Reflections on the 25th anniversary of Baumeister & Leary's seminal paper on the need to belong

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ABSTRACT

This special issue celebrates the impact of Baumeister and Leary's paper on the need to belong on its 25th birthday. This seminal work identified the importance of social connections for humans, suggested that the human need to belong is analogous to our needs for food and water, and identified the invisible hand that guides much of the research in social psychology. The first three articles in this special issue provide examples of how the need to belong has expanded from Baumeister and Leary's original conception of a need for close relationships to a broader need for all kinds of social connections. The next two articles demonstrate the impact of the need to belong. The final two papers give the final word to the paper's original authors, Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary.

Twenty-five years ago, Baumeister and Leary published a little (well, not so little) paper arguing that the need to belong was a pervasive and fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). They presented a compelling and exhaustive case that human beings are social at their core. They argued that humans thrive with relationships and suffer without them.

The beauty of this seminal work on the need to belong is that it didn't just lay out a thesis that humans do well with connections and poorly without, but that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation and thus directs behavior, cognition, motivation, and emotion. By suggesting that our social needs are a driving force in our lives, they opened up the possibility that the need to belong affects human lives in ways of which we may not even be aware.

Although this paper was the first social psychological paper to make this argument, the need to belong influenced every seminal early work of social psychology. Would Festinger's participants have all agreed to help the experimenter by lying to participants if they did not care about belonging (Festinger, 1957)? Would Milgram's have given those electric shocks if defiance did not mean breaking a social contract (Milgram, 1963)? Would Asch's participants have pretended to agree with the other participants if it didn't matter so much to them to be accepted by a group of strangers (Asch, 1951)? Would those young boys in the Sherifs' summer camp have clung to their groups so tightly if they did not have an essential need to connect with others (Sherif et al., 1961)?

What Baumeister and Leary did a quarter of a century ago was bigger than identifying that people need social connections. It was bigger than suggesting that the human need to belong is analogous to our needs for food and water. Their seminal paper changed the face of social psychology because Baumeister and Leary identified the invisible hand that guides so much of the research in our field. In carefully, methodically, and brilliantly laying out the case for a fundamental need to belong they provided the field with a framework that we can use for understanding much of our discipline.

We can see evidence for this shift in the explosion of papers that cite this classic work. Over 10,000 of the 22,000 citations of this twenty-five year old paper come from the past five years. Why do we see this exponential growth in interest in a twenty-five year old paper? Because the need to belong has moved from being an ancillary theory to a foundational theory; we can increase our understanding of a broad range of social psychological phenomena by examining the role that the need to belong plays in those phenomena. In just the last two years the need to belong was used to increase understanding of drug addiction (Inagaki et al., 2020), politics (McDonald et al. (2020), religion (Lewis et al., 2020), mental illness (Kranabetter & Niessen, 2019), sports (Herbison et al., 2019), racial identity (Thelamour et al., 2019), organizational behavior (Shanock et al., 2019), radicalization (Ozer & Bertelsen, 2019), teenage parenting and education (Whiteway, 2019), gambling (Sirola et al., 2019), physical fitness (Evans et al., 2019), pet ownership (Johnson & Bruneau, 2019), self-esteem (Buckingham et al., 2019), metacognition (Gascó et al., 2018), video games (Coulson et al., 2018), racial and gender inequalities in STEM (Casad et al., 2018), persuasion (Ackerman, 2018), eating behavior (Her & Seo, 2018) stereotyping (Dennehy et al., 2018), and cross-cultural differences (Park et al., 2018).

In the last twenty-five years we have seen evidence not only that the need to belong is pervasive and powerful, but also that this very human and very strong need underlies all kinds of social phenomena. I believe that this trend will almost certainly continue. The accumulation of evidence that the need to belong plays a key role in so many areas will push us toward seeing the need to belong as *the* underlying theory of social psychology. In other words, we can explain the vast majority of the field of social psychology if we start with the proposition that humans are fundamentally social creatures who need to feel as if their place in a social world is safe and secure.

This special issue celebrates the impact Baumeister and Leary's thesis had on the field of psychology on its 25th birthday. I anticipate that future birthdays will reveal that the influence of this seminal work has only just begun.

The first three articles in this special issue provide examples of how the need to belong has expanded from Baumeister and Leary's original conception of a need for close relationships to a broader need for all kinds of social connections. Elaine Paravati, Esha Naidu and I, in our paper, *From "love actually" to love, actually: The sociometer takes every kind of fuel*, found that both traditional (e.g., close relationships) and nontraditional (e.g., social surrogates) social strategies are related to wellbeing. In their paper, *Kind Words Do Not Become Tired Words: Undervaluing the Positive Impact of Frequent Compliments*, Xuan Zhao and Nicholas Epley found that people underestimate the power of compliments which may lead people to refrain from expressing these thoughts more often in daily life. Finally, in their paper, *Why do people avoid talking to strangers? A mini meta-analysis of predicted fears and actual experiences talking to a stranger*, Gillian Sandstrom and Erica

Boothby found that people worry about conversations with strangers but that those conversations generally go quite well.

The next two articles demonstrate the impact of the need to belong. In their paper, *There must be more to life than this: The impact of highly-accessible exemplars on self-evaluation and discontent*, Shai Davidai, Sebastian Deri, and Thomas Gilovich's examination of how people's self-views are influenced by readily-accessible extreme exemplars adds to the literature suggesting that the way we define ourselves is driven by our place in the social world. In their paper, *Ostracized and Observed: The Presence of an Audience Affects the Experience of Being Excluded*, Andrew Hales, Miranda McIntyre, Selma Rudert, Kipling Williams, & Herbert Thomas found that having an audience to ostracism hurts when the audience is physically present but helps when it is distant.

We gave the final word to the paper's original authors, Mark Leary and Roy Baumeister.

In their paper, *Social exclusion reduces happiness by creating expectations of future rejection*, Hallgeir Sjåstad, Ming Zhang, Andreas Espegren Masvie, and Roy Baumeister found evidence that social exclusion is detrimental because it creates a generalized expectation of *future* rejection and lack of belonging. In other words, what is terrifying and demoralizing is the worry that we will be incapable of filling our need to belong in the future. In his paper, *The Need to Belong, the Sociometer, and the Pursuit of Relational Value: Unfinished Business*, Mark Leary looks back through the research and describes three projects that, although never published, might be of interest to researchers in this area. The three projects involved (a) distinguishing the effects of social exclusion from the effects of low relational value on reactions to rejection, (b) the effects of ambient darkness on the need to belong, and (c) the effect of acceptance and rejection on people's interpersonal aspirations.

Disclosure statement

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