

# **Academic Inclusion of Psychology Freshmen: An Intervention with Humanistic Group Techniques**

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## **Abstract**

The transition to higher education represents a period of significant challenges for incoming students, especially in programs that require social and emotional interaction, such as Psychology. This article presents the results of a group intervention with new undergraduate students, using Humanistic Psychology techniques to promote academic inclusion and strengthen interpersonal bonds. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining questionnaires and focus groups. The applied techniques were effective in reducing isolation and increasing group cohesion, with students reporting greater engagement after the

interventions. The results underscore the need for institutional welcoming programs based on active and humanized methodologies.

**Keywords:** academic inclusion; humanistic psychology; groups; freshmen; intervention.

## **1. Introduction**

Starting higher education is a significant transition in students' lives, particularly in programs requiring intense interpersonal interaction, such as Psychology. This stage is often accompanied by feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and loneliness. These feelings stem from confronting a new, unknown academic environment that is often already socially structured by upperclassmen. Freshmen often report difficulty forming bonds, understanding institutional dynamics, and expressing their doubts or insecurities.

These challenges can negatively impact academic performance, persistence in the program, and students' emotional well-being. The lack of support networks and emotional bonds can increase feelings of inadequacy and the desire to drop out. Therefore, developing strategies to ease this transition is essential to promote belonging, prevent dropout, and strengthen emotional health within the university context. In this light, the present article reports on a group intervention experience developed by Psychology students, aiming to support freshmen inclusion through dynamics that promote empathy, active listening, and interaction among students from different cohorts.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

Group theory offers tools to understand the role of interactions in human development and identity formation. Kurt Lewin (1947), a pioneer in group dynamics, stated that individual behavior is shaped by the relationships and forces within a group. He introduced concepts such as the dynamic field and interdependence, which are essential for understanding environmental influences on individuals. Carl Rogers (1970), within the humanistic approach, proposed that being part of a group offering facilitative conditions — empathy, congruence,

and unconditional positive regard — fosters personal development, autonomy, and self-confidence.

Authors such as Olmsted (1959) and Moreno (1970) emphasized that groups function as spaces for emotional support, catharsis, and social learning. Pichon-Rivière (2005) defined the operative group as a privileged learning instrument, where roles, myths, and shared objectives are analyzed in interaction. Silvia Lane (1985), a key figure in Brazilian critical social psychology, emphasized the role of groups as spaces for the collective construction of reality, where individuals are formed through social relationships. Lapassade (1989), in turn, pointed out that groups are also traversed by power struggles, norms, and resistance, being places of tension and transformation.

Thus, it is understood that well-conducted groups have the potential to foster welcoming, belonging, and reflection. In the university context — especially with freshmen — the use of group techniques supports the sharing of experiences, identification with others, and development of collective strategies for overcoming initial academic challenges.

### **3. Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative approach supported by descriptive quantitative data. Participants included Psychology students from various academic periods — both freshmen and upperclassmen — all volunteers. Data collection was conducted through an oral questionnaire and the application of two group techniques based on the humanistic approach: the “Web Technique” and the “Inclusion Matrix.”

The activity began with the questionnaire, conducted collectively. Questions were read aloud by a facilitator, and participants answered orally. A co-therapist was responsible for recording the responses, which addressed adaptation to the course, peer bonding, and feelings of belonging.

Then, the following techniques were applied:

Web Technique: Using a ball of yarn, each participant stated their name and shared a difficulty faced in the course. Then, they tossed the yarn to another participant who repeated the process. At the end, the yarn created a symbolic web, representing the interconnection of experiences and the group's strengthening. Participants concluded by exchanging encouraging messages such as "You've got this!", "We're in this together!" or "You are capable!". The technique revealed that although participants didn't know each other well, they shared similar insecurities and challenges, fostering empathy and mutual identification.

Inclusion Matrix: After the first activity, participants were divided into three heterogeneous groups (mixing freshmen and upperclassmen). Each group was challenged to create strategies to welcome new students. Ideas included monthly discussion circles, thematic reading groups, group celebrations, welcome bulletin boards, and a "Freshman Guide" created by the students themselves.

Data analysis occurred in two stages: the quantitative part, with a descriptive profile of participants; and the qualitative part, organized by emergent categories such as: feelings of isolation, mutual support strategies, welcoming proposals, and group perception.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

The intervention allowed for identifying key subjective aspects of the participants' university experience. The oral questionnaire revealed that many freshmen felt out of place, insecure, or unmotivated, while upperclassmen expressed willingness to help but didn't know how to approach or get involved in the process.

During the Web Technique, several participants reported episodes of anxiety, loneliness, fear of judgment, and difficulties adapting to university life. Statements like "I feel lost in class" or "It feels like everyone already knows each other except me" were common. By the end of the activity, however, participants expressed pleasant surprise with their peers' openness, and many reported feeling relieved to discover that their challenges were shared.

The Inclusion Matrix generated a variety of practical and feasible proposals. There was active engagement in idea creation and a cooperative atmosphere among groups. Interaction

between different cohorts also fostered a sense of continuity and history within the program, strengthening the sense of belonging and motivating freshmen to engage more in academic activities.

These results align with humanistic principles, particularly the creation of a bond-facilitating environment as advocated by Carl Rogers. They also correspond to Pichon-Rivière's concept of operative groups, as the activities promoted meaningful learning through experience exchange.

Facilitators' active listening, validation of expressed emotions, and activity horizontality were highlighted by students as important distinguishing features. By the end, many reported feeling more comfortable with peers and more motivated to remain in the program.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This experience highlights the potential of group practices grounded in Humanistic Psychology to foster academic inclusion, emotional well-being, and interpersonal bonding in university settings. The techniques enabled emotional expression, recognition of shared experiences, and collaborative development of solutions for freshmen's difficulties.

In addition to strengthening students' sense of belonging, the intervention supported the development of socioemotional skills such as empathy, active listening, collaboration, and initiative. These competencies are essential for psychologists in training, as they underpin therapeutic relationships and caregiving contexts.

It is recommended that higher education institutions incorporate similar practices into their onboarding and adaptation programs. The involvement of upperclassmen, empathetic facilitation, and listening to freshmen's real needs are crucial for the success of such interventions. As a follow-up, it would be valuable to conduct periodic check-ins with the students involved to evaluate medium- and long-term effects on their academic and emotional journeys.

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