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Interculturality and social skills? Relationships of the stays abroad of students of different faculties with intercultural and social competence

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Abstract

Possessing skills in social and intercultural interaction is vitally important for employees who work in globalized environments, especially as people's working lives tend to involve an increasingly large amount of service-related activities. As a consequence, universities offer cultural studies courses and strive to enable their students to study abroad for a period of time. However, there is still no widely shared agreement on how intercultural experiences and cultural preparation courses predict the perception, thinking and acting of individuals. Therefore, the study at hand uses a cross-sectional design with $N = 430$ participants in order to investigate whether students of cultural studies gain more intercultural competencies during the time spent studying abroad, compared to studies of other subjects. The results reveal that students of cultural subjects show significantly higher levels of cultural empathy and openness in the post hoc measurement, even though there was no interaction effect with the amount of time spent studying abroad. Length of stay abroad had a significant indirect effect on social competence via all the dimensions of the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire. Moreover, results indicate that flexibility to adapt one's behaviour to cultural norms may predict problems when returning to one's home country.

1 | INTERCULTURALITY AND SOCIAL SKILLS? THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LENGTH OF STAY ABROAD, MULTICULTURAL COMPETENCE, AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE FOR CULTURAL STUDIES STUDENTS AND FOR STUDENTS OF OTHER SUBJECTS

The modern working life has shifted towards a globalized, highly interconnected environment. Dealing successfully with foreign cultures is decisive for the success of individuals and organizations in this versatile and complex world (Lengersdorf, 2016). Correspondingly, companies make a considerable effort to assess and promote social and intercultural skills among their employees (Bolten, 2016). Universities are gearing their curricula and support programmes to ensure that students have the international experience that is expected to lead to higher intercultural competence (Lörz, Netz, & Quast, 2016). Correspondingly, students and employees are sent to a stay abroad or to expatriate programmes, with the aim of having them return interculturally competent. This is expected to increase the quality of intercultural interactions in dealing with customers and partners and to reduce the probability of misunderstandings and conflicts (Barmeyer & Franklin, 2016). In addition, there is the chance to create synergies through the constructive use of different perspectives and levels of knowledge, as Stegmann (2011) shows comprehensively in a meta-analysis. In addition to the secondment of students or employees, entire study programmes are designed in such a way that students first deal with one or more cultures from a cultural studies perspective and then study for a certain period of time in the respective culture. Considering this effort, the question arises as to what extent such culture-specific studies are relevant for later intercultural competence. Furthermore, the question arises as to whether students who acquire more competence during longer stays abroad can at least partially apply this competence in dealing with members of their home culture. The central research question of this study is therefore whether students with cultural studies qualifications are more interculturally and socially competent than students without cultural studies qualifications, and whether the length of time that students spend abroad also has a role to play in predicting these levels of competence.

1.1 | Intercultural competence

As intercultural competence is viewed differently by different researchers, there is no consensus regarding a definition (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). According to Genkova (2019), there is a consensus that intercultural competence describes the ability to act efficiently and appropriately in intercultural situations (in accordance with Wolff, 2017). What is controversial is how such an ability is created, which components it is composed of and which correlates are associated with it.

Due to its predictive power and its conceptional strength, the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) by van der Zee and van Oudenhoven (2001) has distinguished itself from other models. The MPQ operationalizes intercultural competence as an expression of an interculturally competent personality. This is reflected in the sum of professional performance, personal adaptation and intercultural interactions of people in multicultural jobs. In this respect, the MPQ can be considered to represent the trait-oriented approach in intercultural competence research. Analogous to the Big Five personality factors, van der Zee and van Oudenhoven (2001) identified five personality traits that make up intercultural competence: cultural empathy is the ability to understand the thinking, behaviour and feelings of culturally diverse people. Openness expresses an open and unprejudiced attitude

towards cultural differences and new experiences. Initiative describes the active approach and shaping of social situations. Emotional stability is the ability to remain calm under new and stressful conditions. Flexibility means to interpret new situations as a positive challenge and wanting to adapt accordingly (van der Zee, van Oudenhoven, Ponterotto, & Fietzer, 2013). Because all these subscales have conceptual similarities to the dimensions of the Big Five model, Gabrenya et al. (2013) classify the MPQ as a Big Five measurement tool that has been specifically tailored to the intercultural context. A number of studies confirmed the construct validity of the MPQ in different versions by factor analysis (Leone, van der Zee, van Oudenhoven, Perugini, & Ercolani, 2005; van der Zee et al., 2013).

It is assumed that a person with higher scores in intercultural competence is more able to interact with people from other cultures and adapt faster (Ng, Wang, & Chan, 2017). Lee and Sukoco (2010) could also show that the intercultural competence significantly moderates the relationship between the length of the stay abroad and the ability to adapt and job performance. People who were interculturally competent were more successful during longer stays.

1.2 | The development of intercultural competence

Even though personality traits are considered stable, it has been shown that the properties of MPQ can change (Tracy-Ventura, Dewaele, Köylü, & McManus, 2016). Tracy-Ventura et al. (2016) discuss the concept of personality development in intercultural contexts. They argue that in response to social circumstances, such as during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, changes in tolerance, conscientiousness and emotional stability occur (Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013). They reason this with reference to Roberts, Wood, and Smith's (2005) Social Investment Theory, which posits that the personality is formed during specific life events (such as travelling abroad and being confronted by another culture), during which individuals can decide whether or not to develop certain personality characteristics. Genkova and Kruse (2020) argue that individuals not only show personality-based behaviour in reaction to certain situational hints but are constantly experiencing intercultural situations, reflecting over one's own and others' behaviour and subsequently adapting their behaviour and behavioural intentions, according to Kolb's experimental learning theory (Kolb, Boyatzis, & Mainemelis, 2001). Therefore, personality development in intercultural situations is likely to be part of an overall learning process when facing intercultural situations.

As well as characteristics such as cultural empathy, intercultural interaction also require certain skills and knowledge. Genkova and Whiting (2020) describe, with reference to Bittner (2008) the following learning goals. They explain that a certain amount of orientation knowledge about foreign cultural standards should first be imparted. Building on this intercultural understanding, individuals are then able to develop a system of orientation, or to expand their pre-existing system, and to develop behavioural patterns for concrete acquisition activities. Ultimately, a transfer must happen in concrete intercultural situations. Genkova and Whiting (2020) describe four central types of intercultural training based on Gudykunst and Hammer (1983), which are meant to support individuals to achieve the mentioned learning goals: culture-general-information-oriented, with reference to the understanding of intercultural communication; culture-specific-information-oriented, information about the target country; culture-general-experience-oriented, sensitizing simulations and role-plays, and finally culture-specific-experience-oriented trainings, which include a concrete examination of a culture, often as simulation or role-play. These concepts are expected to be able to provide individuals with knowledge about the problems of intercultural interaction as well as about specific cultures and to reduce possible affective predispositions such as intergroup anxiety or concrete prejudices. In this way, typical problems that occur in intercultural interaction should be reduced or become less likely (Barmeyer & Franklin, 2016). In total, individual effects of these training methods have been verified in different studies (Barmeyer, 2010; Bittner, 2008; Bolten, 2016; Meleady & Seger, 2017), so that it can be assumed that the four different types of competence transfer can contribute to prepare a person for a stay abroad.

1.3 | Social competence

Social competence is generally regarded as the ability to achieve one's own goals in dealing with other people (Kanning, 2015). Since most people are likely to spend most of their time in the culture/country within which they grew up and were socialized, it is important that they are also competent in dealing with people within their own culture (Kanning, 2015). This social competence is partially genetically determined and partially learned (Kauffeld, 2004). In the professional context, Kauffeld (2004) describe social competence as being primarily the ability to establish and maintain contacts, to position one's own point of view, to motivate others, to accept and acknowledge, as well as to be considerate and level-headed. Junge, Valkenburg, Deković, and Branje (2020) describe that social competence is primarily determined by cognitive performance, early childhood experiences, and states, for example, egocentrism, which enables an individual to make a selfish, and thus potentially successful, choice in a certain situation.

1.4 | The relationship between social and intercultural competence

In addition to discussions about the mutability of characteristics that contribute to social competence, intercultural psychology debates the connection between social and intercultural competence. Rathje (2007), in her comprehensive discussion of the state of research on intercultural competence at the time, considers the relationship between intercultural competence and social competence. She argues that intercultural competence must include culturally generalized social competence, but that it must also consider specific requirements of intercultural interaction and cultural adaption, such as overcoming intercultural stress (van der Zee et al., 2013). Schnabel, Kelava, Seifert, and Kuhlbrodt (2015) classify social skills as a sub-dimension of intercultural competence. These build on the relevant personality dispositions as well as cognitive performance and knowledge. Through success or failure in intercultural situations, individuals acquire competence to act appropriately and efficiently in future situations (Wolff & Borzikowsky, 2018). This is equivalent to developing social competence in adulthood. Tynjälä, Virtanen, Klemola, Kostiainen, and Rasku-Puttonen (2016) describe that the core of competence development is therefore to reflect and adapt one's own behaviour. In this way, this learning process also contributes to the development of personality traits that are necessary for social competence, so that competent behaviour can be demonstrated whilst living in the home country/culture (Kanning, 2015). Therefore, we consider social competence as culture-specific ability. However, certain experiences should be connected to personality development benefiting home-culture-specific and general aspects of competence in interacting with others. To investigate this relationship and the relationships between study programme, length of stays abroad, and multicultural personality traits we developed the research questions and hypotheses of the present study, which are presented in the following section.

1.5 | The present study

Using the experimental learning theory (Kolb, 1984), Wolff and Borzikowsky (2018) convincingly argue that individuals also develop their personality in adulthood and thus become more interculturally competent. Therefore, the underlying question of this study is whether spending time abroad is positively associated with students' intercultural and social competence and whether these relationships are stronger for students who study cultural studies, compared to students from other academic backgrounds. Consequently, in the present study we studied German students with and without experience abroad in order to examine the relationship between stays abroad, intercultural competence and social competence.

In his published master thesis on the development of intercultural competence, Wolff (2017) not only shows its variability over a period of 3 months but also discusses possible covariates of competence acquisition. He describes

that next to the determinants of the cultural contact (primarily the overall length), previous intercultural experiences and previously gained knowledge might predict intercultural competence. However, while intercultural training prior to stays abroad is very unusual at German universities, students in cultural studies courses acquire a broad knowledge of a particular cultural area. A cultural studies programme with an integrated stay abroad includes all forms of intercultural training as described by Bittner (2003) and Gudykunst and Hammer (1983). Other courses of study cannot usually offer such an intercultural education. It is therefore assumed that students of cultural studies have a higher level of intercultural competence than students of other disciplines. Since there are no studies that consider this topic we wanted to contribute to the research on intercultural competence development and examine the meaning of prior intercultural education for stays abroad. We raised the following hypothesis: *Hypothesis 1*: Students of cultural studies have higher intercultural competence than students from other disciplines.

Furthermore, it could be assumed that people who are better prepared for a stay abroad can benefit more from it in terms of having a higher level of competence after a comparable period of time abroad (Wolff, 2017). As described above, it can be assumed that people who participated in training, seminars or lectures on culture-specific information and culture-general orientation might be better prepared to overcome difficulties and gain competence through the presence of orientation knowledge and reflection. It is therefore assumed that people who study cultural studies subject and therefore are particularly exposed to culture-specific knowledge and general theories on culture are even more competent after longer stays than those who study other subjects. *Hypothesis 2*: Length of time abroad is a stronger predictor of cultural competence for students of cultural studies, compared to students from other disciplines.

As previously stated, it is not clear how far social and intercultural competence are related or can be delimited from each other (Rathje, 2007). Social competence is seen as culture-specific (Rathje, 2007), while intercultural competence goes far beyond this and requires the ability to interact with several cultures rather than with one (Schnabel et al., 2015). Consequently, someone who has a high level of intercultural competence should not necessarily have a higher level of social competence but might be likely to develop their personality in a way that leads to more competent behaviour whilst living in their home country/culture. Accordingly, it can be assumed that the development of interculturally competent personality traits over the course of a longer stay can predict a higher level of social competence when interacting with others in one's home culture. Currently there is no study examining this relationship, so we raised the following hypothesis. *Hypothesis 3*: Intercultural competence mediates the relationship between the length of time abroad and social competence, so that length of time abroad positively predicts intercultural competence, which in turn positively predicts social competence.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Design and procedure

The hypotheses were examined by means of a cross-sectional survey. The survey was conducted with the use of an online questionnaire, distributed through various social media channels. In order to answer the research questions, participants were recruited with an invitation link through which they could access the questionnaire on the LimeSurvey platform. Participation requirements were a minimum age of 18 years and that the participants were currently studying in Germany. It was possible to complete the questionnaire on both computer and smartphone. No incentive was offered.

2.2 | Measurement instruments

The standardized questionnaire used for this study was composed of three parts with a total of 129 items and can be filled out in around 20 min.

Social competence was measured with the social competence dimension from the Competence-Reflection-Inventory (Ger.KRI). The KRI is a tested and validated questionnaire for measuring the self-concept of professional competence (Kauffeld, 2004). The distinct dimension social competence (24 items, including 5 negatively formulated statements) consisted of five scales of building and maintaining contacts, positioning one's own point of view, motivating others, acceptance and recognition and consideration and level-headedness. Individuals with high values on this dimension are expected to be able to reach their aims in social situations and establish good relationships with others. The participants could select a percentage value for each item on a scale from 0% (the statement does not apply at all) to 100% (the statement applies completely) in steps of 10 percentage points. In addition, the option 'No statement' was available. For the social competence dimension, there was good internal consistency (α = .88).

Multicultural competence was measured with the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ). This questionnaire determines intercultural competence as a personality disposition and was developed by van der Zee and van Oudenhoven (2001). The questionnaire comprises 91 item statements with a five-point Likert-scale (1 'I do not agree at all.' – 5 'I totally agree', translated by the author) and is an instrument to measure the ability to act effectively in intercultural situations. The items of the MPQ can be divided into the five sub-scales Cultural Empathy, Openness, Emotional Stability, Initiative and Flexibility. Each of these scales is assigned 17 to 20 items. The scale Cultural Empathy refers to the willingness and ability to empathize with the attitudes, feelings, thoughts and behaviour of people from other cultures (e.g., 'I try to understand others opinions' α = .88). The Openness scale is defined by van der Zee and van Oudenhoven (2001) as unbiased attitudes towards members of other cultural groups, as well as other attitudes and approaches (e.g., 'I like to get in contact with others' α = .81). Emotional stability is understood as the ability to cope with psychological stress due to external and internal conflicts in a different cultural environment ('I'm often nervous' α = .85). The scale Initiative describes successful working in multicultural environments and the willingness to act ('I usually wait until others come up to me' [reverse] α = .81). The Flexibility scale describes the willingness to adapt familiar strategies to new circumstances ('I'm fascinated by new technical developments' α = .81).

Finally, a number of demographic questions were asked. These included age, gender, the field of study and culture-specific education within the study programme, in order to create a dichotomous variable whether participants who were studying a cultural studies topic (including purely cultural studies, linguistics, literature, or other subjects which feature a cultural studies aspect) were given the value 1, while participants who were not studying a cultural studies topic were given the value 0. Further questions were asked to determine the completion of the stay abroad and its duration ('How much time did you spend abroad while studying?' (in months). Based on the discussion of Wolff (2017), the time spent abroad prior to the stay abroad was also asked as: 'How much time did you spend abroad in total before beginning your studies?' (in months). This variable was defined as the number of months spent abroad before starting to study.

2.3 | Participants

In total, 441 participants completed the questionnaire. Since it is not possible to determine how many students received the invitation to the questionnaire, there is no need for a classic response rate. It was found that 11 of the questionnaires contained missing values to a considerable extent, or more than 20% missing answers so these participants were removed from the data-file. This resulted in a sample size of 430 (315 females, 110 males, M age = 25.22, SD = 4.51, age range = 18–55 years). The number of semesters that students had studied for in total ranged from 1 to 20 (M = 7.4, SD = 3.93: one semester is half a year of study, so the average participant was in their fourth year of study). Forty-nine per cent of participants were enrolled in culture-specific courses, while 51% were enrolled in non-culture-specific courses. Sixty-three per cent of participants studied abroad for at least 2 months (which we determined to be the minimum number of months required in order to count as having studied abroad). Consequently, there are four groups of participating students: Those with and without experience abroad and those with and without a culture-specific course of study. Of the 204 respondents who studied a culture-specific subject,

143 had studied abroad, while the remaining 61 had not studied abroad. Of the 216 students in other courses of study, 119 had studied abroad, while the other 97 did not. There were no significant differences in possible covariates between students with and without a degree in cultural studies (age, gender, number of months spent abroad before starting to study, length of study-related stays abroad), so that comparability can be assumed with regard to the dimensions studied.

3 | RESULTS

The means and standard deviations for each of the variables (Table 1), as well as the correlations between the variables, can be seen in Figure 1. Social competence correlated with participant's topic of study, with social competence being higher for cultural studies students than for students from other areas of study. In accordance with the results of hypothesis 1, empathy and openness correlated positively with pre-cultural knowledge. Contrary to assumptions, the number of months spent abroad before starting to study only correlated with initiative and the correlation between flexibility and social competence was negative. To test hypothesis 1 (that students of cultural studies will have higher intercultural competence than students from other disciplines), a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted. The statistical requirements for the analysis were met (no multicollinearity, homoscedasticity – Levene-Test $p > .05$, homogeneity of variance–covariance matrices – Box-M Test). The number of months spent studying abroad was included as a covariate. The MANOVA showed a statistically significant difference between students for the combined dependent variables, $F (5, 381) = 7.08$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.085$, Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.915$. The tests for inter-subject effects, as well as the graphical review, showed that the cultural competence sub-scale of empathy ($F [1, 381] = 17.81$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.044$, cultural-specific programme Yes: $M = 4.1$, $SD = 0.40$; No: $M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.45$) and openness ($F [1, 381] = 15.88$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.040$, cultural-specific programme Yes: $M = 3.9$, $SD = 0.40$; No: $M = 3.6$, $SD = 0.47$) were significantly higher among students of cultural studies than among students of other disciplines, thus supporting hypothesis 1. Additional analyses revealed there to be no correlation between the length of time that cultural studies students had studied and their level of intercultural competence.

To test hypothesis 2 (that the length of time abroad is a stronger predictor of cultural competence for students of cultural studies, compared to students from other disciplines), a moderation analysis was performed for each of the sub-scales of the dependent variables using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 1, 5,000 bootstrap samples). There were two possible reasons why an interaction effect might be observed. People who have studied cultural studies could show a generally steeper relationship between duration and intercultural competence if they are generally better prepared through the number of months spent abroad before starting to study and thus learn faster or with fewer problems. It could also be possible that this difference would only occur for a certain period of time and that difference would level off afterwards when the other students caught up with the cultural studies students.

The statistical requirements for regression analysis were met (linearity, homoskedasticity – Levene-Test $p > .05$). The results showed that, for each of the five intercultural competence sub-dimensions, there were significant main effects of the two predictor variables (i.e., both length of time spent studying abroad and topic of study [cultural studies vs. non-cultural disciplines] significantly predicted each intercultural competence sub-dimension), but that there was not a significant interaction between the two variables ($p > .05$), thus providing no evidence of moderation. Hypothesis 2 was thus not supported.

To test hypothesis 3 (that intercultural competence mediates the relationship between the length of stay abroad and social competence), model 4 in version 3.4 of Hayes' (2017) PROCESS macro was used. The analysis featured all five sub-dimensions of the intercultural competence scale as parallel mediators (see Figure 1). The analysis involved 5,000 bootstrapping samples with 95% confidence intervals (LLCI/ULCI), using the percentile method. The number of months spent abroad before starting to study and cultural study programme were included as covariates. The model explained 59% of the variance in social competence ($F [8, 369] = 56.37$, $p < .001$). Figure 1 illustrates the

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics

	Variable	Items	Min	Max	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	Length of stay abroad (months)	1	0	65	4.36	7.87			.14**	.09*	.21***	.07	.22***	.00	.12*	.02
2	Number of months spent abroad before starting to study	1	0	49	0.92	3.92		.005		−.01	.08	.16**	.20***	.17***	.26***	.09
3	Social competence	24	1	11	7.44	1.23	.88	.044	.963		.05	.02	.08	.09	.14**	.01
4	Cultural empathy	18	1	5	3.95	0.47	.88	<.001	.116	.348		.11*	.51***	.36***	.17**	.42***
5	Openness	18	1	5	3.75	0.45	.81	.190	.001	.734	.027		.40***	.45***	.37***	.57***
6	Emotional stability	20	1	5	3.03	0.53	.85	<.001	<.001	.130	<.001	<.001		.55***	.47***	.59***
7	Initiative	17	1	5	3.44	0.59	.89	.978	<.001	.087	<.001	<.001	<.001		.39***	.62***
8	Flexibility	18	1	5	3.19	0.49	.81	.019	<.001	.007	.001	<.001	<.001	<.001		.26***
9	Overall MPQ	91	1	5	3.47	0.36	.75	.696	.073	.803	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	

Note: The values above the diagonal present the correlation coefficients r, the values underneath present the corresponding *p*-values.
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
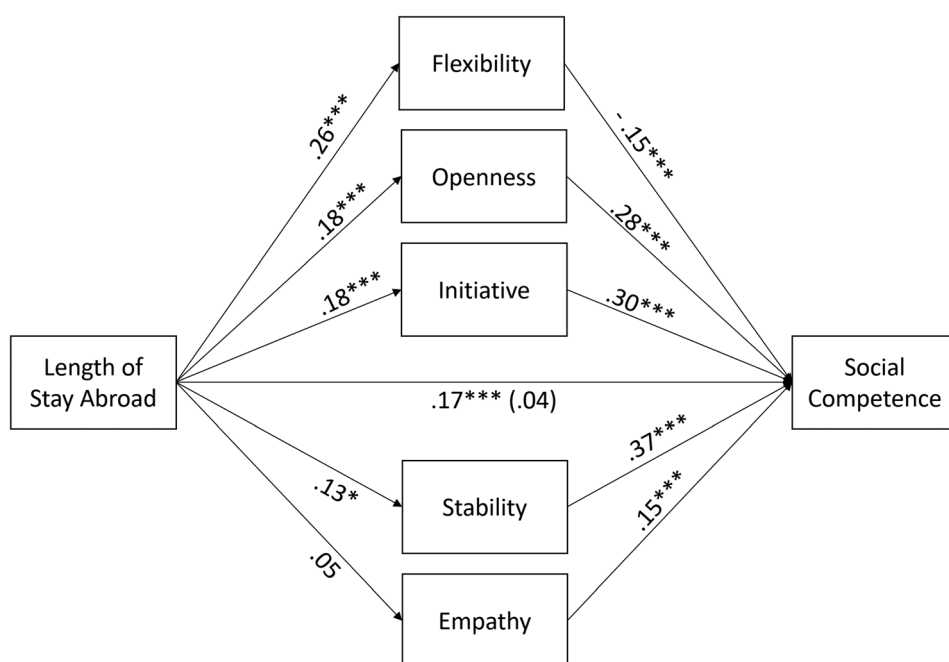
FIGURE 1 Mediation model depicting the indirect effect of the length of stays abroad on social competence through the sub-scales of the MPQ. On the c-path, the value outside brackets is the total effect, while the value inside brackets is the direct effect ($p = .25$). Control variables are not depicted. ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$

model and significant standardized effects. Supporting predictions, there was a significant indirect effect of length of stay abroad on social competence through stability (standardized indirect effect = 0.05, Boot *SE* = 0.02, Boot *LLCI* = 0.01, Boot *ULCI* = 0.09), through openness (standardized indirect effect = 0.05, Boot SE = 0.02, Boot LLCI = 0.02, Boot *ULCI* = 0.09), through initiative (standardized indirect effect = 0.06, Boot SE = 0.02, Boot *LLCI* = 0.02, Boot *ULCI* = −0.10) and flexibility (standardized indirect effect = −0.04, Boot *SE* = 0.01, Boot *LLCI* = −0.07, Boot *ULCI* = −0.02), but not through cultural empathy. The total effect of length of time studying abroad on social competence was significant, Effect = 0.17, SE = 0.01, t = −3.43, p < 0.001, LLCI = 0.02, ULCI = 0.07 and this became non-significant when the mediators were accounted for (direct effect), indicating full mediation, and supporting hypothesis 3.

4 | DISCUSSION

Supporting hypothesis 1, students of cultural studies showed higher expressions on the scales of empathy and openness than participants from other programmes. Contrary to hypothesis 2, there was no interaction effect between previous cultural studies education and the length of stay abroad. Supporting hypothesis 3 the mediation analysis revealed a significant indirect positive effect of the length of stay abroad on social competence through openness, initiative and stability and a negative effect through flexibility. However, cultural empathy did not mediate the relationship between the length of time studying abroad and social competence.

Various authors repeatedly emphasize the need to prepare students and expatriates for their stays abroad and point out that this is not common in the practice of institutional education (Genkova & Schreiber, 2019). Bolten (2016) describes that preparatory measures could above all sharpen sensitivity to cultural differences, which is largely captured by cultural empathy, and convey relevant content, which is not covered by the MPQ scale. The result

that students with culture-specific courses have higher cultural empathy supports this statement. In addition, experience-oriented measures can help to reduce prejudices and negative attitudes (Meleady & Seger, 2017). To answer this question, it would be very useful to conduct a pre- and post-test before and after the stay abroad (such as, for example, Wolff & Borzikowsky, 2018) with students with and without preparatory measures. In addition, it would be useful to survey aspects of contact quality and quantity with persons from the target culture and to record the study performance to include the moderating effect of intercultural competence on performance in the target culture implied by Lee and Sukoco (2010). Because this study was conducted after the participants who had studied abroad had returned, it is not possible to say whether the difference in cultural empathy and openness was already present before the stay abroad or was only acquired during the stay abroad. Even though the results of hypothesis 1 and the current literature indicate that prepared students acquire more competence than non-prepared students (Wolff, 2017; Wolff & Borzikowsky, 2018), there was no statistical support for hypothesis 2. However, even though there was no interaction effect, there were independent effects of both length of stay and study programme on the MPQ sub-scales. This indicates that students from culture-specific study courses probably acquire more competence in terms of cultural empathy and openness, however, there is no support for the assumption that this makes them learn faster. It seems rather that, as Bolten (2016) suggests, theoretical preparation and direct confrontation with other cultures by travelling abroad help students to gain different kinds of competences, and should therefore be combined.

Supporting hypothesis 3, there is a medium to weak, but significant, positive indirect relationship between the duration of a stay abroad and social competence via each of the sub-scales of the intercultural personality scale (except for cultural empathy, which was not significantly predicted by length of time studying abroad, and flexibility, which was a negative predictor of social competence). Thus, for the sample studied, longer periods of study abroad are related to higher social competence via increased intercultural openness, stability, and initiative. This is in line with the expectations for this study and extends the results of Schnabel et al. (2015), which show that stays abroad are related to the social component of intercultural competence. People who develop the personality traits of intercultural competence (Wolff, 2017) are probably overall more able to interact with other people, even though flexibility might mitigate this relationship.

Flexibility was shown to be a negative predictor of social competence. This is surprising because the flexible adaptation of one's own behaviour to contextual conditions can be understood as a core aspect of social competence (Kauffeld, 2004). According to Kanning (2019), flexibility makes it possible to achieve one's own goals in mono-cultural social situations. The present study examined the relationship between personality traits and behavioural tendencies on a cross-sectional basis. Therefore, no statements about a causal relationship can be made. However, the results speak to a well-established problem in acculturation research (see, for example, Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963), namely that people who have adapted well to new cultural conditions (or were particularly flexible there) may experience a re-culturalization shock on returning to their own culture. Intercultural flexibility is operationalized in the MPQ as the ability to adapt to foreign cultural behaviour. Rudmin (2009) describes how, upon returning to their home country, people find that they are less adapted to the circumstances there than they thought they were and can thus suffer a re-culturalization shock. Adaption to foreign behaviours could thus be connected to problems when returning to the home culture. This suggests that flexibility can be understood as a multidimensional construct that describes both the ability to adopt flexible behaviours and the ability to assess when behaviour is particularly appropriate. This would also contribute to the workplace study of Hinzmann, Rašticová, and Šácha (2019), who showed that those who have just arrived in a company usually show higher levels of engagement and extra-task behaviour depending on their level of flexibility. However, when time goes by, people quickly readapt their behaviour closer to the average performance level in the company. Hinzmann et al. (2019) concluded that flexibility makes people more likely to adapt their behaviour to be closer to, however, does not make them able to differentiate between appropriate and exaggerated levels of engagement. Wöhrle, van Oudenhoven, Otten, and van der Zee (2015) concluded that in addition to the ability and willingness to change one's behaviour flexibly, empathy must also be present to find the right behaviour in social situations.

In the literature on intercultural competence development and training (e.g., Bittner, 2003, 2008), a possible transfer phase (equating to concrete intercultural experiences) should always be followed by a phase of optimization. This corresponds to the adoption of a meta-perspective for the classification of the experiences made and further planning. If this approach is applied to stays abroad, such as studying abroad, it is obvious that, in addition to adequate preparation, appropriate follow-up should also be included in the design of programmes. This is in line with the result of this study that flexibility to adapt to foreign behaviours is negatively related to social competence in the home country. Consequently, returnees might profit from support with processing their experiences abroad and get a feeling for distinguishing which behaviour is appropriate in which country. Barmeyer and Franklin (2016) propose coaching as a process-accompanying measure that helps home-comers to classify their experiences and adapt their behaviour accordingly. They describe that the process of managing stays abroad extends from the planning of the assignment to the stay and follow-up, even if the latter is often neglected. Accordingly, this study implies that the process of assignment is not completed when an individual returns. Rather, it seems obvious to offer further support in order to apply the transfer of characteristics developed abroad to the relatively new cultural context.

In contrast to Wolff's (2017) statements, the number of months participants spent abroad before starting to study has only a marginal relation to social initiative. Intercultural psychology often considers the total amount of intercultural experiences as decisive for intercultural competence (Genkova, 2019; Wolff & Borzikowsky, 2018). In the present study, previous experience abroad was measured in terms of the number of months participants had spent abroad before their studies began (analogous to the remarks of Wolff & Borzikowsky, 2018). In terms of the theories on the development of social skills, this period would be particularly crucial for learning empathy as a central component of social competence (Junge et al., 2020). Research on intercultural experiences refers to people who lived abroad in early childhood as Third-Culture-Kids. Extensive studies have now been published on this subject, which Nash (2020) summarizes in a review. The main finding of this review is that young people who go to school in another country are more interculturally competent (with differing operationalizations of the competence concept, though; Morales, 2017). They are more likely to develop a sense of cultural differences, even if these vary greatly from one individual to another and depend on the particular environment (Poonoosamy, 2018). Third-Culture kids are also generally said to be more interculturally competent and sensitive in adulthood (Waal, Born, Brinkmann, & Frasch, 2020), which, according to Nash (2020), makes them potentially promising expatriate candidates. At the same time, Nash (2020) emphasizes that the results on Third-Culture-Kids are rather heterogeneous, which is mainly due to the different operationalization of 'stays abroad in childhood or adolescence'. While it was not an aim of this study to investigate childhood experiences, we neither differentiated between participants' experiences of staying abroad (e.g., extended stays abroad after school, travel for work, highly structured stays abroad during school, long term migration, etc.) nor asked them when these experiences happened. This might explain why the results did not show a significant relationship between the number of months spent abroad before starting to study and multicultural personality traits. For future studies, it would be promising to analyse experiences abroad during childhood and possible consequences in a differentiated and in-depth manner, possibly by means of a qualitative investigation. Poonoosamy (2018) already investigated the experience of third-culture-kids, but did not investigate their competence level.

4.1 | LIMITATIONS

The present study has some limitations. We did not ask to what extent the students prepared for their stays abroad, since preparatory measures are redundant for students of cultural subjects. In a study on the effects of stays abroad on intercultural intelligence, Genkova and Schreiber (2019) found that the respondents prepared themselves primarily through language courses and had at least an intermediate knowledge of the national language before going abroad. Apart from this, in the study by Genkova and Schreiber (2019), none of the students reported having explicitly prepared themselves culturally. Future studies should include this aspect and ask to what extent students have

informed themselves about linguistic, cultural, geographical, and legal conditions before leaving (Bittner, 2003). Due to the cross-sectional design, no causal correlations can be analysed and conclusions about causal relationships remain speculative, although comprehensive longitudinal and post hoc analyses are available, especially for the relationship between the length of stays abroad and intercultural competence (Heinzmann, Künzle, Schallhart, & Müller, 2020) However, in the present study, it cannot be shown if the higher intercultural competence of students of cultural studies is related to the stay abroad or the pre-educational studies, even though post hoc analysis revealed that there was no correlation between the time spent studying culture-specific courses and intercultural competence. While post hoc analyses should always be interpreted carefully, this implies that either there was a preselection process, making more empathic students study cultural studies, or there is a non-linear relationship between the studies of a certain culture, stays abroad and intercultural competence. This should be analysed in future studies with pre-post-tests. Preparatory measures for stays abroad should also be taken into account, as these were not considered in the present study. It would be important to find out whether the respondents had a significant amount of cultural studies in their studies or not. Bittner (2003) suggests lectures on linguistic, cultural, geographical and legal aspects as appropriate preparation. Future studies should also consider the extent to which participants have contact with locals and other international students while abroad, as well as their ability to perform (consider, for example, grades). This would make it possible to investigate which aspects of intercultural competence abroad were crucial for social interaction in the host-country and which could be transferred to the home country. Another limitation is that the sample contains a disproportionate number of women which could influence the external validity. Since the groups studied (especially subject areas) do not differ in terms of gender distribution, it is unlikely that the inequality of distribution systematically distorted the results. Furthermore, the external validity of the available results for the operational context should be checked. Although generalizability of the results is assumed, it is questionable whether performance and context parameters for students and professionals abroad are comparable, especially with regard to social support and inclusion. Finally, we did not control for cultural distance. While Wolff and Borzikowsky (2018) suggest to include cultural distance (the subjective level of differences between the home- and host-culture), Shenkar (2012) argues reasonably that the intercultural personality development does not necessarily depend on how much one differs from their cultural environment. Rather, there is support for the assumption that mastering the challenges of poor adaptation to the current social environment (Barmeyer & Franklin, 2016) and overcoming daily hassles (Uslucan, 2017) are the reasons for intercultural personality development.

4.2 | CONCLUSION

Despite the limitations of this study, we could show that students of cultural studies generally show a higher cultural empathy and openness than other students after their stay abroad. In addition, results revealed that people who were more emotionally stable, open and socially active were also more likely to show a higher level of social competence in their home culture. This adds value to not only educational institutions, but also to international programmes, such as the new version of the Erasmus exchange programme from 2021. However, we also found that flexibility in accepting the behaviour and attitudes of other cultures was negatively associated with the ability to cope with their home culture on their return. From this, we conclude that returnees have a need for support in order to reintegrate into their home culture, which is only partially taken into account in practice at the moment (Barmeyer & Franklin, 2016).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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