

SOCIAL IDENTITY AND EXPERIENCES OF BELONGING

by

ROSE REED

Submitted to the Psychology Department
School of Natural and Social Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

May 2021

Sponsor: Krystal Perkins, Ph.D.
Second Reader: Yanine Hess, Ph.D.

Abstract

The goal of this study was to better understand experiences of belonging among individuals with different stigmatized social identities. It was hypothesized that individuals with a stigmatized social identity would experience belonging differently than individuals without a stigmatized social identity, and that social identity would be more relevant to experiences of belonging for individuals with a stigmatized social identity. This study employed a mixed-method analysis combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Participants included 87 college students at the State University of New York at Purchase College. Participants responded to an open-ended prompt asking them to provide a personal narrative about a time when they felt a sense of belonging and then completed a survey with 11 Likert-type questions that assessed different facets of belonging. One-way ANOVA's and independent samples t-tests were used to analyze the data collected. Though no statistically significant differences were found, qualitative results of this study suggest that individuals with stigmatized social identities, especially individuals with a stigmatized gender identity, experience belonging differently.

Keywords: belonging, social identity, stigma, race, gender.

Introduction

One of the first comprehensive discussions of belonging come from Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggests that human needs exist in a hierarchy, beginning with the most basic needs of food and water and leading up to self-actualization. Belongingness needs, as stated by Maslow, are the "very essence of human nature itself" (1954, p. xiii) and are part of our psychological needs. Psychological needs include needs that must be met in order to avoid illness and psychopathology. According to Maslow, psychological needs can be fulfilled only after physiological and safety needs have been met. Other theories, such as Baumeister and Leary's Belongingness Hypothesis, emphasize the importance of belonging as a fundamental human motivation. Baumeister and Leary's belongingness hypothesis suggests that human beings "have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (1995, p. 497). Optimally, these relationships include frequent, pleasant interactions with a few other people, with interactions taking place in the context of mutual concern from and for both parties. Feelings of belonging typically occur when an individual is part of an in-group, has stable social bonds with intimate attachments, and feels that they are mutually cared for (Baumeister, 1981). Feeling that one is cared for, accepted, understood, and fits in with a group or system also brings a sense of belonging (Leake, 2007). Belonging is also essential to the construction of a sense of identity, an important developmental task for people generally, and for adolescents in particular (Erikson, 1964).

Several scholars suggest that belonging is a necessary long-term protective factor against a wide range of negative outcomes for children, such as emotional distress, suicidal thoughts and behaviors, violence, early sexual debut, negative academic behaviors, and use of cigarettes,

alcohol, and marijuana (Cavanagh, 2008; Crosnoe & Elder, 2004; Resnick, 1997). Leake (2007) suggest that individuals' first experiences of belonging take place in the family because family is "the primary context of human experience from the cradle to the grave" (p. 136). Family builds a foundation and precedent for belonging because it provides an individual's first social bond with mutual care and intimate connection. Families contribute to belonging by providing children with love, affection, and a positive home environment. Having a positive home environment through which a child can feel understood, supported, and share enjoyable experiences with family members can help a child feel that they belong to a larger group (King, 2016). The treatment a child receives from their parents as an infant is crucial in developing a secure attachment style. Attachment styles developed in childhood can influence an individual's view of themselves in relation to others throughout their lives (Hagerty et al., 2002). This view is a foundation for how individuals perceive themselves in interpersonal interactions.

A sense of belonging is theorized to arise from "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment" (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995, p. 9). Within this definition, two defining attributes of belonging are foundational: valued involvement and fit. Valued involvement is the experience of feeling valued, needed, or accepted, whereas fit is the perception that an individual's characteristics align with their system or environment. Hagerty and Patusky (1995) outline the antecedents of belonging including energy for involvement, potential and desire for meaningful involvement, and potential for shared or complementary characteristics (1995). One's attachment style has the potential to affect their experience of valued involvement and fit. For example, a child with an insecure avoidant attachment style is likely to be more insecure and therefore not view themselves as valued, perceive themselves to fit in, or perceive their characteristics to align

with group values. As these are key antecedents to belonging, this attachment style could hinder them from developing feelings of belonging.

Drawing from attachment theory, King and Boyd (2016) examined the relationship between perceived relationship and family belonging. In particular, this study examined which factors predicted adolescents' perceptions of family belonging in two-biological-parent families. It focused on the quality of mother-child relationships, father-child relationships, and marital quality as primary predictors of family belonging. Data was used from National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (ADD Health), a nationally representative study from 1994-1995 that included data from over 20,000 adolescents in grades seven through twelve. These adolescents were interviewed about family belonging, desire to leave home, family fun, and family attentiveness. Marital quality and parent-child relationship quality were similarly measured through interviews with the adolescent participants. The study concluded that parent-child relationship quality was directly and significantly associated with greater feelings of belonging and that the most important predictor of belonging was the quality of adolescents' relationship with their mother and relationship with their father. Additionally, indirect associations were found between family belonging and marital quality, gender, age, race, religiosity, and number of siblings. This study confirms the importance of family on belonging as well as the significance of parent-child relationships on belonging (King & Boyd, 2016).

The significance of parent-child relationships has been applied to non-familial relationships as well. For many children, the role of primary caregiver and/or source of authority is filled by someone other than a biological parent. Sieving et al., (2017) examined the role of youth-adult connectedness as a protective factor. In this study, "youth-adult connectedness" was operationalized as a multidimensional construct, including closeness, caring and belonging (p.

S278). A multivariate analysis was conducted on data collected from a sample of students in a school-based mentoring program and a statewide sample of high school students with reports of homelessness. The study concluded that strong positive relationships with parents and other caring adults contribute to positive development and act as a foundation for the well-being and health of adolescents (Sieving et al., 2017). These results shed light on the necessity of close, caring relationships between youth and adults.

Another source of belonging includes peers. Karcher (2009) examined the effects of being a peer mentor for teens. Over a span of nine months, high school students who acted as peer mentors to students in fourth and fifth grade experienced a significant increase in connectedness to friends, connectedness to culturally different peers, connectedness to self-in-future, connectedness to school, school self-esteem, and extracurricular self-esteem (Karcher, 2009). The cross-age peer mentor programs used a developmental or psychosocial approach that aimed to provide mentees with empathy, friendship, and attention. The primary goal of the programs was to establish a caring relationship between mentor and mentee. Benefits for mentees in these programs included changes in attitudes towards school, connectedness to school and peers, self-efficacy, grades, and social skills (Karcher, 2007). These findings show the direct relationship between peer connection and belonging, emphasizing the benefit of relationships with older peers.

Stigmatization and Group Belonging

Other scholars have studied how just being able to identify with a group may be a source of individual well-being, especially among members of stigmatized groups (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000). According to Knowles and Gardner (2008), group membership can offer individuals a greater sense of self-worth, validation, a lesser sense of existential terror as a result of symbolic

immortality, and an opportunity to achieve goals through group action. Various benefits of belonging to a group can be dependent on the type of group (Knowles & Gardner, 2008). Lickel et al., (2000) found that groups can be divided into three different types based on their unique qualities: intimacy groups, task groups, and social categories. The characteristics of these groups vary depending on their size, type of relationships between members, frequency of interaction between members, similarities between members, importance to their members, and needs they fulfill (Lickel et al., 2000). Regardless of their characteristics each group serves as a resource to its members, aiding in the fulfillment of their basic needs for affiliation and belonging (Knowles & Gardner, 2008).

Sedikides and Brewer studied how group membership aids in self-definition and self-interpretation, finding that both personal and impersonal bonds act as a basis for the formation of a collective self. Similar to Stets' 2000 study examining identity formation, Sedikides and Brewer explored the idea of identification through differentiation and comparison of oneself to others in their group (Sedikides & Brewer, 2015; Stets, 2000). Stets (2000) studied how social identity plays a role in group belonging. Identity is formed through the process of self-categorization which involves using the reflexiveness of the self to categorize and classify it in relation to other categories and classifications. These categories can include, but are not limited to "attitudes, beliefs, values, affective reactions, behavioral norms, and styles of speech" (Stets, 2000, p. 225). For social identity formation, social comparisons are made relating the self to other people. Further comparisons can be made categorizing other people as either part of the in-group, if they are similar to the self, or part of the out-group if they are not. The act of categorizing others as part of one's in-group is advantageous as it helps define an individual's social identity.

As explained by Tragakis (2006), social identity content can be viewed by society in many different ways. It is through the differential treatment of individuals based on their social identity that denigration and devaluation as well as elevation and glorification are habituated in society. This leads to stigmatization and marginalization of certain social identities (Tragakis, 2006). The Rejection Identification Model demonstrates the benefits of the presence of others with a similar social identity for individuals with a stigmatized identity. This model explains that perceiving rejection from the dominant culture is associated with increased belonging in the form of identification with one's group. That is, when acceptance from the dominant majority is not likely, turning to one's ingroup can alleviate harm to one's well-being (Schmitt, 2002). One reason for this is that group identification can fulfill people's desire to feel that they belong. Identifying with the minority group is a strategy to obtain acceptance and enhance psychological well-being (Branscombe et al., 1999).

Frable et al. examined concealable stigmas in their 1998 study. Participants with concealable and visible stigmatized characteristics as well as a control group without any stigmatized characteristics rated their momentary self-esteem over a span of 11 days and provided brief descriptions of the moment. The results of the study showed that participants with concealable stigmatized characteristics (e.g., gay, bulimic, or of low-income families) reported lower self-esteem than participants in the other two groups. However, their self-esteem rose when in the presence of others who belonged to the stigmatized group. This can be explained by returning to the idea of social comparison as a source of social identity. Evaluating the self in relation to group members offers a more positive perception than that of non-group members, granting individuals protection from negative cultural messages (Frable, et al., 1998).

Present Research

In summary, previous research has examined individual and group belonging in the context of schools, families, and peer groups (Karcher, 2007; Sieving et al., 2017). While past studies have examined many different sources of belonging, there are still gaps in the research. Previous studies have used quantitative approaches to measure a sense of belonging under various conditions, with few qualitative or mixed methods designs. Additionally, past research has rarely focused on the interplay between feelings of belonging and stigmatization and on the intersectionality of stigma on belongingness. The current study addressed these discrepancies by using a mixed-methods approach to examine personal narratives about belonging from individuals with different social identities. It is proposed that participants who have a stigmatized or marginalized social identity will experience belonging differently than those who do not, and that their identity will be more relevant to their sense of belonging.

Method

Participants

Ninety-one participants were recruited through Introduction to Psychology courses at SUNY Purchase College. Prior to analysis, five responses were removed, one for being a duplicate, and the other three participants for reporting that they never experienced a sense of belonging. The majority of participants were female ($N = 53$), followed by male ($N = 23$), non-binary ($N = 6$), prefer not to say ($N = 3$), transgender male ($N = 1$), and blank ($N = 1$). Participants' ages ranged from eighteen to thirty-seven. Most participants were either nineteen (47.1%) or twenty (31%). Out of the 87 participants, 62 were classified as having multiple stigmatized social identities and 23 were classified as having one. Participants were classified as having a single stigmatized social identity if they identified as male and a race other than White.

Participants were classified as having multiple stigmatized social identities if they identified as a gender other than male and a race other than White. As there were not any participants who identified as male and White, there weren't any participants without any stigmatized social identities.

Materials and Procedure

A Qualtrics survey was used to collect participants' data. Participants were given an open-ended essay prompt, asking them to provide a detailed description of a time they felt a sense of belonging. Following this, the survey included five open-ended questions to provide more detail about the scenario they described, such as "What, if anything made you feel like your opinions and behaviors mattered?" Participants' responses described the people they were with and the way they were treated by those around them. Next, the survey presented 11 Likert-type questions for participants to rate the extent to which the situation made them think or feel different things (such as how courteously other treated them, or how much their behaviors mattered). A rating of one meaning "Not at all," to a rating of five meaning "Extremely." To finish, the survey asked for factual information about the situation, such as the kind of people involved, and the duration of the situation. Once participants completed this survey, they entered their demographic information and were debriefed.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

A quantitative analysis was conducted to analyze participants' responses to the 11 Likert-type questions. These questions addressed the extent to which participants felt their presence was noticed in the situation they described, felt others were aware of them, felt their presence was

positively acknowledged, were treated courteously by other people, felt their opinions or behaviors mattered, felt it was important that they were there personally, felt like others valued them, felt like others thought highly of them, felt fundamentally understood as a person, felt that another person truly knew them in the situation they described, and how strong a sense of overall belonging they felt. Responses to these questions were examined with three independent variables including participants' gender identity, race, and whether participants had one or multiple stigmatized identities. Responses to these questions were analyzed to find the differences in experiences between participants with one stigmatized social identity and participants with multiple stigmatized social identities.

Gender Identity and Belonging

It was hypothesized that participants with a stigmatized gender identity would rate their experiences significantly differently, compared to participants without a stigmatized gender identity. Participants who self-identified as female, non-binary, or "other" were considered to have a stigmatized gender identity, while those who self-identified as male were not. One limitation to note before considering the following analyses is that in the non-binary category there were only six participants, in the prefer not to answer category there were only three participants, and in the transgender male category there was only one participant. Despite these small sample sizes, and the possibility of a weaker statistical analysis, the gender identities were not combined into a larger conglomerate category. As the aim of the study was to better understand the experiences of marginalized individuals, grouping genders together would have contradicted this goal.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine differences in responses across gender identities for reports of the extent to which participants felt their presence was noticed. The

analysis showed that there was no significant effect of this, $F(4,81) = 0.87, p = 0.485$.

Transgender men ($M = 5.00, SD = 0.00$) felt their presence was noticed more than non-binary participants ($M = 4.83, SD = 0.41$), and participants who preferred not to say their gender identity ($M = 4.67, SD = 0.58$). Female participants felt that their presence was noticed the least ($M = 4.36, SD = 0.90$).

A second one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences in responses for reports of the extent to which participants felt others were aware of them. The analysis showed that there was no significant effect of this, $F(4,81) = 0.30, p = 0.879$. Transgender men ($M = 5.00, SD = 0.00$) felt others were more aware of them than non-binary participants ($M = 4.83, SD = 0.41$), and male participants ($M = 4.70, SD = 0.56$). Female participants felt others were the least aware of them ($M = 4.60, SD = 0.69$).

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences in responses for reports of the extent to which participants felt their presence was positively acknowledged. The analysis showed that there was no significant effect of this, $F(4,81) = 0.31, p = 0.870$. Transgender men ($M = 5.00, SD = 0.00$) felt that their presence was positively acknowledged more than participants who preferred not to say their gender identity ($M = 4.67, SD = 0.58$), and males ($M = 4.48, SD = 0.85$). Non-binary participants felt their presence was positively acknowledged the least ($M = 4.33, SD = 1.21$).

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences in responses for reports of the extent to which participants felt people treated them courteously. The analysis showed that there was no significant effect of this, $F(4,81) = 0.28, p = 0.890$. Transgender men ($M = 5.00, SD = 0.00$) felt people treated them courteously more than non-binary participants ($M = 4.67, SD =$

0.52), and participants who preferred not to say their gender ($M = 4.67, SD = 0.58$). Female participants felt people treated them courteously the least ($M = 4.45, SD = 0.73$).

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences in responses for reports of the extent to which participants felt their opinions or behaviors mattered. The analysis showed that there was no significant effect of this, $F(4,81) = 0.59, p = 0.669$. Men felt their opinions or behaviors mattered the most ($M = 4.57, SD = 0.59$), followed by participants who preferred not to say their gender ($M = 4.33, SD = 0.58$), and non-binary participants ($M = 4.33, SD = 1.03$). Female participants felt their opinions or behaviors mattered the least ($M = 4.26, SD = 0.98$).

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences in responses for reports of the extent to which participants felt it was important that they were personally there, in the situation that they described. The analysis showed that there was no significant effect of this, $F(4,81) = 2.11, p = 0.087$. Non-binary participants ($M = 5.00, SD = 0.00$) and transgender men ($M = 5.00, SD = 0.00$) felt it was important that they were personally there in the situation they described, more than men ($M = 4.65, SD = 0.57$). Female participants felt it was important that they were there personally the least ($M = 4.34, SD = 0.78$).

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences in responses for reports of the extent to which participants felt they were valued. The analysis showed that there was no significant effect of this, $F(4,81) = 0.81, p = 0.522$. Transgender men ($M = 5.00, SD = 0.00$) felt valued more than participants who preferred not to say their gender ($M = 4.67, SD = 0.58$), and men ($M = 4.65, SD = 0.57$). Female participants felt the least valued ($M = 4.32, SD = 0.57$).

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences in responses for reports of the extent to which participants felt like others thought highly of them. The analysis showed that there was no significant effect of this ($F(4,81) = 0.72, p = 0.580$). Men ($M = 4.44, SD = 0.84$) felt

that other thought highly of them more than female participants ($M = 4.17, SD = 1.60$), and transgender male ($M = 4.00, SD = 0.00$). Non-binary participants felt others thought highly of them the least ($M = 3.83, SD = 1.60$).

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences in responses for reports of the extent to which participants felt fundamentally understood. The analysis showed that there was no significant effect of this, $F(4,81) = 0.38, p = 0.826$. Participants who preferred not to say their gender felt the most fundamentally understood ($M = 4.33, SD = 0.58$), followed by men ($M = 4.22, SD = 1.10$), and female participants ($M = 4.15, SD = 1.02$). Non-binary participants felt the least fundamentally understood ($M = 3.67, SD = 1.21$).

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences in responses for reports of the extent to which participants felt that others truly knew them. The analysis showed that there was no significant effect of this, $F(4,81) = 0.55, p = 0.701$. Participants who preferred not to say their gender felt the most truly known ($M = 4.33, SD = 1.16$), followed by male participants ($M = 4.17, SD = 0.94$), and female participants ($M = 4.08, SD = 0.94$). Non-binary participants felt the least truly known ($M = 3.50, SD = 1.38$).

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the differences in participants overall sense of belonging. The analysis showed that there was no significant effect of this, $F(4, 81) = 1.26, p = 0.294$. Non-binary participants, transgender men, and participants who preferred not to say their gender all reported feeling the greatest sense of belonging ($M = 5.00, SD = 0.00$), followed by male participants ($M = 4.61, SD = 0.66$). Female participants reported feeling the least sense of belonging ($M = 4.51, SD = 0.67$).

Despite a lack of statistical significance across analyses a trend can be seen in participants' responses, showing that the gender identity who reported feeling the lowest sense of

belonging was either female or non-binary for every question. This trend supports the hypothesis that individuals with a stigmatized social identity, such as female or non-binary, experience belonging differently. Additionally, this trend indicates that female and non-binary individuals do not have as strong a sense of belonging as male individuals.

Multiple Stigmatized Identities and Belonging

It was hypothesized that participants with multiple stigmatized identities would rate their experiences significantly differently compared to participants with one stigmatized identity. Stigmatized identities included gender identity and race. Though there was no statistical significance found, a general trend can be seen supporting this hypothesis, with participants with one stigmatized identity reporting higher scores for all Likert-type questions.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine feelings that individuals' presence was noticed for participants with one stigmatized identity versus participants with multiple stigmatized identities. The analysis showed that participants with one stigmatized identity ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.66$) felt that they were noticed more than participants with multiple stigmatized identities ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.86$), however the difference was not statistically significant, $t(83) = -0.96$, $p = 0.342$.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine the feeling that others were aware of participants. The analysis showed that participants with one stigmatized identity ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 0.56$) felt that others were more aware of them than participants with multiple stigmatized identities ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 0.08$), however the difference was not statistically significant, $t(83) = -0.43$, $p = 0.668$.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine the feeling that participants' presence was positively acknowledged. The analysis showed that participants with one

stigmatized identity ($M = 4.48, SD = 0.85$) felt that their presence was positively acknowledged more than participants with multiple stigmatized identities ($M = 4.39, SD = 0.80$), however the difference was not statistically significant, $t(83) = -0.46, p = 0.646$.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine the feeling that participants were treated courteously. The analysis showed that participants with one stigmatized identity ($M = 4.57, SD = 0.73$) felt that they were treated more courteously than participants with multiple stigmatized identities ($M = 4.50, SD = 0.81$), however the difference was not statistically significant, $t(83) = -0.34, p = 0.735$.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine the feeling that participants opinions or behaviors mattered. The analysis showed that participants with one stigmatized identity ($M = 4.57, SD = 0.59$) felt that their opinions or behaviors mattered more than participants with multiple stigmatized identities ($M = 4.29, SD = 0.97$), however the difference was not statistically significant, $t(83) = -1.28, p = 0.205$.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine the feeling that it was important that participants were personally there. The analysis showed that participants with one stigmatized identity ($M = 4.65, SD = 0.76$) felt that it was important that they were there personally more than participants with multiple stigmatized identities ($M = 4.42, SD = 0.76$), however the difference was not statistically significant, $t(83) = -1.36, p = 0.185$.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine the feeling that others valued participants. The analysis showed that participants with one stigmatized identity ($M = 4.65, SD = 0.57$) felt valued more than participants with multiple stigmatized identities ($M = 4.37, SD = 0.57$), however the difference was not statistically significant, $t(83) = -1.38, p = 0.171$.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine the feeling that others thought highly of participants. The analysis showed that participants with one stigmatized identity ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.84$) felt that others thought highly of them more than participants with multiple stigmatized identities ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.06$), however the difference was not statistically significant, $t(83) = -1.24$, $p = 0.218$.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine the feeling that participants were fundamentally understood. The analysis showed that participants with one stigmatized identity ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.09$) felt fundamentally understood more than participants with multiple stigmatized identities ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 1.02$), however the difference was not statistically significant, $t(83) = -0.41$, $p = 0.687$.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine the feeling that participants were truly known as a person. The analysis showed that participants with one stigmatized identity ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.94$) felt truly known as a person more than participants with multiple stigmatized identities ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 1.08$), however the difference was not statistically significant, $t(83) = -0.49$, $p = 0.623$.

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine sense of belonging for participants. The analysis showed that participants with one stigmatized identity ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.66$) felt a greater sense of belonging than participants with multiple stigmatized identities ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.64$), however the difference was not statistically significant, $t(83) = -0.18$, $p = 0.859$.

Qualitative Results

Analysis. The focus of the qualitative analysis was based on participants' answers to the following prompt:

“Please think of a time when you felt a sense of belonging. Take a few minutes and describe to us what happened, who was there, and in what ways you felt like you belonged and what made you feel that way. Try to describe the situation, as well as your thoughts and feelings in as much detail as possible. You may use real or altered names and all names included in your story will be changed by the researchers regardless after data analysis.”

In particular, the primary investigator coded the narratives for the type of people mentioned (i.e., family, friends, coworkers), whether participants or others’ social identity was mentioned (i.e., race, gender, sexual orientation), and previous experiences of not feeling belonging (i.e., bullying, alienation, rejection), and shared interests (i.e., sports, clubs, college majors). A frequency count was generated based on whether these aspects of belonging were mentioned.

People Mentioned

One detail examined within participants’ narratives of belonging was the people they mentioned. Primarily, this included friends, family, coworkers, or classmates. Out of 87 participants, 83 described group scenarios, and four described one-on-one situations. The following are examples:

Extract 1:

(37, male): I got together with my immediate family for my brother's birthday. We were all outside at my family home on [redacted] lake where we have spent many summers going back to my great grandfather. It was an abnormally sunny and warm November afternoon on the water. My family has its problems but we have always had a strong sense of community and a deep bond. I felt very much at home and comfortable, despite the fact that we had to stay outside and wear masks, and that we could not even hug. Just

being together was very gratifying. I was happy, joyous and filled with loving memories and laughter.

Extract 2:

(20, non-binary): Anytime really that I'm with my two best friends I feel like I belong. We could literally just sit and do nothing and just be in each other's presence and it feels so natural. It's the feeling of being at home and able to fully and comfortably be who I am. There's no judgement and we're just super open with each other. They use my correct pronouns and name and let me speak freely.

For 27 participants, the presence of family had the largest effect on their sense of belonging, and, for 39 participants, friends made the biggest impact. One common trend among participants' different sources of belonging was the idea of connectedness through presence. As mentioned in both extracts above, many participants included statements about feeling belonging as the result of being in the presence of a particular person or group.

Social Identity and Shared Identity

Out of 87 participants, seven emphasized common characteristics between themselves and the people who acted as a source of belonging for them. A common theme was a shared social identity between the participant and the group or people mentioned. The following excerpts are examples of this theme:

Extract 1

(19): When I was in high school I joined a GSA program with my friend at the time. It was small but the students were all queer and the teacher was someone I confided in beforehand about coming out. It was really comforting to me and felt like I belonged. Especially when we got together and had a conversation about the cultural aspect of

where ethnicity and race were prominent in that. It really made me feel comfortable enough to talk to my immigrant parents about it.

Extract 2

(20, female): I was born in the US; however, at the age of five, I moved to the Dominican Republic with my grandparents. At the age of ten came back to the US not speaking a single word of English. At the time it was a major change in my life the moving and language barrier. When I started going to school I felt as if I did not fit in (did not belong). It all changed when I become friends with the other bilingual Dominican kids. The fact that we shared the same culture and spoke Spanish made me feel as if I belonged and that I found my “group”.

As seen in Extract 1, spending time with people who shared a social identity helped the participant build trust and ultimately gave them an outlet to which they could confide their thoughts and concerns to. Through the identity the GSA program members shared, the community was able to offer the narrator of that extract comfort and belonging. Similarly, when the narrator of Extract 2 became friends with someone with a shared identity, she was able find a group in which she belonged. Despite her identity originally being a source of social alienation, upon becoming friends with people who shared her identity, it became a source of belonging.

Previous Experiences

Another theme that arose while analyzing participants’ narratives was previous experiences of alienation, bullying, or an overall lack of belonging. Fifteen out of 87 participants mentioned examples of these experiences prior to explaining the scenarios in which they ultimately felt that they did belong. The following extracts illustrate this theme:

Extract 1

(20, male): I felt a sense a belonging when I went to my summer camp for the first time. I went there, and for a while, I felt like an outcast. I never had a true sense of belonging. Then I arrived at that camp and realized that I was not alone in the world. other people also go through the same things that I do. they sing like I do, they act like I do. They love, and have the same passion that I do. I constantly just felt relaxed.

Extract 2

(20, female): When I first came to Purchase after being bullied at a past university. I felt very welcomed by my class and peers which I did not before. I knew this was a place I could explore my creative side without being judged. I had felt a great sense of relief but also fear because I was in such a bad place before. I was scared of getting bullied again. I was scared of getting gaslit by my faculty like before and feel like I was going crazy. I quickly realized how different Purchase was to [my previous university].

The first extract discusses the transformation a participant felt after creating bonds with the people he first did not feel he belonged with. By gaining an understanding of the traits and beliefs he had in common with the other people at his summer camp, this participant was able to abandon his lonesome feelings and gain a true sense of belonging. Similar, to the first extract, Extract 2 explains the feelings of freedom that allowed the participant to feel a genuine sense of belonging. She described how having the opportunity to explore creatively without the restraints of judgement allowed her to develop feelings of belonging despite negative experiences in her past. She was able to do this through the recognition of the difference between her current experience and her past experiences.

Shared Interests

Out of 87 participants, 37 mentioned shared interests between themselves and the people mentioned in their narratives. These interests were most commonly clubs, sports, general topics of interest, or college majors. Based on belonging described in the narratives submitted, this theme stems from bonds built from the common ground of shared interests and the pursuit of a common goal. The following extracts are examples of this:

Extract 1

(20, female): I had been a dancer my whole life but never felt good enough. I was never the best dancer in the room but was also never the worst. I was told I was too fat to be a ballerina and hated ballet ever since. I had always loved to sing though. Finally once I had gotten to 5th grade there was an opportunity to do my school's musical. I was so nervous but I was cast in one of the lead roles. It was the most amazing experience to put together a show with a group of people. We felt like a family. We rehearsed every day and put so much work into what we were doing. Flash forward to now and I still get the same feeling when I work on shows. (I work at a youth theatre) Something about being a piece in a huge puzzle that ends up being a show gives me a sense of belonging. I also realized in 5th grade that theatre was my passion. So sharing this with others who felt the same way was an amazing feeling that I never wanted to give up which is why theatre is a part of my career plan.

Extract 2

(19, male): I was part of a Mariachi Club that became a family after spending four years together. We always supported each other and being there made me feel as if none of my

worries mattered when I had the huge support team that was the club. If i were to pinpoint an exact event where I felt like I belonged it would be when I was elected as an officer in the club. Everyone looked so happy and supportive and my heart felt full of joy. I was seen as someone with enough dedication and was liked well enough to be elected without any speeches.

As seen in Extract 1, the participants gained connectedness through the common interest of theatre, which lead to feelings of belonging. The family-like atmosphere that theatre offered her allowed her space to follow her passion and work towards a common goal with the people who felt like family to her. Similar to Extract 1, the participant of Extract 2 discusses feelings of family from the club that he belongs to. Through the continued support of his Mariachi Club, he was able to gain a sense of belonging.

Differences in Narratives of Belonging by Gender

Throughout the themes examined, two participants who identified as male mentioned previous scenarios in which they didn't feel that they belonged, while 14 participants who identified as genders considered stigmatized mentioned this. This may mean that individuals with stigmatized gender identities are more likely to have experiences in which they feel a sense of rejection and alienation. Out of the nine narratives that mentioned shared social identities, two belonged to male participants while seven belonged to participants who were not male. This suggests that social identity is more relevant to belonging for individuals with a stigmatized gender identity. These results support the hypothesis that individuals whose gender identity is stigmatized, have different experiences of belonging compared to individuals whose gender identities are not stigmatized.

Differences in Narratives of Belonging by Participants' Stigmatized Social Identities

Across all of the themes considered, participants with multiple stigmatized identities responded the most frequently as having experienced previous scenarios in which they felt they did not belong, were bullied, or felt alienated. Compared to the two participants with one stigmatized identity who responded as having felt this way, 14 participants with multiple stigmatized identities responded as having felt this way. Participants with multiple stigmatized identities also mentioned that part of their sense of belonging came from their experiences with groups or people who shared their stigmatized identity, more than participants with a single stigmatized identity. Five participants with multiple stigmatized identities noted this in their narratives compared to one participant with a single stigmatized identity. Similarly, only one participant with a single stigmatized identity mentioned their identity in their narrative, while six participants with multiple stigmatized identities mentioned theirs. The hypothesis that individuals who have multiple stigmatized social identities experience belonging differently is supported by these results.

Discussion

Implications

This study sought to examine the differences in experiences of belonging among individuals with different stigmatized social identities. The results support the hypothesis that individuals with stigmatized identities experience belonging differently. One finding that supports this is female participants' responses on the Likert-type questions compared to the responses of participants of other genders. Across all questions, female participants rated their experiences lower. This was consistent for questions used to assess individuals' experiences across different facets of belonging. Female participants also reported having a shared identity

with the people mentioned in their narratives more than participants of other genders. This supports the findings of Schmitt et al. in their study examining the effects of perceived discrimination against gender identity on well-being which concluded that for women, perceptions of discrimination lead to negative psychological well-being, but that increased gender group identification can help to alleviate it. Schmitt et al.'s findings explain the lesser sense of belonging our results show in female participants as well as the greater mention of shared identity within their qualitative responses (2002). Therefore, it is possible that this trend is due to the discrimination against, and marginalization of the female gender identity.

The results of this study also support the hypothesis that individuals with multiple stigmatized identities experience belonging differently than individuals with one stigmatized identity. Evidence for this claim can be seen in participants' personal narratives as well as their responses to the Likert-type questions. Out of the seven participants who mentioned their social identity and noted sharing an identity with the other people in their narratives, only one person had a single stigmatized social identity. The skew in the data indicates an increased importance in shared identity for individuals with multiple stigmatized social identities. This aligns with the findings of Branscombe et al. regarding the rejection identification model which predicts that minority group identification results in a positive effect on well-being (1999).

One limitation that must be noted is the small sample size for genders other than male or female. The number of participants who identified as transgender male, non-binary, or who preferred not to report their gender only included ten participants. Although the sample sizes were very small for these demographics, we chose to analyze the data using the identity participants reported, rather than combine data into a larger sample. As the study aimed to better understand experiences of marginalized groups, disregarding individuals' identification by

grouping their responses together for analysis would have contributed to the disregard of individuals' social identity. This should be considered when interpreting the results from our analyses.

Another limitation that must be addressed is the lack of a control group. Initially, we sought to compare the experiences of individuals with stigmatized social identities to those of individuals without any stigmatized social identities. However, our participants, coincidentally, did not include any individuals who did not possess a stigmatized social identity. We adapted our study to this by modifying our variables to compare the experiences of individuals with one stigmatized social identity to participants with multiple stigmatized identities.

Future research should seek to confirm the trends found in the current research by collecting data from a larger participants pool. By including individuals without any stigmatized identities, it will allow a more accurate analysis of the distinct differences based on identity. Based on the initial trends found in the current study, it is likely that similar, if not more severe differences would be found when a control group is included. Additionally, including more social identities in future studies would allow researchers to account for possible moderating variables. Additional social identities could include sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or psychopathological conditions. Not only would collecting data about these identities account for potential moderating variables, but it would also indicate more specific sources of belonging and give a more detailed picture of the effects of cross-sectionality on belonging.

References

- Akerlof, G. A., & Kranton, R. E. (2000). Economics and identity. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *115*(3), 715-753.
- Baumeister, R., & Leary, M. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, *117*, 497-529. doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497.
- Benoit, D. (2004). Infant-parent attachment: Definition, types, antecedents, measurement and outcome. *Pediatric Child Health*, *9*(8), 541-545. doi: 10.1093/pch/9.8.541.
- Branscombe, N., Schmitt, M., & Harvey, R. (1999). Perceiving pervasive discrimination among African Americans: Implications for group identification and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *77*, 135–149. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.77.1.135
- Cavanagh, S.E. (2008). Family structure history and adolescent adjustment. *Journal of Family Issues*, *29*(7), 944-980. doi: 10.1177/0192513X07311232.
- Crosnoe, R., & Elder G.H. (2004). Family dynamics, supportive relationships, and educational resilience during adolescence. *Journal of Family Issues*, *25*(5), 571-602. doi: 10.1177/0192513X03258307.
- Erikson, E. (1964). *Childhood and Society*. New York: Norton.
- Frable, D. E. S., Platt, L., & Hoey, S. (1998). Concealable stigmas and positive self-perceptions: Feeling better around similar others. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *74*(4), 909–922. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.74.4.909>.
- Hagerty, B.M.K., & Patusky, K. (1995). Developing a measure of sense of belonging. *Nursing Research*, *44*(1), 9-13. doi: 10.1097/00006199-199501000-00003.
- Hagerty, B.M., Williams, R.A., & Oe, H. (2002). Childhood antecedents of sense of belonging.

- Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 58(7), 793-801. doi: 10.1002/jclp.2007.
- Karcher, M. (2014). Cross-age peer mentoring. In D. L. DuBois, & M. J. Karcher *Handbook of Youth Mentoring* (pp. 233-258). SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: 10.4135/9781412996907.n16
- King, V., & Boyd, L. M. (2016). Factors associated with perceptions of family belonging among adolescents. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 78(4), 1114–1130. doi: 10.1111/jomf.12322
- Knowles, M. L., & Gardner, W. L. (2008). Benefits of Membership: The Activation and Amplification of Group Identities in Response to Social Rejection. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34(9), 1200–1213. doi: 10.1177/0146167208320062
- Leake, V. S. (2007). Personal, Familial, and Systemic Factors Associated with Family Belonging for Stepfamily Adolescents. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 47(1–2), 135–155.
- Lickel, B., Hamilton, D. L., Wierzchowska, G., Lewis, A., Sherman, S. J., & Uhles, A. N. (2000). Varieties of groups and the perception of group entitativity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78(2), 223.
- Schmitt, M. T., Branscombe, N. R., Kobrynowicz, D., & Owen, S. (2002). Perceiving discrimination against one's gender group has different implications for well-being in women and men. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 28(2), 197–210.
- Sedikides, C., & Brewer, M. B. (2015). *Individual Self, Relational Self, Collective Self*. Psychology Press.
- Sieving, R. E., McRee, A. L., McMorris, B. J., Shlafer, R. J., Gower, A. L., Kapa, H. M.,

- Beckman, K. J., Doty, J. L., Plowman, S. L., & Resnick, M. D. (2017). Youth-adult connectedness: A key protective factor for adolescent health. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 52(3 Suppl 3), S275–S278. doi: 10.1016/j.amepre.2016.07.037
- Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J. (2000). Identity theory and social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(3), 224–237. doi: 10.2307/2695870
- Timberlake, E. M., & Hamlin II, E. R. (1982). The sibling group: A neglected dimension of placement. *Child Welfare*, 61(8), 545–552.
- Tragakis, M. W. (2006). Social identity integration: The role of social identity content in psychological adjustment [Ph.D., The University of Utah]. In *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*.