

# The relentless pursuit of acceptance and belonging

Mark R. Leary<sup>a,\*</sup> and Shira Gabriel<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, Duke University, Durham, NC, United States

<sup>b</sup>Department of Psychology, SUNY Buffalo, Buffalo, NY, United States

\*Corresponding author: e-mail address: leary@duke.edu

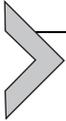
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## Abstract

A great deal of human behavior is motivated by the desire for acceptance and belonging, and a high proportion of people's emotional reactions stems from concerns with actual or potential social rejection. The pervasive quest for acceptance can be seen in the attention and effort people devote to their physical appearance, their efforts to be liked, achievement-related behaviors, conformity, accumulating resources that others need, and generally being the sort of person with whom others want to have social connections. Depending on the context, concerns with social acceptance are typically

accompanied by emotions such as social anxiety, embarrassment, jealousy, hurt feelings, and guilt, as well as lowered self-esteem. In addition, people who feel inadequately valued and accepted may behave in ways to increase acceptance, aggress against those who rejected them, distance themselves from other people, and/or engage in symbolic efforts to increase their subjective sense of being accepted. Concerns with acceptance and belonging exert a pervasive, ongoing effect on human thought, behavior, and emotion.



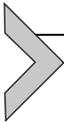
## 1. Introduction

Even after studying acceptance and belonging for many years, we remain puzzled as to why social and motivational psychologists took so long to fully appreciate the strong and pervasive role that the quest for acceptance and belonging plays in human life. Many theorists had echoed Aristotle's observation that *Homo sapiens* is a resolutely social animal (Axelrod & Hamilton, 1981; Buss, 1995), and after publication of Aronson's (1972) influential text, it became common parlance to refer to human beings as "the social animal." Yet, most writers viewed human sociality in terms of mere social interaction and group living. Indeed, human beings sometimes seem compulsively driven to interact with an endless stream of people—family members, partners, friends, neighbors, acquaintances, fellow group members, co-workers, passing strangers, and others—even when their interactions serve no useful purpose or are fraught with anxiety or conflict.

Of course, many other animals live in groups and interact with conspecifics on an ongoing basis. The primary difference between human beings and most other creatures is not the fact that we are "social" animals who interact and form social relationships with other people; many birds and mammals have ongoing relationships with others in their herd, flock, pack, or troupe. Rather, the difference lies in the fact that human beings invest an exceptional amount of thought and energy into being valued and accepted by others and in the degree to which people's concerns with what others think of them influence their behaviors and emotions. Other animals certainly show evidence of attachment and are distressed when they are separated from or marginalized by others (Goodall, 1986; Panksepp, 2003), but concerns with acceptance and belonging seem far more pervasive and influential among human beings than other animals.

At least as far back as McDougall's (1908) speculations about the "gregarious instinct" and Adler's (1930/1970) discussion of "social feeling," several motivation theorists have suggested that something like belonging is

a particularly important human motive, although they have called it by a variety of names (e.g., Bowlby, 1969; Cacioppo et al., 2000; Ferguson, 1989; Fiske, 2008; Maslow, 1954; McAdams, 1992; Murray, 1938; Ryan & Deci, 2000). But, aside from Self-determination Theory's emphasis on "relatedness" as one of the three basic human motives (Ryan & Deci, 2000), these insights did not filter widely into social psychology or motivation science. Indeed, for several decades, most of the prominent theoretical orientations in social psychology focused on intrapersonal motives, such as motives for cognitive consistency and self-esteem, rather than interpersonal ones—a somewhat surprising emphasis for a field called *social* psychology (Leary, Raimi, Jongman-Sereno, & Diebels, 2015).



## 2. The motive for acceptance and belonging

Wider interest in the centrality of concerns with acceptance and belonging followed in the wake of Baumeister and Leary's (1995) article proposing that the "need to belong" is a fundamental human motivation. Their central premise was that "human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497) and, thus, devote a great deal of thought, time, and energy to pursuing acceptance by other people. Their article went beyond simply making the claim that people are motivated to seek acceptance and belonging to a systematic analysis of evidence that supports the idea that the need to belong is a fundamental motive that likely evolved because it facilitated survival and reproduction throughout human evolution.

As evidence, Baumeister and Leary (1995) noted, for example, that: a desire for acceptance and belonging can be seen in all normal individuals in all cultures without any special circumstances required for the motive to emerge; people form social bonds very easily, without special eliciting circumstances; people in every culture belong to small, primary groups and form a variety of relationships with family members, friends, mates, and others; and people develop group identifications quickly and easily. Furthermore, once social bonds form, people are very reluctant to allow them to dissolve, even when relationships have no instrumental function and may even be distressing or harmful, as when people are unwilling to leave bad relationships and abusive spouses. People are also interested in maintaining occasional contact with those with whom they once had ongoing relationships even though those old relationships no longer provide tangible value.

Other evidence that supports the importance of this motive is that people's thoughts, emotions, and conversations often involve the state of their interpersonal relationships. People think a great deal about other people, drawing inferences about their characteristics and trying to discern how others perceive them. People also tend to dwell on problems with their social connections and seek ways to strengthen them. Furthermore, changes in social connections are a primary source of people's emotions. Maintaining relationships in which one feels valued and accepted generates positive emotions, and events that undermine connections—for example, when relationships break up or people move away—are typically distressing.

Finally, people who do not experience adequate acceptance and belonging show an array of adverse effects, including stress, depression, poor psychological adjustment, lowered ability to self-regulate, and compromised physical health. Long term social isolation is associated with loneliness (Jones, Freemon, & Goswick, 1981) and anxiety (Mathes, Adams, & Davies, 1985). Chronic loneliness predicts a plethora of poor health outcomes such as compromised immune functioning (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1984), high blood pressure, and increased mortality (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010). Lack of social connections also predicts an increase in psychopathology (Bhatti, Derezotes, Kim, & Specht, 1989), including eating disorders and attempted suicide. Children who experience ostracism not only suffer as they are being ostracized but also exhibit long term negative emotions and problematic behaviors as a result (Kupersmidt, Griesler, DeRosier, Patterson, & Davis, 1995; Prinstein & Aikins, 2004). Together, such findings support the idea that people literally need to be accepted and to belong in order to thrive.

Although Baumeister and Leary (1995) called this motive the “need to belong,” their conceptualization clearly involves more than merely wanting to belong to groups per se. The word, “belong,” connotes having membership in a group, and we normally think of people “belonging” to teams, work groups, clubs, professional associations, clans, secret societies, and other groups. We would not normally talk about people “belonging” to their neighbor, best friend, or romantic partner. Yet, most research that has invoked the need to belong has dealt with being accepted or rejected by individuals as much as belonging to groups. In retrospect, “need to belong” may not have been the most accurate, precise, and unambiguous way to characterize this motive.

What is also not evident in Baumeister and Leary's (1995) analysis is that not all efforts to be accepted or to belong arise from the universal, evolved need that they described. Although a desire for social connection is an

inherent part of human nature, some efforts to be accepted or to belong reflect momentary, tactical efforts to achieve specific goals rather than an evolved need. For example, a business person might seek membership in a business association not because he or she desires acceptance or belonging per se but rather to make contacts that will increase sales. The person doesn't really care about this particular organization or these particular people, and he or she is not trying to remedy a deficit in belonging; he or she is simply doing something that will be good for business. In cases of instrumental efforts to be accepted or to belong, the motivational impetus is not a desire for acceptance or belonging per se, so the evolved need to belong is not necessarily involved.

Given these two ambiguities in the "need to belong" moniker, in this chapter, we will use the more cumbersome term "motive to be accepted and belong" (or "acceptance and belonging motivation") rather than "need to belong." We do so to make it clear that (a) we are talking about both acceptance by individuals and belonging to groups and (b) not all efforts to be accepted and to belong spring from the evolved *need* to belong but can nonetheless be regarded as motivated by a desire for acceptance or belonging.

## 2.1 How many motives?

Whatever they have called it, most theorists have implicitly conceptualized the motive for acceptance and belonging as a single motive that plays out in our relationships with everyone, whether family members, partners, friends, neighbors, co-workers, acquaintances, or strangers. Yet, questions have been raised about whether this is best regarded as a single broad motive that can be directed toward relationships with an array of targets or whether it involves a number of discrete motives that direct efforts to establish connections with various categories of people. People seek accepting social connections with at least five qualitatively distinct types of social entities (see [Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001](#)), but it is unclear whether efforts to seek and maintain these five kinds of social connections arise from precisely the same motive.

First, people belong to a variety of collectives such as tribes, villages, communities, and nations. The members of these groups may or may not have direct contact with all other members, but they each identify as members of these collectives and typically want to be recognized or accepted as such by other group members. Second, people form instrumental coalitions with other people who work directly together to achieve mutually desired goals. Hunting parties may have been the earliest instrumental coalitions,

but today, people join teams, committees, work groups, army units, civic organizations, gangs, unions, neighborhood associations, and other task-oriented groups.

Third, people develop relationships for the purpose of mating and typically want to be “accepted” by their mates even outside of the mating context. To complicate things, people may form different sorts of mating relationships—ranging from one-time liaisons to long-term monogamous pairings—that differ in the degree to which people are motivated to be accepted.

Fourth, people have kin relationships that are based primarily on genetic relatedness, although people may adopt non-kin as full-fledged family members. But, whether genetically related or not, people in family relationships typically want to be accepted. Finally, people seek friendships, which inherently involve acceptance. Friendships develop on the basis of a mutual communal orientation in which each individual can rely on the support of his or her friends in a manner that transcends contexts, roles, and time (Hruschka, 2010).

The criteria for acceptance into these various kinds of relationships differ greatly, as do the reasons for rejection from them (Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001). Community memberships are based on shared heritage or culture, coalition memberships on the ability to contribute to the group’s goals, mating relationships on mate value, kin relationships on genetic relatedness and willingness to sacrifice for family members, and friendships on the basis of being a reliable source of companionship and support. Given that different kinds of interpersonal relationships are characterized by somewhat different behavioral and emotional features, pose different problems, require different solutions, and, at least in the ancestral environment, would have involved different implications for survival, reproduction, and inclusive fitness, evolutionary psychologists suggest that a separate mechanism might be needed for each qualitatively different motive (Symons, 1992). Applied to acceptance and belonging, this consideration suggests that we may be dealing with at least five distinct motives rather than one (Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001).

Despite compelling arguments for (at least) five different belongingness motivations, the motivations do appear to be intertwined. First, many criteria for acceptance and belonging apply across most, if not all, all kinds of relationships. For example, a person who behaves in an untrustworthy, selfish, duplicitous, or cruel fashion is not likely to be accepted by other people, no matter what type of relationship we might imagine. Second, most of the emotional reactions to potential and actual rejection (to be discussed later) are the same regardless of the type of relationship or group from which one is rejected.

Third, to an extent, one relationship may substitute for another, supporting the existence of a general motive for acceptance and belonging aside from whatever specific motives might exist for different kinds of relationships. For example, people in new romantic relationships often withdraw a bit from their same-sex friends (Burton-Chellew & Dunbar, 2015), and members of the military may develop relationships among each other that substitute for the family members back home (Settersten, 2006). And, as we will discuss, even pets and celebrities can partly substitute for relationships with real people. The substitution is rarely total: family members do not fully replace friends or lovers, and instrumental coalitions don't fully replace friendships. But, the fact that substitution occurs at all suggests that all relationships may satisfy some generic motive for acceptance and belonging in addition to whatever special affordances each type of relationship may offer. The question of whether there are different motivations to belong has not been carefully examined and deserves additional research attention.

## 2.2 Relational value

Furthermore, despite differences in the specific relationships and group memberships that people desire, certain psychological processes appear to be involved whenever concerns for acceptance and belonging are salient. In an effort to identify the central feature shared by all efforts to be accepted and to belong, as well as all reactions to experiences of acceptance and rejection, Leary (2001) suggested that acceptance and rejection can be conceptualized in terms of “relational value”—the degree to which other people value interacting and having relationships with us. Some people regard their relationships with us as very valuable and important; to those individuals, our relational value is high. Other people view their relationships with us as less valuable and important; to them, our relational value is low. At the extreme, most people do not value having relationships with us at all; to them, our relational value is zero.

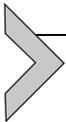
In all instances in which people seek acceptance or belonging—no matter the context or the target—they fundamentally want to protect or increase their relational value. When their relational value is as high as they desire in a particular context, people feel “accepted” or that they “belong;” when their relational value is lower than they desire, they feel “rejected.” Relational value is the currency with which all acceptance and belonging operates.

Having relational value to other people is important because it increases people's access to a wide array of desired social and material outcomes,

including companionship, friendship, group memberships, romantic relationships, social support, logistical help, financial and material resources, social influence, and a broad range of social, occupational, financial, recreational, and sexual opportunities. As a result, human beings are highly motivated to have high relational value, at least with respect to certain individuals, because our prehistoric ancestors survived only by belonging to and being accepted by a supportive clan that valued them as members.

Importantly, relational value is never established once-and-for-all. Not only do people engage in an ongoing process of establishing connections with new individuals, but they also must adjust to the changing demands of established relationships. In addition, occasions sometimes arise in which misbehavior, ineptitude, disclosures of damaging information, or other interpersonal predicaments call one's relational value into question. Few, if any, relationships are so secure that people can afford to take their relational value for granted. Thus, people are pervasively concerned with establishing, maintaining, and promoting their relational value in other people's eyes. In other words, they are motivated to be accepted and to belong.

In many cases, it is unclear whether people's efforts to manage their relational value—and their reactions when they perceive that their relational value is low or declining—should be regarded as motivated by a desire for acceptance (an approach motivation) or by a fear of rejection (an avoidance motivation). This conceptual distinction is important in motivational analyses (Elliot, 2008) but remains unaddressed among researchers who study acceptance and belonging.



### **3. The far-reaching impact of acceptance and belonging motivation on human behavior**

Theory and research suggest that the motive for acceptance and belonging is not simply one of many equally important social motives (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Fiske, 2008; Maslow, 1954). Rather, it is a fundamental motive that underlies an exceptionally broad swath of human behavior. Indeed, there are few social encounters in which people have no concern whatsoever with whether they are being accepted versus rejected by others, whether those others are people who are physically present or people whose acceptance may be affected should they learn later how the person behaved. The motivation to foster and maintain acceptance or belonging pervades virtually every social interaction, either as the primary focus or as an implicit concern lurking in the background. And, it also

influences many behaviors that occur when people are alone as they prepare to interact with others or consider the implications of private behaviors that might later become known by others. A species that was otherwise identical to *Homo sapiens* but that lacked this basic motive would behave quite differently than modern human beings. We find it difficult to identify another social motive that exerts a broader, more powerful, or more pervasive influence on thought, emotion, and behavior than the motive to be accepted and to belong.

The remainder of this chapter examines the behavioral and emotional implications of the need to belong. We first take a sweeping look at six major classes of human behavior that fundamentally involve efforts to be accepted or belong by establishing, maintaining, and promoting people's relational value: enhancing physical attractiveness, trying to be liked, achievement, conformity, being a good social exchange partner, and having resources. We then examine the emotional implications of this motive, followed by the ways in which people try to restore their acceptance and belonging when threatened.

### 3.1 Physical appearance

Everyone knows that physical appearance matters. People tend to assume that it matters because attractive people are liked more than unattractive people, which is true, but the impact runs deeper. Appearance affects the degree to which people are relationally valued and, thus, accepted by other individuals and groups. Physical appearance influences acceptance and belonging via two routes, so people regularly attend to two features of their appearance.

First, a good deal of research shows that people automatically assume that attractive people possess more positive personal characteristics than less attractive people do. For example, based on appearance alone, attractive people are rated as significantly more intelligent, sociable, warm, socially skilled, altruistic, and well-adjusted than less attractive people (for reviews, see Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Feingold, 1992; Langlois et al., 2000). And, of course, people who are perceived to possess these characteristics are more likely to be relationally valued and accepted. Disturbingly, Langlois and her colleagues showed this effect can be seen even when judging infants: attractive newborn infants were rated more positively and received more affection, attention, and care from their mothers than infants who were less attractive (Langlois, Ritter, Casey, & Sawin, 1995; Ritter, Casey, & Langlois, 1991). In adulthood, these differences in

judgments can have not only social but also tangible consequences. For example, economists estimate that attractive people earn 12% more than unattractive people on average (Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994), and attractive criminal defendants receive more lenient sentences (Mazzella & Feingold, 1994) unless they had used their appearance to perpetrate the crime (Sigall & Ostrove, 1975; but see Shechory-Bitton & Zvi, 2015). Although there are exceptions, being unattractive is generally a disadvantage in life (Griffin & Langlois, 2006).

Most people devote time every day to their physical appearance, and virtually everything they do to enhance their appearance is in the service of acceptance and belonging. Although some daily grooming practices focus on bodily cleanliness, much grooming—such as regularly showering, shaving, and washing and combing one's hair—involves efforts to enhance one's physical appearance (and scent). Many people also use appearance-enhancing aids such as make-up, hair products, and teeth whiteners, and also choose clothing that will enhance how they look. Many also exercise, get their hair cut, suntan, or have nonessential cosmetic surgery to look better (Blum, 2003; Braun, 2005). Although few people look as good as they would like, most of us take steps to make the best of what we have, and the primary reason is to enhance the probability of acceptance and belonging.

In addition to simply trying to appear attractive—or at least not unattractive—people often manage their appearance in ways that make them fit into the situations and roles in which they find themselves. People's choices regarding hair style, clothing, bodily adornments (such as piercings and tattoos), and, for men, whether to sport facial hair are affected by their desire to fit into occupational and social roles. People also wear clothing that they believe, correctly or incorrectly, not only enhances their appearance but that also conforms to the accepted “wardrobe” of their occupational and social groups (Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Peluchette, Karl, & Rust, 2006). For example, to be maximally valued at work, a Wall Street banker must look quite different than a construction worker, who must look different than a tattoo artist.

### 3.2 Being liked

Every normal person prefers to be liked rather than disliked and regularly behaves in ways that lead other people to like him or her. People want to be liked because being liked is a primary route to acceptance and belonging. In other words, liking is generally not the ultimate goal—it is the motive for

acceptance and belonging that drives the behaviors designed to elicit liking. We will give just a few examples to show the breadth of this effect.

People like those who are more similar to them on almost any dimension—socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic background, personality traits, attitudes toward almost anything (no matter how trivial), values, physical attractiveness, hobbies, educational level, and so on. A meta-analysis of similarity-attraction effects from 313 studies showed that perceived similarity was associated with attraction in both experimental studies and real-world settings (Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008). Furthermore, people are more likely to befriend (Kandel, 1978; Selfhout et al., 2010) and fall in love with people who they perceive as similar to themselves (AhYun, 2002). Put simply, a person's perceived relational value is increased by similarity to others. Three features of the similarity-attraction effect are germane to the motivation to be accepted and to belong.

First, the similarity-attraction effect may be fueled, at least in part, by a desire for acceptance and belonging. Several explanations have been offered for the similarity-attraction effect (Montoya & Horton, 2013; Singh, Chen, & Wegener, 2014), one of which is that people like similar others because they assume that similar others are more likely to like them (Condon & Crano, 1988). We aren't inclined to waste our time trying to establish relationships with people aren't likely to value and accept us (Aron, Dutton, Aron, & Iverson, 1989; Gold, Ryckman, & Mosley, 1984).

Second, the similarity-attraction effect affects how we interact with other people. People regularly seek to identify and capitalize on areas of similarity when they interact ("Where are you from? What do you do?"). The purpose of these exchanges is not merely to get to know the other person but also to find common ground that can provide clues for how to foster one's relational value in the other person's eyes (Affi & Lucas, 2008).

Third and perhaps most importantly, knowing that similarity increases attraction and relational value leads people to behave in ways that foster impressions of similarity. People often advertise, exaggerate, or even fabricate their similarities with others. For example, as we'll discuss, people may conform—in their opinions and their behavior—to appear similar and increase the likelihood that others will like and accept them (Kacmar, Carlson, & Bratton, 2004).

Of course, excessive similarity means that a person is just like everyone else and, thus, not likely to provide unique value to others. For this reason, people often try to find a balance between being similar enough to other people to be accepted but also different enough to be interesting and

nonredundant, without being viewed as deviant. According to optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991), people maintain their social identity to meet both a need for group inclusion and belonging (assimilation) and a need for distinctiveness from other group members (differentiation). We view the process slightly differently: only a single motive underlies the pursuit of optimal distinctiveness. People strive for differentiation not because they need to be different but rather to maximize their relational value to other people, and, thus, promote their belonging. Maximizing social acceptance and belonging requires people to be assimilated enough to be viewed as an acceptable person but differentiated enough to be uniquely valuable.

In addition to efforts to appear similar to other people, the large class of behaviors that fall under the heading of ingratiation also reflect a desire to be liked and accepted. (In fact, this connection is highlighted in the definition of “ingratiate” offered by the *Merriam-Webster, n.d.*—“to gain favor or favorable acceptance by deliberate effort.”) Several categories of ingratiation tactics have been identified, including other-enhancement (flattery), rendering favors, opinion conformity, and modesty (Gordon, 1996; Jones & Wortman, 1973; Vonk, 2002), and they all involve efforts to be liked and accepted.

### 3.3 Achievement-related behaviors

Motivation theorists have typically drawn a distinction between achievement-focused behaviors that are motivated by a desire for achievement, competence, or success and interpersonal behaviors that are motivated by a desire for liking, acceptance, or status. Yet, when viewed through the lens of relational value, this distinction is not as clear as it might appear. People often engage in achievement-oriented behaviors in the service of interpersonal goals, including acceptance and belonging. Said differently, people who seek to achieve or to be successful often pursue these outcomes not for their own sake or because they may result in tangible rewards but rather because excellence and achievement increase relational value, acceptance, and belonging. People who demonstrate knowledge, abilities, and skills in almost any domain are more likely to be sought as relationship partners and group members than those who don't, either because their skills benefit others, other people desire the rewards of their achievements, or because others wish to be associated with successful people.

Viewed in this way, much of what people do to achieve, succeed, and demonstrate their competencies may be motivated by the desire for acceptance or belonging or by concerns with losing relational value in others'

eyes. Whether we are talking about intellectual skills, artistic or musical ability, athletic prowess, or task-specific abilities (such as gardening, car repair, or brewing beer), people are motivated to develop and display certain knowledge and skills, in part, because they increase the likelihood that others will value and accept them and lower the likelihood that they will be devalued and rejected. To see the link between the motives for acceptance and achievement, one need only imagine what would happen to people's desire to achieve if excellence and accomplishment suddenly elicited disinterest, diminished respect, or ostracism rather than approbation and acceptance.

Of course, researchers interested in achievement have acknowledged that social goals can influence achievement-related behaviors. Most notably, the concept of performance goals—as opposed to mastery goals—points to a social motive to outperform others (Dweck, 1986; Elliot, 1999, 2005). In addition, theorists have explored a variety of noncompetence goals that include social reasons that students try to succeed academically (Kaplan & Maehr, 2007; Urdan & Maehr, 1995, p. 214). For example, Dowson and McInerney (2003) identified five “social goals” that can influence achievement behaviors, and at least three of these—goals involving affiliation, approval, and status—have clear implications for acceptance and belonging (see also Miller, Greene, Montalvo, Ravindran, & Nichols, 1996).

In a study of academic goals, Urdan and Mestas (2006) found that many of the reasons that students give for pursuing performance goals are explicitly interpersonal. For example, students indicated that they were motivated to do well to impress other people, gain respect, increase their status, and build or maintain social connections with family members and friends, all of which can be in the service of acceptance and belonging. Similarly, in three studies of goals among Korean students, Lee and Bong (2016) found that students most frequently endorsed “social status” reasons for achievement, although “status” is not an accurate description of these goals, which involved efforts not only to enhance status but also acceptance and belonging.

Although people generally try to appear knowledgeable and competent, occasions arise in which they believe that they will increase their relational value and acceptance by appearing less competent than they really are, so achievement declines and they try to hide their accomplishments. In such instances, people may “play dumb” by pretending to be less informed or less competent than they really are (Dean, Braito, Powers, & Bruton, 1975; Thornton, Audesse, Ryckman, & Burckle, 2006). People play dumb for several reasons, but the most common may be to increase their acceptance by someone who might be put-off by their knowledge or competence (Thornton et al., 2006).

### 3.4 Conforming to norms

Two of social psychology's earliest classic studies demonstrated important links between conformity and social acceptance. [Schachter \(1951\)](#) showed that people who deviate from the majority in a group, even on trivial criteria, tend to be devalued, marginalized, and ostracized (see also [Wesselmann et al., 2014](#)), and [Asch \(1955\)](#) showed that people will disregard or misrepresent their own sensory perceptions and personal values to conform to a group's opinion. Since then, decades of research have shown that people conform in a variety of ways in order to be accepted or avoid rejection (e.g., [Bäck, Bäck, Altermark, & Knapton, 2018](#); [Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991](#); [Heerdink, van Kleef, Homan, & Fischer, 2013](#); [Insko, Smith, Alicke, Wade, & Taylor, 1985](#); [Janes & Olson, 2000](#); [Marques, Abrams, Paez, & Hogg, 2001](#)).

Indeed, many social psychological phenomena can be explained in terms of people going along with others to maintain social connections or to avoid jeopardizing their position in a group. For example, people may censor their objections to what other people say and go along with decisions with which they disagree. In group settings, members' efforts to maintain group cohesion and their position in the group can undermine effective group discussions and lead to bad decisions, as in the case of groupthink ([McCauley, 1989](#)).

People also mold their beliefs and attitudes to the groups to which they belong or aspire to belong (e.g., [Kacmar et al., 2004](#); [Levitan & Verhulst, 2016](#)), a notion that was introduced many years ago by [Smith, Bruner, and White \(1956\)](#) in their analysis of the "social adjustment" function of attitudes. When people's attitudes differ from those of people whose acceptance is important to them, they tend to express attitudes that are more similar to those others than is actually the case. People even increase the alignment of their attitudes with close others when rejected by a third party, presumably to solidify their existing relationships ([Reid, Davis, & Green, 2019](#)).

Many of the rules, norms, and morals that people must follow to maintain their relational value and standing in their groups are explicit. But people also conform to the implicit perspectives, attitudes, tastes, and ways of doing things that "go without saying" within a particular group. Even though many of these norms are objectively inconsequential (such as a particular way of talking or a preference for a certain kind of music), people who behave in ways that indicate they do not share the group's views may be devalued.

To be accepted as a member-in-good-standing of virtually any group, members must almost always conform to the norm of showing loyalty and favoritism toward their own group, often while derogating and

disadvantaging members of other groups. Thus, the common patterns of in-group favoritism uncovered in research on the minimal group paradigm (Diehl, 1990) are due not only to an automatic effect of social categorization or to a natural affinity for one's own groups but also to an effort to solidify one's position among those with whom one most strongly identifies. Derogating and rejecting members of other groups may foster acceptance by increasing in-group cohesion and enhancing members' attraction for one another (Brewer, 2007; Pickett & Brewer, 2005).

### 3.5 Being a good social exchange partner

Interpersonal interactions and relationships are guided by social exchange rules regarding how the individuals are expected to treat one another (Emerson, 1976; Gouldner, 1960; Hall, 2011). A number of such rules have been proposed including reciprocity, honesty, fairness, dependability, cooperation, rationality, and some minimal level of concern for other people's needs (Bies & Moag, 1986; Cosmides & Tooby, 1992; Cottrell, Neuberg, & Li, 2007; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Taylor, Tracy, Renard, Harrison, & Carroll, 1995). Behaving in ways that violate social exchange rules shows that a person is a poor social exchange partner whose behavior might disadvantage other people, thereby lowering his or her relational value.

People obviously prefer to have connections with those who abide by social exchange rules. In fact, evolutionary psychologists suggest that human beings may possess evolved cognitive mechanisms designed to detect violations of certain social exchange rules (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992, 2008), such as a "cheater detection" system that may monitor instances in which other people take benefits to which they are not entitled (Cosmides, 1989; Delton, Cosmides, Guemo, Robertson, & Tooby, 2012).

Because one's relational value and chances of being accepted into most relationships and groups are enhanced by being a good social exchange partner, people generally try to follow social exchange rules, and conceal, deny, or excuse instances in which they do not do so. This motive is the basis of a certain amount of ethical and prosocial behavior, and for the fact that people tend to behave more ethically and prosocially in public than they do in private (Rom & Conway, 2018).

Individuals, groups, and societies sometimes use the threat of rejection as a means of controlling others' behavior, thereby inducing behaviors that promote the group's well-being and conform to group norms while punishing those that undermine group welfare or go against group norms

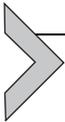
(Gruter & Masters, 1986; Williams, 2001). For example, reciprocity is enforced chiefly through the implied threat of rejection for those who fail to reciprocate (Cotterell, Eisenberger, & Speicher, 1992), which increases the pressure to negotiate and reciprocate (Cialdini et al., 1975; Hale & Laliker, 1999). Likewise, people work harder on group tasks when their personal contributions can be monitored (Karau & Williams, 1995). Similarly, people are most likely to behave in cooperative and helpful ways when their social connections might be jeopardized by selfishness (Danheiser & Graziano, 1982; Orbell, Van de Kragt, & Dawes, 1988) and when belonging is salient (Kramer & Brewer, 1984). In fact, certain prosocial tendencies may have evolved because they have reputational benefits that lead other people to value interacting with us (Sperber & Baumard, 2012).

### 3.6 Resources: Having what others need

Finally, people are more likely to be valued and accepted by individuals and groups when they have resources that those individuals or groups desire. Those resources may be knowledge, skills, possessions, contacts, money, or other things. In such cases, people are accepted not because others value their relationship per se (as in the case of friendships, family relationships, and most romantic pairings) but rather because they provide tangible resources that other people want or need; they have instrumental social value (Leary, Jongman-Sereno, & Diebels, 2014). We can tell the difference between relational value and instrumental social value by asking the question, “Would others value their relationship with the person just as much if the person no longer possessed the resource?” Relational value is based on the psychological and emotional importance of a relationship almost without regard for the person’s instrumental usefulness in helping us to accomplish particular goals.

The distinction between relational value and instrumental social value is important because it maps onto the difference between being accepted and having status (Leary et al., 2014). People are accorded status to the extent they appear to possess resources, including personal characteristics, that promote the attainment of collective goals. People who are seen as promoting collective outcomes—and thereby benefitting the group and its members—are accorded higher status than people who are not perceived to contribute to group outcomes. Yet, status sometimes promotes relational value because people often value having relationships with those who facilitate collective outcomes and, thus, have high status.

The fact that people sometimes accrue resources to bolster acceptance suggests that the desire for acceptance motivates materialism. Indeed, the motive for social acceptance correlates positively with materialism (Rose & DeJesus, 2007), and inducing people to feel socially excluded, which should increase their desire for acceptance, causes people to behave in more materialistic, even greedy ways (Twenge & Baumeister, 2005). In fact, displaying that one has valued resources may be an evolutionary-prepared strategy that increases acceptance and mate value (Rose & Conlon, 2009).



#### **4. Immediate reactions to thwarted acceptance and belonging**

People's efforts to increase acceptance and belonging—by enhancing their physical attractiveness (or at least trying not to be unattractive), trying to be liked, achievement, conformity, being a good social exchange partner, and having resources—capture a very broad span of human social behavior, demonstrating the strong and pervasive role that concerns with acceptance and belonging play in human life. However, these efforts reflect only the first of three processes involved in establishing and maintaining relational value. People must not only behave in ways that lead people to want to have social connections with them but also be attuned to indications that their relational value is low or declining and deal with instances in which they perceive that they are rejected.

Motivational systems typically include processes that monitor the degree to which the focal goal is being satisfied, and the motive for acceptance and belonging is no exception. Indeed, human beings appear hyper-vigilant for cues relevant to the degree to which they are being valued and accepted versus devalued and rejected by others (Leary & Downs, 1995; Pickett & Gardner, 2005). Because people do not have the cognitive capacity to constantly monitor others' judgments of them on a conscious level, this system typically operates in background mode, scanning the environment in an automatic and ongoing fashion with little conscious awareness on the part of the individual. Although people sometimes consciously think about how others are perceiving and evaluating them, the system typically monitors the social environment, as well as one's own behavior, at a preattentive level for indications of immediate or potential threats to relational value. As Cooley (1922, p. 208) observed, people regularly “live in the minds of others without knowing it.”

Although this monitoring system has not been studied in detail, its output seems to consist of at least three immediate psychological reactions—conscious attention to the possible threat to acceptance/belonging, emotional reactions, and changes in state self-esteem. First, detection of cues indicating low or declining relational value evokes an orienting response and a conscious assessment of others' reactions to the individual (Chen, Du, Xiang, Zhang, & Zhang, 2017; Leary, 2005). Just a momentary look of disinterest, disagreement, or derision on the face of another person can evoke a conscious analysis of the situation. The system seems quite efficient: for example, research suggests that nonverbal ostracism is detected within 20s of its onset (Williams, 2009).

Second, detection of an actual or potential threat to acceptance is usually accompanied by one or more emotional reactions. Whether people are ostracized by a group, rejected by a romantic partner, disregarded by a friend, estranged from family members, or merely ignored in casual encounters, rejections generally elicit strong emotions (Leary, Koch, & Hechenbleikner, 2001). Even the mere possibility of rejection can be highly distressing. The fact that people experience strong emotions when rejected provides additional evidence that acceptance and belonging are exceptionally important.

The striking thing is not just that people are highly distressed by real, imagined, and potential rejection—even by rejections that don't really matter in any practical sense—but that they have the capacity to experience several distinct affective reactions when they perceive their relational value to be low or in jeopardy, including hurt feelings, jealousy, social anxiety, embarrassment, guilt, and shame. It's as if natural selection wanted to arm human beings with an arsenal of reactions to ensure that we never failed to detect and respond to events that might jeopardize our acceptance or belonging.

#### 4.1 Emotional reactions

The emotion most consistently associated with low perceived relational value is hurt feelings (Leary & Leder, 2009; MacDonald & Leary, 2005; Vangelisti, Young, Carpenter-Theune, & Alexander, 2005; Williams, 2009). People's feelings are hurt when they perceive that other people do not regard their relationship with them to be as valuable or important as the person desires (Leary & Leder, 2009; Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998). Note that people do not have to be explicitly "rejected" to have their feelings hurt; people's feelings can be hurt even

when they know that the other person accepts and maybe even loves them. The critical element that triggers hurt feelings is perceiving that one has low relational value *at the moment* even if low relational value occurs in an otherwise accepting and supportive relationship (MacDonald & Leary, 2005; Snapp & Leary, 2001).

Other emotional reactions appear designed to warn people of potential threats to relational value even before actual rejection is detected. Social anxiety—feelings of nervousness in social encounters—arises when people become concerned that they may convey undesired impressions of themselves that will lower their relational value (Leary & Jongman-Sereno, 2014). The impressions people make on others are a primary determinant of the degree to which others value and accept them. For example, being perceived as attractive, competent, likeable, and ethical generally results in higher relational value than being viewed as unattractive, incompetent, unlikeable, or immoral. Social anxiety can be regarded as an early warning system that deters people from behaving in ways that jeopardize their social image and relational value and leads them to take steps to bolster their image against possible damage.

Whereas social anxiety arises when people think they might make an undesired impression, embarrassment occurs when people perceive that they have already conveyed a negative impression of themselves (Miller, 1996). Embarrassment alerts people to threats to their social image and motivates remedial behaviors that try to repair the damage and restore their relational value through apologies, excuse-making, restitution, and pleas for forgiveness (Fraser, 2000; Gonzales, Pederson, Manning, & Wetter, 1990; Leary, Landel, & Patton, 1996; Ohtsubo & Yagi, 2015). Failure to engage in remedial behaviors after doing something embarrassing typically results in even more negative impressions and lower relational value.

People experience jealousy when they believe that the presence or intrusion of a third party is leading another person to value his or her relationship with them less than before (Buss, 2000). Although the prototypical case of jealousy involves threats to romantic and sexual relationships, jealousy can arise whenever people believe that a third party is lowering their relational value to another person. So, an employee may experience jealousy when the boss favors another employee, and children may be jealous of the attention that a parent devotes to a sibling. Jealousy is often accompanied by efforts to eliminate the influence of the third party by increasing one's own desirability to the target, diminishing the rivals' appeal by disparaging him or her to the target, or threatening one or both of them (Buss, 2000; Guerrero, Spitzberg, & Yoshimura, 2004).

People experience guilt and shame when they violate social standards in ways that might lower their relational value, damage their relationships, and result in rejection. Guilt and shame arise in similar circumstances but in response to slightly different relational concerns. People experience guilt when they think they have done something that might lead others to relationally devalue them, but they experience shame when they think that others' judgments of them as a person, particularly judgments of their character, may lead to relational devaluation and possible rejection (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). Anticipatory guilt and shame may also arise proactively to discourage people from doing things that, if later discovered by others, might lead to relational devaluation and rejection.

Although the bulk of the research shows that rejection leads to negative emotions, a few studies have shown evidence of affective numbing instead (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005; Gallegos & Gasper, 2018; Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002, 2003). Most notably, the future-alone paradigm—in which people are told that they are likely to spend their adult life without close relationships—often leads to affective numbness (Baumeister et al., 2005; Bernstein & Claypool, 2012; Twenge et al., 2002, 2003; see Blackhart, Nelson, Knowles, & Baumeister, 2010). However, the future-alone manipulation does not actually reject people or cause them to believe that they currently have low relational value and, thus, reveals little about emotional reactions to rejection per se. Participants' reactions to this manipulation may reflect concern, confusion, and consternation about an undesired future event, or a sense of hopelessness about their interpersonal future (Richman & Leary, 2009).

## 4.2 Self-esteem

A third common effect of perceiving that one has been devalued or rejected involves decreased state self-esteem. Life circumstances that involve rejection—such as romantic break-ups, unrequited love, being bullied, and exclusion from social groups—are associated with lower self-esteem (Martin, Richman, & Leary, 2018; Murray, Griffin, Rose, & Bellavia, 2003; Nishina & Juvonen, 2005). Likewise, participants who are rejected in experimental studies show lower state self-esteem than those who are accepted (Bernstein et al., 2013; Leary, Cottrell, & Phillips, 2001; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000; Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2004).

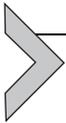
These changes in self-esteem, like the emotions that occur concurrently, may also be part of the monitoring process. Sociometer theory proposes that state self-esteem is a subjective marker of one's relational value to other people, an internal reflection of others' feelings about the person (Leary, 2006; Leary & Downs, 1995). Not only does state self-esteem reflect people's perceptions of their relational value, but increases and decreases in state self-esteem in response to perceived changes in relational value may calibrate people's interpersonal aspirations. When the sociometer detects low or high relational value, changes in state self-esteem may influence people's aspirations regarding the kinds of people with whom they are motivated to interact, thus improving their prospects of being valued and accepted (Kavanagh, Robins, & Ellis, 2010; Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001; Leary, 2020).

Although most research shows that rejection leads to lower state self-esteem than acceptance, a meta-analysis by Blackhart et al. (2010) suggested that, although acceptance raises self-esteem compared to neutral control groups, rejection does not reliably lower it. However, three considerations render this finding ambiguous. First, there is no way to know whether the subjective relational value or state self-esteem of participants in the control groups was in, fact, "neutral"—that is, neither low nor high (if, indeed, it even makes sense to construe self-esteem scores as having a neutral value). In addition, research shows that objectively neutral feedback is typically perceived as rejecting (Leary, Haupt, Strausser, & Chokel, 1998). Finally, using measures of both explicit and implicit self-esteem, Bernstein et al. (2013) provided evidence that rejection does lower self-esteem unless participants are motivated to manage their impressions on explicit measures of self-esteem. Additional work is needed to examine the conditions under which acceptance and rejection do and do not affect state self-esteem.

### 4.3 Sensitivity to rejection cues

In addition to its effects on attention, emotion, and self-esteem, rejection increases the sensitivity of the monitoring system, leading people to be even more sensitive to social cues. For example, rejection leads people to distinguish more successfully between real and fake smiles (Bernstein, Young, Brown, Sacco, & Claypool, 2008) and to use that information more effectively in deciding with whom to work (Bernstein, Sacco, Brown, Young, & Claypool, 2010). Similarly, rejection increases people's ability to distinguish

between happy and sad faces (Sacco, Wirth, Hugenberg, Chen, & Williams, 2011) and increases how quickly people can find smiling faces in a crowd (DeWall, Maner, & Rouby, 2009). Rejection also heightens the ability to distinguish truth from lies, particularly when the information is relevant to social affiliation (Eck, Schoel, & Greifeneder, 2016), and it makes people more sensitive to other people's tone of voice (Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). In addition, people who are rejected are better able to remember social information presented in the diary of another student (Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000). This increased attention to social information is often focused on people who are likely to be relationship partners such as in-group members (Van Bavel, Swencionis, O'Connor, & Cunningham, 2012) or outgroup members who are specifically presented as potential relationship partners (Sacco & Bernstein, 2015). So, although this monitoring system chronically keeps tabs on acceptance and rejection, it becomes even more attuned to cues relevant to relational value when it matters most.



## 5. Responses to threats to acceptance and belonging

Despite their best efforts to maintain relational value, everyone encounters situations in which they perceive their relational value is low and they feel rejected. A large body of research has examined reactions to rejection, ostracism, exclusion, and related concepts, to which we now turn.

Research on reactions to rejection has been plagued by ambiguity and inconsistency in terminology, conceptualization, and methodology that sometimes make it unclear whether studies purporting to study the same phenomenon actually do so (Bernstein & Claypool, 2012). Notably, researchers have used different terms for concepts that involve threats to acceptance or belonging, including social exclusion, rejection, ostracism, low relational value, and unfulfilled belonging. Each of these terms has a somewhat different connotation, and each has conceptual shortcomings. For example, people don't experience mere "exclusion" as rejection, people can feel deeply rejected even when no one objectively "rejected" them, and ostracism connotes a specific form of rejection that involves being ignored.

To avoid confusion, we will use the term "rejection" to refer to the state in which people experience inadequate acceptance or belonging because people invariably *feel* rejected in all of these phenomena. In addition, we find it useful to employ the concept of relational value to integrate findings across terms and approaches. As noted earlier, all concepts intended to denote a state of inadequate acceptance or belonging can be conceptualized in terms of low

perceived relational value. When people perceive that their relational value is acceptably high, they feel accepted or that they belong. But when they perceive their relational value is lower than desired—through exclusion, explicit rejection, ostracism, stigmatization, discrimination, devaluation, bullying, or whatever—they feel rejected (Leary, 2001; Richman & Leary, 2009). So, the concept of relational value provides a unifying connection among all of these concepts.

## 5.1 Methodological approaches

Research on rejection has taken correlational, experimental, and quasi-experimental approaches, each with the standard benefits and liabilities. Most experimental studies of reactions to inadequate acceptance or belonging has relied on one of four primary paradigms. First, some experiments have provided participants with explicit information indicating that they were accepted or rejected by one or more other people in the research setting, typically other participants or experimental accomplices posing as participants. For example, studies have been conducted in which participants believed that other people: voted them out of a laboratory group, chose them last for a team, did not want to work with them, listened to them less than to another participant as they talked about themselves, described them in ways that connote low acceptance, or did not wish to get to know them further after initially learning about or interacting with them (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2005; Bourgeois & Leary, 2001; Leary et al., 1995; Leary, Springer, et al., 1998; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001).

Second, the Cyberball paradigm has been an exceptionally popular way to lead participants to feel ostracized (Williams et al., 2000), both because it can be used in both laboratory and on-line studies, and because it provides a bare-bone, minimalist rejection experience, allowing for considerable experimental control. Participants are led to believe that they are playing a virtual ball-throwing game with two other participants on a computer. After the first few of rounds in which the virtual ball is thrown to the participant's avatar, the participant no longer has the virtual ball thrown to him or her as the other "players" begin throwing it only to one another.

Cyberball creates a strikingly minor rejection experience in which participants are excluded from a meaningless game that has no implications for them by complete strangers who don't know who they are or anything about them. Even so, Cyberball ostracism has strong emotional and behavioral effects even in variants of the paradigm that lowered the social threat

even further. For example, participants felt rejected and experienced negative emotions even when the other players who didn't throw the ball to them were members of the Ku Klux Klan (Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007) and when participants were forewarned that the ball wouldn't be thrown to them due to a computer problem (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003) or were offered financial gain if the ball was not thrown to them (Van Beest & Williams, 2006). In fact, participants were upset when they did not receive the ball even when told that having the ball thrown to them could be bad because the ball might "explode" on them (Van Beest, Williams, & Van Dijk, 2011). In the most minimalist version of the procedure, participants who were told they were being automatically excluded by a computer program—rather than by a person—still experienced a threat to belonging and lower mood (Zadro et al., 2004). These findings show that Cyberball effectively creates an experience of being ostracized and that it takes very little to make people feel rejected.

A third approach to inducing rejection is to expose participants to subtle, nonverbal indications that they might not be fully accepted or included. For example, people feel rejected when other interactants avert their gaze (Wirth, Sacco, Hugenberg, & Williams, 2010), they experience awkward pauses in the flow of conversation (Koudenburg, Postmes, & Gordijn, 2013), or they are "forgotten" by a research assistant (King & Geise, 2011). People also feel ostracized when others use shorter utterances when speaking to them than they do with others (Williams, Shore, & Grahe, 1998), when other people have "inside" information they do not have (Jones, Carter-Sowell, Kelly, & Williams, 2009; Iannone, Kelly, & Williams, 2018), or read a paragraph that uses acronyms with which they are unfamiliar (Hales, Williams, & Rector, 2017), each of which conveys that the participant is somehow peripheral to a group.

A fourth method used to induce a sense of rejection is the future-alone paradigm and its variants, mentioned earlier (Twenge et al., 2003). In this paradigm, participants receive feedback based on a personality test indicating that they will be unsuccessful in their relationships and live out their lives mostly alone, being told "you are the type who will end up alone later in life ... Relationships don't last, and, when you're past the age where people are constantly forming new relationships, you'll end up being alone more and more" (Twenge et al., 2003, p. 416). Importantly, the future-alone induction is not a manipulation of rejection or low relational value per se as participants are in no sense being currently rejected (much like telling people they will be very hungry in the future cannot be viewed as a

manipulation of hunger); in fact, the experimental induction explicitly notes that “you may have friends and relationships now....” Rather, the procedure creates a threat of future rejection and loneliness. Thus, we must be careful not to interpret the results of studies that used the future-alone paradigms as reflecting effects of exclusion or rejection per se. The future-alone manipulation provides insights into what happens when people receive the message that they may be facing a life with few close relationships or that they should give up hope of having their need for acceptance and belonging fulfilled, but its effects are often different from those of the other methods (Bernstein & Claypool, 2012).

## 5.2 Behavioral responses

Interpersonal rejection—in whatever form it takes—motivates behaviors to respond to the rejection. As Richman and Leary (2009) suggested, depending on the circumstances and the person’s construal of the situation, rejection may instigate three distinct motives that involve: a heightened desire for social connections; angry, antisocial urges to defend oneself or to hurt those who rejected the person; and social withdrawal arising from the desire to avoid further rejection or believing that no useful action can be taken.

**Prosocial, affiliative behavior.** The most common behavioral responses to social rejection involve attempts to enhance acceptance or belonging, either with respect to those who have rejected the person or to other people. Participants who are led to experience rejection want to make new friends and work with others on a task, behave in ways that lead them to be seen as attractive interaction partners (by being helpful and cooperative, for example), rate other people more positively, and reward those who might be future interaction partners (e.g., Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007; Ouwerkerk, Kerr, Gallucci, & Van Lange, 2005; Shelton, Richeson, & Salvatore, 2004; Williams et al., 2000). Other attempts are more subtle, such as exerting more effort on a collective task, presumably to increase their value to a group (Williams & Sommer, 1997) and mimicking others’ mannerisms (because behavioral mimicry increases attraction; Lakin, Chartrand, & Arkin, 2008). Rejection also leads people to acquiesce to other people’s requests (Carter-Sowell, Chen, & Williams, 2008).

People who feel rejected may also try to increase acceptance by affiliating with others with whom they may not have previously considered interacting. For example, rejection increases interest in joining activist groups and even gangs (Hales & Williams, 2018) and leads women to be more

open to short term mating strategies (Sacco, Young, Brown, Bernstein, & Hugenberg, 2012).

Interacting with strangers may also decrease the negative effects of rejection. Research on communication with strangers offers an intriguing paradox—people often think that interacting with strangers will lead to negative affect, but, in reality, interactions with strangers often produce positive feelings. So, contrary to their expectations, people enjoy commuting more when they connect with a stranger than when they sit in solitude (Epley & Schroeder, 2019) or when they talk with a shuttle driver (Gunaydin, Oztekin, Karabulut, & Salman-Engin, 2020). Along the same lines, people enjoy chatting with others in a waiting room more than they expect (Epley & Schroeder, 2014), and students who interact with classmates experience greater feelings of belonging and happiness than they expect. Furthermore, although people assume that they will feel much better after interacting with a romantic partner than with a stranger, they tend to feel just as good after interacting with strangers as their partner (Dunn, Biesanz, Human, & Finn, 2007).

For our purposes, the important point is that the positive affect that people experience from talking with strangers seems to come from satisfying the motivation to belong. For example, people who had a social interaction with a barista who smiled, made eye contact, and conversed briefly reported more positive affect than those who did not, and that difference was mediated by feelings of belonging (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). Similarly, students reported greater feelings of belonging and happiness after classes in which they interacted with more classmates than after they did not (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2013). Even visual acknowledgment from a stranger leads to a feeling of social connection (Wesselmann, Cardoso, Slater, & Williams, 2012). Clearly, even relatively superficial encounters with people we don't know can increase the degree to which we feel like we are accepted and belong, possibly because they convey that others value having a connection with us, however briefly.

Some people also turn to animals to alleviate the negative feelings of rejection. Relationships with pets reduce loneliness, give emotional support, and increase well-being (Collis & McNicholas, 1998; Krause-Parello, 2008; Serpell, 2003), and merely thinking about one's pet can provide as much of a psychological buffer to the pain of rejection as thinking about a human friend (McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton, & Martin, 2011). Loneliness also predicts rating one's pet higher on anthropomorphic traits (Epley, Schroeder, & Waytz, 2013; McConnell et al., 2011). Interestingly, people can get some of the same health benefits from animals as they do from human

relationships (Staats, Pierfelice, Kim, & Crandell, 1999). Even unfamiliar animals can have a similar effect: participants who were ostracized in a Cyberball game reported less distress if they rated their feelings in the presence of a dog (Aydin et al., 2012).

**Antisocial, angry behavior.** A good deal of research supports a strong link between social rejection and anger or aggression (Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivan, 2006; Ren, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2017). Experimental evidence shows that rejection can lead to aggressive behavior both toward the perpetrator of the rejection as well as other uninvolved people, and many instances of real-life aggression seem to arise from rejection, as in many cases of domestic violence and school shootings (Leary et al., 2006).

The aggression may or may not be instrumental. It can result from general frustration and anger, a desire for revenge, or from the belief that responding aggressively will make the rejected person feel better, which it sometimes does (Chester & DeWall, 2017). Antisocial reactions to rejection are common in the future-alone research and may reflect how people respond when they believe that they have no chance of ever connecting to others (Richman & Leary, 2009; Twenge et al., 2001).

**Social withdrawal.** Rejection can also result in behaviors that lower social contact with other people, including withdrawal. People who are rejected sometimes actively avoid interacting with the person who rejected them. As Vangelisti (2001) noted, a central feature of feeling hurt is a sense of vulnerability. People who have been rejected understandably do not wish to be hurt further, which leads them to distance socially from the person who rejected them and sometimes from others as well (Vangelisti et al., 2005).

Research participants who interacted with a person who had rejected them had a sense of dread and a lowered desire to interact, and they moved further away from the person and oriented their bodies away from him or her (Waldrip & Jensen-Campbell, 2007). Furthermore, despite wanting social connections, people who feel lonely—which often includes a sense of low relational value—are less responsive to others during discussions (Anderson & Martin, 1995). Rejection also leads people to perceive those who excluded them as less human, which decreases the likelihood of positive social interactions (Bastian & Haslam, 2010).

People who are excluded sometimes also avoid interacting with people who were not the ones who excluded them. This generalized social withdrawal is probably most likely when interacting with people whose acceptance is not assured (Vangelisti et al., 2005). People who are rejected may defensively downplay the degree to which they care about social acceptance,

which might reduce the sting of rejection but also lead them to avoid opportunities for social interaction for fear of being hurt (Bourgeois & Leary, 2001). Excluded people are also more dishonest, which is not a successful relational strategy (Poon, Chen, & DeWall, 2013). Finally, rejection led participants to be less likely to help another person and less likely to cooperate in a mixed motive game (Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007).

Richman and Leary (2009) offered a model predicting whether people who have been rejected are likely to behave prosocially, to respond antisocially, or to withdraw based on patterns of six contruals involving: the fairness of the rejection, expectations of relationship repair, pervasiveness or chronicity of the rejection, the value of the damaged relationship, perceived costs of the rejection, and the possibility of relational alternatives. For example, if people believe new relationships are possible, think the old relationships can be repaired, and/or care a great deal about the connections being fixed (i.e., see a high cost of rejection or a high value in the relationships), they are more likely to engage in affiliative, prosocial behaviors. But if people see no hope of reconnection and blame this specifically on the person who rejected them, they are more likely to behave antisocially toward the person. In contrast, if they perceive the rejection as likely to be chronic or pervasive and conclude that they are generally disliked, unloved, or, worse, unlovable, then they may withdraw and avoid social connection.

### 5.3 Symbolic efforts to increase feelings of acceptance and belonging

As we have described, people who feel inadequately accepted often behave in ways that appear designed to increase their relational value, acceptance, and belonging. In addition, they sometimes do things that may make them *feel* more valued and accepted without actually affecting the nature of their interactions or relationships with other people.

**Religion.** People sometimes turn to religion to deal with rejection just as they turn to religion to cope with other sources of distress. But, they may also use their relationship with God to compensate for inadequate connections with people. For example, people who are single and without a committed relationship tend to be more religious and more likely to report that they have a personal relationship with God (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2000). Furthermore, people who worry about being rejected—those with insecure and anxious attachment styles—tend to have stronger religious beliefs than those who are securely attached (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990).

And, participants who were led to feel lonely in an experimental study increased the degree to which they believed in a variety of supernatural agents, including God (Aydin, Fischer, & Frey, 2010; Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2008, Exp. 2; Gebauer & Maio, 2012).

**Anthropomorphism.** Loneliness and isolation have long been offered as explanations for classic examples of anthropomorphism—such as seeing mermaids in the ocean and naming geological features by their humanlike features (e.g., Loukatos, 1976). But research suggests that people who are lonely, either because they are chronically lonely or are induced to feel lonely, are also more likely to anthropomorphize animals than less lonely people are (Epley et al., 2008). Loneliness also predicted the degree to which participants anthropomorphized objects seen in the Hubble telescope (Waytz, Cacioppo, & Epley, 2010). Conversely, reminding people of a close supportive relationship reduces anthropomorphism (Bartz, Tchalova, & Fenerci, 2016). Along the same lines, people undergoing extreme isolation often hold conversations with imagined people, animals, or religious deities (Kirkpatrick, Shillito, & Kellas, 1999).

**Engaging with narratives.** Whether we are deeply engrossed in a book, watching episode after episode of a show where we learn about characters' lives, or watching a movie in a dark theater where all we can see and hear is on the screen, narratives provide a potent means of tricking the brain into thinking we are connecting with other people (Gabriel, Valenti, & Young, 2016). Research suggests that experiencing narratives leads people to psychologically become a part of the collective described within the narrative (Gabriel & Young, 2011). So, although Harry Potter and Hermione Granger don't become our friends when one reads a Harry Potter book, readers are pulled into their world and feel, probably unconsciously, that they are a part of the Hogwarts group. Not only do people experiencing a narrative feel as if they are in its social world, but the more they feel like they are part of the narrative's world, the higher their life satisfaction and positive mood, two primary outcomes of belonging (Gabriel & Young, 2011). Perhaps that is why thinking about favorite television programs protects against the negative effects of rejection more than thinking about other TV shows (Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009).

**Reminders of close others.** The motivation to be accepted and belong can draw people to objects or situations that remind them of loved ones, thereby making them feel more socially connected. Gardner, Pickett, and Knowles (2005) referred to using reminders of one's close relationships as "social snacking." Just as people snack when they are hungry but can't have

a full meal at the moment, they socially snack on reminders of actual relationships such as photographs and letters, their newsfeed, or pictures of people they know posted on social media (Gardner et al., 2005; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012).

These snacks are only as useful as the relationships they remind us of; if we have insecure relationships with the people who are triggered by the reminders, then the reminders will not satisfy our need for acceptance and belonging. However, people who were not picked for a group task felt better if they were able to write about their best friend (Twenge et al., 2007). People can also boost feelings of acceptance and connection after rejection by assuming that the people they know are closer to them (Pitts, Wilson, & Hugenberg, 2014). However, this effect occurs only for accepting others and neutral others but not the perpetrators of rejection (Knowles, Green, & Weidel, 2014).

People can also be reminded of close others through food. Research shows that eating comfort foods can buffer people against the negative effects of rejection, but only if they have secure bonds with the caregivers who used to prepare and feed them those foods (Troisi & Gabriel, 2011). Similarly, feeling rejected increases liking of comfort foods for people who are securely attached (Troisi, Gabriel, Derrick, & Geisler, 2015). Finally, a daily diary study examining people's consumption of comfort food showed that participants were more likely to eat comfort foods following experiences of rejection (Troisi et al., 2015).

**Parasocial relationships.** The human neural architecture seems to be ill-evolved to distinguish between the “real” people we experience in person from the “fake” people we see on television and in movies (Kanazawa, 2002; Reeves & Nass, 1996). In support of this notion, parasocial relationships—one-sided social connections that people imagine having with celebrities—often elicit cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses that are similar to those of real relationships (Gardner & Knowles, 2008; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005, 2006). People demonstrate high levels of commitment to their parasocial relationships (Branch, Wilson, & Agnew, 2013; Eyal & Dailey, 2012) and engage in activities (on-line, for example) that closely resemble relationship maintenance strategies (Sanderson, 2009). Notably, parasocial “break-ups”—as when a favorite television show is canceled, a musical group disbands, or a local newscaster moves to a different city—may lead to emotional distress (Cohen, 2003, 2004; Eyal & Cohen, 2006; Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011). Because parasocial relationships present little threat of rejection, people who worry about being rejected can garner

some of the same benefits from parasocial bonds that people normally get from actual relationships (Derrick, Gabriel, & Tippin, 2008).

In summary, people use many tactics to feel connected to others and to counteract the negative effects of rejection. This suggests that the motivation to belong is flexible—it can be satisfied, at least temporarily, in many ways. Although there is no way to dispute the importance of close relationships to a sense of acceptance and belonging, research is uncovering other ways in which people promote feelings of social connection.



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## 6. Conclusion

The motive to be accepted and belong manifests across broad domains of human cognition, behavior, and emotion. People are chronically preoccupied with the state of their social connections, try to behave in ways that lead others to value and accept them, experience emotions as they perceive changes to their relational value, and respond behaviorally—whether prosocially, antisocially, or asocially—when they perceive their relational value to be low or declining. Concerns with acceptance and belonging permeate human life.

We have touched upon many of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral implications of the need to belong, but other important psychological and social phenomena may also be buttressed by the desire for acceptance and belonging and deserve additional attention. For example, more than 80% of the world's adult population identifies with a religious group, and many aspects of religious belief and practice may emerge as much from people's desire for social connection as from religious conviction. Similarly, prejudice is as much an interpersonal phenomenon as a personal attitude. People's decisions about who to regard as ingroup members versus outsiders depend heavily on patterns of acceptance and belonging, and the desire for acceptance by certain people or groups can generate and maintain specific prejudicial attitudes. Likewise, many of people's hobbies and leisure activities are enacted partly for the social connections that develop when participating in these activities with like-minded enthusiasts, whether they are golfers, hunters, runners, beer drinkers, boaters, bridge players, bird-watchers, or whoever.

The role of the need to belong on economic phenomena also deserves additional attention. For example, many industries are fundamentally focused on helping people increase their relational value and fulfill their need to belong. The fashion industry, the grooming and cosmetic industry, the weight loss industry, and aspects of the personal fitness industry are oriented

toward helping people make socially desirable impressions that increase their relational value. And, of course, people's purchasing choices of products as diverse as clothing, furniture, and cars are partly affected by concerns with what other people will think.

Although social and motivational psychologists are certainly more attuned to the power of the need to belong than they were 25 years ago, we sense that many still underestimate the powerful and expansive role that it plays in human affairs. In our view, the striving for acceptance and belonging should not be regarded as just another motive that stands alongside a panoply of other needs, drives, motives, urges, and goals that instigate and guide human behavior. Rather, it is a foundational motive that helps to explain much of what people think, feel, and do. There are few social situations in which people are indifferent to whether they are accepted versus rejected. The pursuit of acceptance and belonging is relentless and important.

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