

Belonging and Beyond: How Social Connections Shape Our World

By: Caitlyn Meagher

Adapted by Fishtank Staff

Introduction

- 1 The desire to belong is a universal feeling that affects all people in society. [According to the Oxford Dictionary](#), belonging is defined as a "deep sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identification within a group, place, or context." When someone feels like they belong in a specific environment, they feel valued and respected.
- 2 Since the beginning of human evolution, people have connected with others in order to survive. This desire to form and grow relationships is deeply rooted in the human brain. Over the years, researchers have used various methods to measure this subjective feeling and universal need. Their research has provided a deeper understanding of how belonging affects people.

Major Research Breakthroughs in Belonging

- 3 Theories about the importance of belonging first became popular in the 20th century. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, wrote about the importance of interpersonal connection. However, Abraham Maslow was the first psychologist to write about belonging as a human need. His 1943 paper, "A Theory of Human Motivation," laid out his ideas regarding a hierarchy of human needs.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

- 4 Maslow's theory, commonly referred to as the [Hierarchy of Needs](#), states that humans must acquire their basic needs before they can begin fulfilling other higher, more complex needs. Some of the most basic needs are physiological, like breathing, food, water, and rest. Other basic needs are related to safety, like health, employment, and family. Once these needs are fulfilled, humans can begin achieving their psychological needs, like love and belonging. These needs are satisfied when a person has strong relationships with friends, family, and community. Maslow argued that after those psychological needs are met, humans can achieve the needs on the hierarchy's next level. These include developing self-esteem or confidence in one's worth and abilities and gaining the respect of others. So, to develop positive self-esteem, a person must feel like they belong to a group or community. The highest level of Maslow's hierarchy is self-actualization. Self-actualization happens when a person achieves their full potential and becomes their best self. Maslow wrote that needs like belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization can be harder to achieve and maintain than the basic ones. Social and environmental barriers can limit a person's ability to access these higher needs.



Belonging as a Fundamental Human Need

5 [The next groundbreaking research](#) about belonging emerged in 1995. Researchers Mark Leary and Roy F. Baumeister analyzed many earlier studies on belonging to draw wider conclusions. They found that humans have a universal drive to belong, which motivates their thoughts and actions. The researchers believed that the drive to belong was hardwired into humans since belonging has historically improved humans' chances of survival. They found that people across cultures consistently think about how they can maintain social bonds. To feel a true sense of belonging, people must have frequent, positive interactions with others. They must also maintain long-term, close relationships. When people form close social bonds, they experience more life satisfaction and happiness. However, the failure to meet this need for connection can cause deep emotional suffering and long-term psychological consequences. The desire to achieve positive feelings and avoid negative outcomes motivates people to act in ways that build strong social ties. In fact, this drive to build social bonds is so important that Leary and Baumeister argued it was a fundamental human need—not a secondary need as Maslow described it.

Self-Esteem and Belonging

6 Leary and Baumeister's later research explored the connection between self-esteem and belonging. [According to their research](#), self-esteem is not just about how individuals feel about themselves internally. It actually serves as a warning signal that measures how much individuals feel accepted or rejected by other people. It gives them feedback about how well their relationships are going. When people feel valued and accepted by others, their self-esteem increases. When people feel rejected, their self-esteem goes down. [Leary's research](#) found that this decrease in self-esteem warns individuals to change their behaviors to increase their sense of belonging. For example, imagine you spread a rumor about a classmate and they found out about it. How might that impact your self-esteem? According to Leary and Beaumeister's research, you might feel less good about yourself after this incident. So, you might do things to increase your self-esteem, like apologize to your classmate. Humans' concerns about others' opinions of ourselves often motivate us to behave in certain ways.

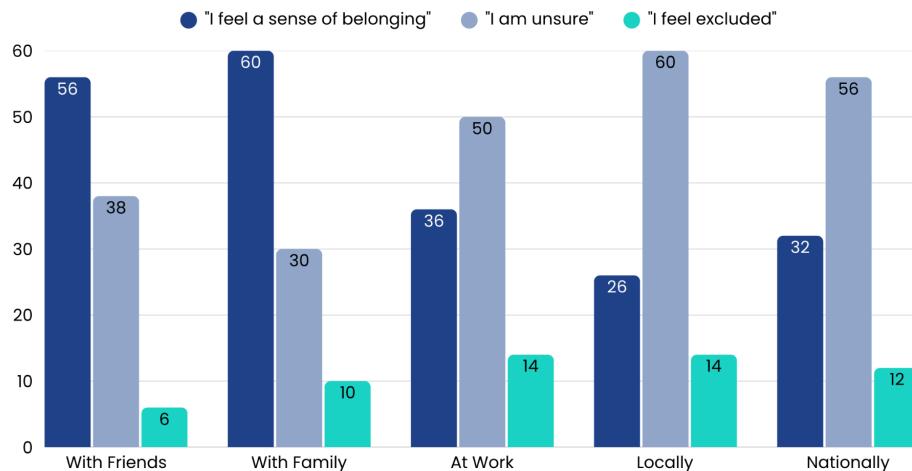
The Role of Belonging in Student Success

- 7 Although feeling connected to people is important in many settings, it is especially critical in schools. According to the [Student Experience Research Network](#), students who feel valued by their teachers and fellow students "engage more fully in their learning" and persevere when they experience adversity.
- 8 A 2020 research analysis by the same organization also found a connection between belonging and positive learning outcomes. It studied decades of belonging research to examine the importance of creating environments that promote a feeling of belonging. The analysis found that students who do not feel a sense of belonging at school are often searching for threats in their environment that signal whether or not they are welcome. This stress uses cognitive resources, or brain power, needed for learning and can cause poorer academic performance. It can also discourage students from forming deeper relationships, which is important for their physical and mental health. So, a student's feeling of belonging is vital for their learning.
- 9 The [Student Experience Research Network's research](#) found that feelings of belonging were higher among students who had educators who shared their community and cultural backgrounds. They were also higher in schools where students could contribute to class discussions and were held to high standards. The research by the Student Experience Research Network further highlighted how different individuals may experience the same environment differently based on factors like "race and ethnicity, gender and sexual identity, language, class, indigeneity, or ability." Because of this, it's important for educators who create learning environments to look at social, historical, and political contexts to successfully support all their students and foster a sense of belonging for all students.

The State of Belonging in the United States

- 10 Feeling accepted by others is not just something students struggle with. Most American adults struggle with it, too. A 2024 study by [Over Zero and the American Immigration Council](#) found that most Americans don't feel like they belong in their workplace (64%), the nation (67%), and their local community (74%). At the same time, Americans report feeling a greater sense of belonging among friends (56%) and family (60%). This study also found that Americans with more diverse friend groups (including differences in race, ethnicity, gender, economic class, or age) feel stronger feelings of belonging among their friends than Americans with less diverse friend groups.

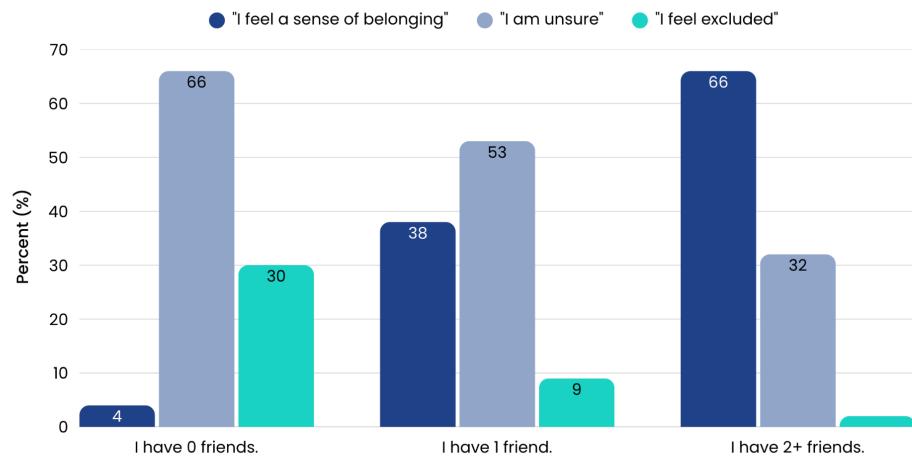
Impact of Setting on Sense of Belonging



Source: Argo, N., & Sheikh, H. (2023). The belonging barometer: The state of belonging in America. Over Zero and the Center for Inclusion and Belonging at the American Immigration Council. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/the_belonging_barometer_-_the_state_of_belonging_in_america.pdf

11 [The same study](#) found that people who felt a stronger sense of belonging were also healthier and happier. They reported less pain, stress, loneliness, and more life satisfaction. Additionally, they were more involved in their communities, trusted their local and national governments more, and felt less marginalized. So, feeling like you belong can affect so many aspects of a person's life.

Impact of Number of Friends on Sense of Belonging



Source: Argo, N., & Sheikh, H. (2023). The belonging barometer: The state of belonging in America. Over Zero and the Center for Inclusion and Belonging at the American Immigration Council. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/the_belonging_barometer_-_the_state_of_belonging_in_america.pdf

The Future of Belonging Research

12 Belonging is a complex thing to measure because it is influenced by so many factors. Researchers continue to analyze how personality, culture, and even social media shape how connected we feel to others. They're also studying how different parts of our identities affect our sense of belonging. The exciting part? With this knowledge, people can create schools and communities where more people feel included. The implications of this research could create a society that is overall healthier, happier, and more connected.