

## Reading

# Why Do People Need to Belong?

## Pre-Reading Questions

Before you start to read, take a few minutes to consider the following questions:

- Why do we seek out belonging in groups?
- What can we gain and lose from belonging to a group?

## Introduction

It is common for people to want to belong—to be valued by a group that appreciates and supports them. It can feel good to be part of a group where we contribute our ideas and talents, find comfort during difficult times, and make friends who share our values, interests, and experiences. When we feel like we belong, it can boost our self-esteem, help us take action, and give our lives meaning. This reading will explore why humans seek belonging and the positive and negative aspects of forming social groups.

## The Need to Belong

Humans have **evolved** to seek membership in groups as a way to survive. In a study conducted in 1995, social psychologists Baumeister and Leary concluded that the need to belong, “to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of interpersonal relationships,” is an **innate** human need. Early in human history, tasks like hunting, gathering food, taking care of children, and seeking protection from enemies and predators were more effective when done in groups rather than alone.<sup>1</sup>

Our need for belonging affects how we feel, think, and understand the world around us. For example, researchers at UC Berkeley found that “students who feel a strong sense of belonging are more engaged and more likely to join school organizations . . . and make connections with peers, faculty, and staff.” On the other hand, when we feel like we don’t belong, we experience what social psychologists call “belonging

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<sup>1</sup> Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, “[The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation](#),” *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 449, accessed Oct. 14, 2023.

uncertainty.”<sup>2</sup> This uncertainty can make us believe that others won’t understand us, and we may be less willing to express our ideas or take risks.<sup>3</sup>

## The Complexity of Belonging

Groups play an important role in providing us with resources, knowledge, and protection from outside threats. However, they can also create clear boundaries between those who are part of the group and those who are not. These boundaries establish “in” groups and “out” groups, which can be used to include or exclude members.

Take a moment to think about the different groups you belong to, like your family, friends, clubs, sports team, neighborhood, or religious community. Now think about the larger groups you belong to based on aspects of your identity, such as your age, ethnicity, gender, language, race, sexuality, and socioeconomic class. Imagine that each of these groups has an invisible border around it. People who are part of the group are inside the border. Those who are not members, either by choice or because they don’t meet the group’s **criteria** for acceptance, are outside. Inside the boundary, we feel a sense of belonging and safety, surrounded by individuals who share our values and experiences.

However, it is important to understand that our strong desire to be part of a group can cause us to intentionally or unintentionally harm people who are outside of that group. While we focus on nurturing and protecting our own sense of belonging, we may **marginalize** and exclude others. In the places where we feel the strongest sense of belonging, such as our neighborhood, with friends our own age, in a club, on a team, or at a specific table in the cafeteria, there are individuals who may feel **vulnerable**, unsafe, unheard, and unnoticed. Our strong desire to be included can lead us to exclude others. We might even conform to the group’s norms and expected behavior in order to feel accepted, even if it means **compromising** our own values.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the need to belong is a **fundamental** aspect of human nature. We have an innate drive to seek out groups and communities that offer acceptance, support, and a sense of identity. However, it is important to understand that our pursuit of belonging can come at the expense of others. While it is natural to

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<sup>2</sup> Mary C. Murphy, Kathryn Boucher, and Christine Logel, “[How to Help Students Feel a Sense of Belonging During the Pandemic](#),” *Greater Good Magazine*, January 19, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey L. Cohen, *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), 30–31.

**prioritize** our own sense of belonging, we need to be mindful of the potential harm we may cause to those who do not fit within our groups or who feel excluded. By **fostering** inclusivity, empathy, and respect, we can work to create environments where everyone feels valued, heard, and included.

## Connection Questions

1. Why do we seek out belonging in groups? Support your ideas with examples from the text.
2. Why do you think people divide themselves into “we” and “they,” or “in” groups and “out” groups? When can this division be positive? When does it become a problem?
3. What are some ways in which our strong desire to belong can lead us to exclude others, either intentionally or unintentionally?
4. Why do we sometimes make decisions that are not aligned with our values in order to increase our sense of belonging?
5. How can we balance our own need for belonging with the responsibility to include and respect others who may be different from us?