity can be described as the internalisation of the aspects belonging to a profession, which is essential for the appropriate adaptation to new responsibilities, building resilience and increased work ethic, as well as leading to the identification as a part of the workforce (Fitzgerald, 2020).

Given the importance of this transitional phase in fostering professional growth, the current study examines the experiences of FGS and CGS during their internships. Specifically, it investigates the relation between competence as a significantly influential variable and encountering and managing challenging, negatively perceived situations and how these experiences may differ between the two student groups. Since FGS are reported to experience significant barriers and disadvantages in academia, it is anticipated that FGS continue to rate their experiences as more negative within academic and professional contexts (Phillips et al., 2020). Research by Olson (2013) supports the assumption that this student group experiences a challenging transitional period and highlights the assumption that FGS might face similar challenges of adjustment to the workplace environment as to the academic environment. As a result, the current study expects FGS to experience more negative experiences during the internship compared to their CGS peers.

A variable that is assumed to exert a significant influence on the transitional phase into the workplace is the variable of competence. According to the Self Determination Theory (SDT), as the psychological framework exploring human motivation, personality development and human well-being, fulfilling fundamental psychological needs is crucial for effective functioning, motivation and overall well-being. Within SDT, competence refers to the need to feel effective, capable, and skilled. It enables and drives individuals to master challenges, improve abilities, and experience success in tasks (Ryan & Deci, 2000). While SDT identifies relatedness and autonomy as equally fundamental psychological needs, extensive research has

already explored these dimensions. Interesting insights have been gained by research by Butz and Stupnisky (2017), which explores the need for relatedness, while research by Guay (2021) explores the need for autonomy more deeply. Consequently, the present study focuses exclusively on the role of competence. The need for competence plays a central role in shaping individual engagement and persistence in the face of challenging situations. The SDT argues that individuals operating in environments supporting their sense of competence are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation, positive affect and a sense of agency (Wang et al., 2019). Conversely, contexts that dismiss the need for competence, for example through repeated exposure to negative experiences, can hinder motivation and lead to feelings of anxiety as well as low well-being (Wang et al., 2019). In light of the current study, the more frequent negative experiences reported by FGS can be seen as factors that actively frustrate their sense of competence. Consequently, FGS may be more vulnerable to the cost associated with an unmet need for competence, including reduced confidence and heightened stress. This aligns with the SDT's assumption that competence frustration may contribute not only to diminished well-being but also to impaired performance. When contrasting this to their peers, CGS benefitting from greater alignment with norms, high resources, and a strong support system may experience more consistent competence-affirming feedback, which in turn heightens the reinforcement of self-efficacy. Therefore, it can be inferred that differences in competence between the two student groups are not individual but more likely structurally shaped and that these disparities may carry potential to influence the navigational shift from university to the workplace.

The current research

To investigate this further, this longitudinal research aims to investigate the following hypotheses. Firstly, it is investigated whether FGS encounter more negative experiences during their internships compared to CGS (H1). Secondly, this research will investigate whether negative experiences are negatively related to feelings of competence, inferring that

more negative experiences during the full internship lead to lower levels of perceived competence in the final month of the internship (H2). The last hypothesis will be that the relationship between negative experiences and competence is moderated by generational status, such that for FGS, the relationship is more strongly negative than for CGS (H3).

Methods

Research design

To evaluate the students' internship experience over time, the current study was set up as an Experience Sampling Method (ESM) study, with a weekly diary design across an average of 22 weeks. The key general characteristics of this method consist of collecting data from a small sample of participants over an extended period (Van Berkel et al., 2017). This approach enabled the researchers to capture individuals' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in real life, providing a comprehensive view of the participants' weekly experiences and, through the multitude of measures, providing accurate reports by reducing retrospective bias (Vogelsmeier et al., 2024).

Participants

The study is based on a sample of 87 Master Psychology students, enrolled at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands and doing their clinical internship to conduct the final part of their study program. It involves students who did their clinical internship in different program specialisations, including neuropsychology, developmental psychology, clinical psychology, or forensic psychology. A cut-off score of 75% response rates has been chosen. According to research by Burns et al. (2008), the selection of exclusively high response rates enhances parameter estimate precision while simultaneously enhancing validity. In this regard, response rates of at least 70% are desirable, and 75% has been ultimately chosen to facilitate the abovementioned advantages for the current study. The

sample consisted of a total of 63 participants eligible for the analysis, 55 (87.3%) of whom were female, and 8 (12.7%) of whom were male. Regarding their generational status, the majority of participants were defined as CGS, with a total of 49 (77.78%) participants, whereas 14 (22.22%) participants were defined as FGS. The age ranged between 19 and 38 years. Specifically, 34 (54%) participants ranged from 19 to 23, 14 (22%) participants were aged 24 and 15 (24%) participants ranged from 25 to 38. Within this sample, 61 (95.24%) participants were from the Netherlands or other European countries, while 3 (4.76%) participants identified as ethnic minorities.

Procedure

The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Psychology of the University of Groningen (reference number ppo-016-003). During the informational meetings about their internships, the study was introduced to the students, who were then invited to send an email to the study's supervisors if they had an interest in participating. Following, additional information materials were sent out. In this case, the anonymity of the participants was ensured by making sure that the involved teachers were unaware of the participants' identities due to the fact that the students did not sign up through direct contact with them. Before the initial start of the internship, the students were asked to fill out a questionnaire including informed consent and further questions. This specifically included information about their age, ethnic origin, and their parents' highest achieved educational level to be able to determine their generational status.

Throughout the time that the participants were engaging in their internships, they were given an online questionnaire once per week. The questionnaires specifically examined participants' positive and negative emotions encountered during the day, their perceived self-perception, including an open-ended prompt to describe one significant experience during the internship of that week, and lastly offered the opportunity to rate the participants' feelings and

thoughts. The questionnaires were sent to the participants via email, including a Qualtrics link. In case of non-response, a follow-up mail was sent out to investigate their well-being and indicate the missing response. After completing the diary questions throughout the internship, the participants were given a monetary reward of 40 Euros. After the internship had ended, a post-questionnaire was sent out to the participants, which was not examined as part of the current study. After completing the post-questionnaires, the participants received an additional 20 Euros to the monetary reward received before.

Measures

In order to properly investigate the hypotheses for the current study, the following three separate constructs were used: generational status, negative experiences, and lastly, the individual's level of perceived competence.

Generational status

The student's generational status was determined based on two items from the initial questionnaire, which assessed the level of education of both parents. Participants were classified as FGS if neither parent had obtained a diploma in higher education, while those with at least one parent having attended higher education and having obtained a diploma were categorised as CGS. This variable was encoded as a dummy variable, where 0 indicated belonging to the CGS status and 1 indicated belonging to the FGS status.

Negative experiences

To examine challenging and negatively perceived situations during the internships, one item from the weekly diary questionnaires was analysed after the participants were asked to first describe a meaningful experience from the past internship week in text form. They then rated this experience on a scale ranging from 0, indicating the lowest, to 100, indicating the highest and therefore most negative, in response to the question: “Do you have negative

feelings about the experience?". Although this item from the questionnaire also assessed the perceived meaningfulness and positive emotions associated with the experience, these aspects were not relevant to the current study and were therefore excluded from the analysis. This measure relating to negative feelings regarding experienced situations was aggregated across the entire duration of the internship.

Level of competence

The student's level of competence was determined based on an item from the weekly diary questionnaire. It aimed at deepening the exploration of the meaningful situation during the internship experienced during the week and specifically asked the participants to rank their perceived level of competence on a scale ranging from 1 (I felt incompetent) to 9 (I felt competent). These scores were aggregated across the final four weeks of the internship.

Data analysis

The data was collected using Qualtrics XM and subsequently converted into numeric values before being exported to Microsoft Excel. The cleaned dataset exclusively consisted of participants with more than 75% response rates and, therefore, related to a cut-off score of 16 entries during an average of 22 weeks, and was finally imported into RStudio for data analysis. Several measures were conducted to analyse the gathered data and investigate the abovementioned hypotheses. For the first hypothesis, a t-test was conducted with generational status as the independent variable and competence as the dependent variable. Regarding the second hypothesis, a regression analysis was performed to further assess the predictive value of negative experiences on competence levels, providing insight into the direction and strength of this relationship. In order to test the final hypothesis, the association between negative experiences and competence was examined using a moderation technique to investigate if generational status moderated this relationship, meaning that the relationship has more detrimental effects on FGS than CGS. A multiple regression analysis was performed

with competence as the dependent variable, negative experiences as the independent variable, generational status as the moderator, and an interaction term (Negative Experiences × Generational Status). This brings about the following equation: Competence=b0+b1 (Negative Experiences) +b2(Generational Status) +b3(Negative Experiences x Generational Status) +e. Lastly, a simple slopes analysis was performed to investigate the predictive value of negative experiences on competence levels for each of the groups (FGS vs. CGS).

Results

Hypothesis 1

Table 1 displays the means, standard deviations and the results of the t-test comparing negative experiences, feelings of competence and the number of weeks that the students completed the internship survey for the two student groups (FGS vs. CGS). Contrary to H1, no significant differences were found in the rated levels of competence.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations Comparing Negative Experiences and Levels of Competence of FGS and CGS

Measure	FGS (n=14)		CGS (n=49)		t(24)	95% CI
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*		
Negative Experience	27.58	6.85	25.08	7.34	1.16	[-2.23, 6.65]
Competence	4.61	2.14	4.73	1.99	.26	[-1.11, 1.28]

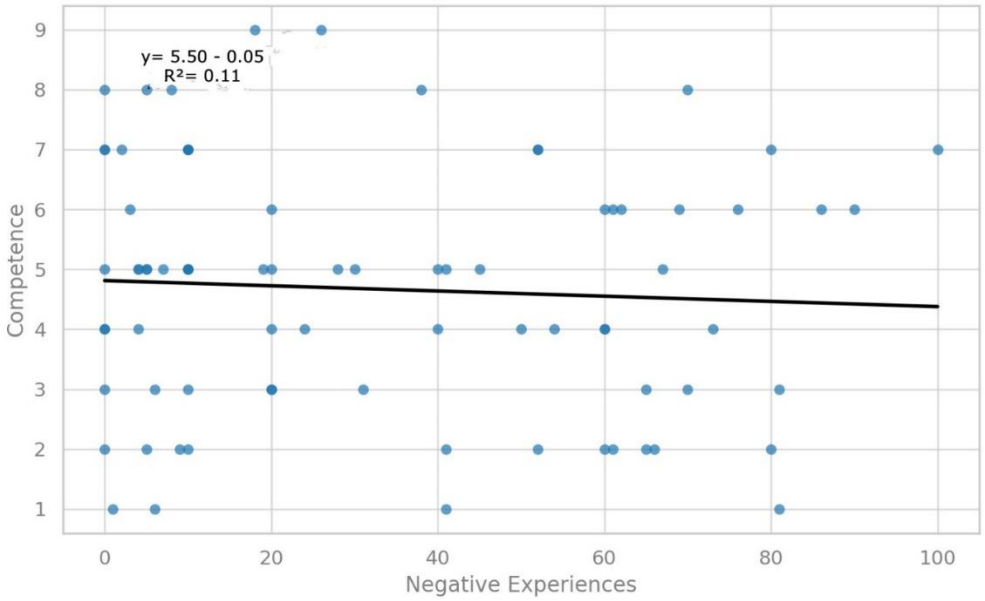
Note. Negative Experiences were Measured over the Entire Internship Duration with Items of the Weekly Diary Questionnaire on a Scale from 0-100, Competence was Measured with Another Item of the Weekly Diary Questionnaire on a Scale from 1 to 9

Hypothesis 2

Furthermore, a simple linear regression was conducted to examine whether negative experiences are negatively related to feelings of competence (Figure 1). The model was statistically significant, $F(1,61) = 7.50$, $p = .008$, with an intercept of 5.50, which indicated that when negative experiences were zero, the predicted level of competence was 5.50. Looking at the measurement of this construct, this score lies on the upper side of the given scale. In line with H2, negative experiences were negatively related to competence ($\beta = -0.05$, $p = .008$). This indicates that when students encountered a higher number of negative experiences, their perceived feelings of competence decreased. Approximately 11% of the variance in the level of competence can be explained by the model.

Figure 1

Regression Output Showing the Relationship between Negative Experiences and Competence



Hypothesis 3

Next, a moderation analysis examined whether generational status (0 = CGS, 1 = FGS) moderated the relationship between negative experiences and competence (Table 2). Contrary to the third hypothesis, results indicated that the interaction term is significantly positive. The

moderation analysis was followed up by a simple slope analysis to explore how the relationship between negative experiences and competence differs for the two student groups (Table 3).

Table 2

Investigating the Relationship between Competence and Negative Experiences with Generational Status as the Moderator

Predictor	Estimate (b)	SE	t-value	p-value
(Intercept)	6.50***	.50	13.00	.001
Negative Experiences(b1)	-.30***	.05	-6.00	.001
Generational Status (b2)	-1.20**	.70	-1.71	.009
Interaction (b3)	.10*	.04	2.50	.002

*Note. SE= standard error,*** p < .001, ** p <.01, * p < .05*

Table 3

Simple Slope Analysis Exploring the Relationship Between Negative Experiences and Competence and the Difference Between the Student Groups

Group	Slope	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	95% CI
CGS	-.40	.12	-3.33	.001	[-0.64, -0.16]
FGS	-.20	.09	-2.22	.030	[-0.38, -0.02]

Note. CGS= Continuous Generation Students, FGS= First Generation Students

Discussion

The current study aimed to investigate the differences between FGS and CGS during their internship and examined the potentially differing role of feelings of competence in challenging and negatively perceived situations, based on the aggregated data of ESM diary data from the investigated internships related to the students. What was found were partly unexpected results, specifically that FGS did not encounter more negative experiences during their internships compared to the CGS student group. Furthermore, in line with our expectations, we found that higher levels of negative experiences were indeed associated with

lower levels of competence. These negative experiences had a more negative effect on CGS, shown by a significant interaction effect, which lastly presents an unexpected finding.

Previous literature has shown that FGS are reported to experience significant barriers and disadvantages in higher education, and that this is expected to continue within the professional environment (Phillips et al., 2020). Moreover, literature by Olson (2013) suggests that this specific target group experiences a challenging transitional period from the academic setting to the workforce due to FGS facing similar problems of adjustment as before, even though extensive evidence and literature are still lacking in this regard. In the current study, contrary to expectations, FGS did not encounter more negative experiences during their internships in comparison to CGS. The lack of anticipated significant differences can be potentially explained by the increased resilience of FGS in facing and managing challenges. Previous studies have suggested that resilience oftentimes can be explained and increased by the determination to succeed in challenging environments despite adverse conditions (Davino, 2013). Furthermore, research by Fitz-Gerald (2017) suggests that FGS can exhibit strong coping mechanisms, specifically through their ability to navigate unfamiliar situations. Having already encountered and navigated major barriers throughout their academic journey, these students may have developed skills such as proactive problem-solving and increased help-seeking, which enable them to better manage stressors and reduce the perceived intensity of negative experiences during the internship. This strength may be underrecognized in deficit-oriented contexts but could explain why FGS in this study did not report significantly more negative experiences than their peers.

Furthermore, the second hypothesis was indeed supported in the current study. The regression analysis revealed that higher levels of negative experiences are associated with lower levels of competence, meaning that for students facing more negative experiences, the feelings of competence diminished. Recent work by I Nyoman Tri Sutaguna (2023) supports

the assumption that negative experiences in professional environments can ultimately lead to diminished competence. Regarding this notion, the research done by Wang et al. (2019) argues that for students not feeling adequately supported, negatively experienced situations can develop into barriers to their professional growth. Furthermore, the SDT argues that contexts that dismiss the need for competence can hinder motivation and lead to feelings of anxiety as well as low well-being (Wang et al., 2019). These findings highlight the importance of the intertwined roles of competence and negative experiences, and the detrimental effects that can occur consequentially.

To continue, the third hypothesis was not supported in the current study, but the research rather revealed an opposite effect than expected. While negative experiences are negatively associated with levels of competence, the moderation analysis revealed that although both groups experienced a decline in competence due to negative experiences, the negative effect of negative experiences on competence is significantly weaker for FGS than for CGS. Additionally, there was a non-significant direct effect of generational status on competence reported, pointing to the notion that generational status as a variable itself did not influence competence directly, but rather moderated how negative experiences influenced the levels of perceived competence. This finding aligns with the work of Ivemark and Ambrose (2021), who reported that FGS often develop strong adaptive skills to manage the effects of negative experiences they encounter, which is in line with the aforementioned findings of FGS's increased coping skills in comparison to CGS.

Strengths and limitations

The design choice of a longitudinal ESM study enabled researchers to analyse and provide a comprehensive view of students' real-life experiences, while allowing the participating students to recall weekly experiences rather than retrospectively at the end of the internship, leading to detailed accounts and the possibility of gathering accurate data.

Although it was beyond the scope of the current study to go more into depth with more frequent assessments during the internship, the study still provided interesting insights which were able to closely reflect the student's inner world during the internship, recalling feelings, thoughts and memories. Another strength of the current study lies in its ability to provide valuable insight into the differences that occur due to belonging to separate generational status groups and the transitional period from higher education into the work field, as most research focuses on the transition into university. This suggests that differing processes take place during the transitional period to the workplace in comparison to the transition to academic life, and that further research is needed.

While these strengths provide major benefits of the current study, its limitations should also be taken into consideration. Firstly, the observed sample size imbalance between the two student groups could limit the generalisability of this exploratory study, which therefore offers a good reason for future research to increase the sample sizes while taking an equal number of participants from both groups into account. Regarding the generalisability, and as there were only students from the University of Groningen and the study field of psychology included, this points to another area of improvement for future research. Lastly, another limitation concerns the measurement of the variables of interest. The constructs were investigated using brief scales and questions, which may lead to an insufficient capturing of the nature of the chosen constructs. For instance, negative experiences during the internship might range from encountering subtle microaggressions to overt discrimination or stress. Therefore, a narrowly defined scale regarding the measurement of the key constructs poses a significant limitation to the current study.

Implications for science and practice

Suggestions for future research could entail analysing the current weekly internship assessments rather than limiting the scope to analysing the aggregated data over time, while

simultaneously providing more comprehensive measurements of the key constructs. This could be done to gain even more in-depth insights into the variables of interest and allow for findings that align with the complex and multidimensional nature of the underlying psychological experiences during the time of the internship. Furthermore, sample sizes should be increased, and inclusion criteria should be widened to account for more generalisability. Lastly, long-term impacts beyond the compulsory internships to assess the impact of early experiences in the professional domain on the further career of graduate students can be investigated and should be further explored to allow for a thorough investigation of this highly relevant period in the lives of the students and to facilitate the development of methods and tools, to positively shape and appropriately support individuals during this time.

Conclusion

Reviewing all the findings and results of the study, it can be concluded that partly expected, partly unexpected insights were gained while comparing the experiences in the transitional period between the academic and the professional domain in regards to FGS and CGS. On the one hand, FGS did not encounter more negative experiences during their internships when compared to CGS. On the other hand, higher levels of negative experiences were associated with lower levels of competence, and lastly, generational status moderated how negative experiences influenced the levels of perceived competence. All in all, the current study provided valuable information to aid in closing the existing research gap in the respective field, even though current limitations should be taken into consideration in future research. The findings of the study can inform the possibility of improving general internship designs so that features enhancing competence development are strengthened. Ultimately, the findings highlighted in the current study contribute not only to academic understanding but also to practical efforts aimed at fostering more equitable internship experiences for all students, regardless of their generational background.

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Appendix A

Artificial Intelligence Statement

During the preparation of this work, I used Google Scholar and Google to conduct a literature search for my thesis. Furthermore, the data in the study was analysed in RStudio. The text was written within Word, and the citation manager Scribbr was used to create and sort the reference list. Finally, ChatGPT and Grammarly were used to receive minor suggestions for improving the structure of certain paragraphs. After using this tool/service, I thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as needed, taking full responsibility for the final outcome.

Appendix B

ESM Diary Entries Measuring the Chosen Constructs

Instruction: In each week, describe an experience that has influenced your internship in one way or another. Something YOU care about: something that keeps you busy, that you think about, that evokes strong feelings in you. That can be a concrete experience, something that has happened, but also something you think about, feelings or wishes or thoughts that you don't know what to do with, are worried about, or are very happy with, etc. You can describe a concrete event (e.g. a special experience with a client), but also a more indirect experience that influences how you feel or think about your work (e.g. your relationship ended). You may describe the same experience several times, because you may still be working on the same subject the next time. If there are several experiences within one week that you would like to report, you can do so by completing a new report for each experience.

Briefly describe an experience from the past week that you find important. As a guideline, consider the following questions. What was the experience? In what situation? What were your thoughts about it? How does it affect how you experience your internship?

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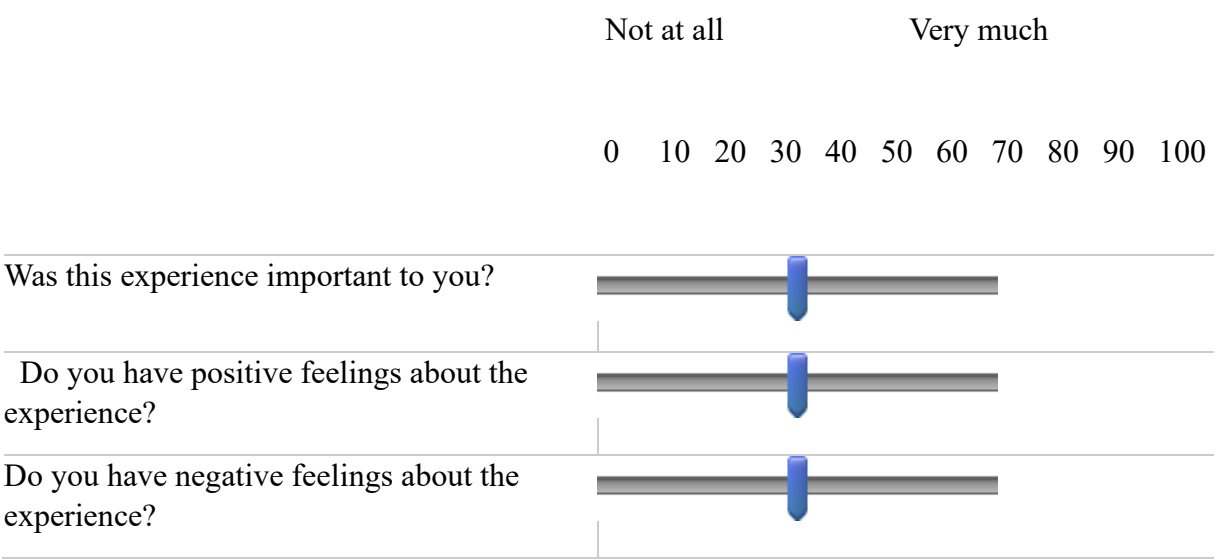
Use the slider to answer the questions below about the experience you just described.



And here are three more questions about this experience

	1 (1)	2 (2)	3 (3)	4 (4)	5 (5)	6 (6)	7 (7)	8 (8)	9 (9)	
I felt pressured	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	I felt free to make my own choices
I felt incompetent	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	I felt competent
I felt alone	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	I felt connected to others