

The Need for Social Embeddedness: Human Belonging Goes Beyond Dyadic Bonds

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Abstract

We propose that much of modern human behavior can be understood as the outcome of a primitive and implicit desire for social embeddedness (i.e., a desire to belong to a larger, societal-level collective). Research from our lab suggests that people watch television, follow celebrities, and go to concerts and sporting events, at least in part, to fill this need. Connections to other research and implications for understanding human behavior are discussed.

Keywords

belongingness, social surrogates, need for social embeddedness, need to belong

In their seminal article, Baumeister and Leary (1995) persuasively argued for a basic and fundamental need to belong, which they defined as a need to form and maintain strong, stable interpersonal relationships. The careful evidence Baumeister and Leary reviewed and summarized has been cited more than 30,000 times and has become a touchstone in the field of psychology.

However, a careful reading of the Baumeister and Leary article, and the decades of work that followed it, shows an almost exclusive focus on dyadic bonds—primarily romantic bonds (for a discussion, see Hirsch & Clark, 2019). Evidence from research from the last 2 decades of work in our laboratory—as well as related work from other researchers—suggests that there is a basic need for social connection that is much broader than the need to belong within dyadic relationships: a need for social embeddedness. By social embeddedness, we mean a feeling of belonging to a larger, societal-level collective. Our research suggests that this need for social embeddedness often operates at an implicit level (i.e., without conscious awareness), can be filled in many ways, and is essential for well-being.

Although it is easy to understand why dyadic bonds (in particular romantic ones) are necessary for the survival of the species, there are also reasons to believe that a sense of social embeddedness is essential for survival. Evolutionary biologists argue that humans likely evolved during a time when they were only able to survive if they were a part of a larger collective (Caporael & Brewer, 1995; Wilson, 1978). Our

evolutionary ancestors were, frankly, physically pathetic compared with other apex predators: Our claws are flimsy nails that break at the simplest tasks; our teeth can break if we bite into something too hard or do not floss regularly; and although our muscles may be good for basic gym activities, they could never save us from any other apex predator. Instead, we survived by living together. Living together allowed humans to share resources, help one another with childcare, hunt together, and protect one another from predators. Our evolutionary history suggests that we evolved for social living—for example, we developed the language necessary for cooperation. We also evolved a primitive system that rewards us when we feel a broad sense of connection and makes us feel terrible when we lose that connection (Caporael & Brewer, 1995; Wilson, 1978). Just as with the needs for food and physical comfort, the primitive system that drives embeddedness seeks a state of homeostasis (i.e., a feeling that one is embedded in society; Maslow, 1943). When we feel a lack of embeddedness, we are driven to do what we can to fill it. This primitive system likely utilizes the same affective system that serves other basic needs; when we feel embedded in a larger social framework, we feel good. When we do not, we feel bad (Frijda, 1988). Back in the day, this system kept our ancestors

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Fig. 1. Differences between the need for social embeddedness and the need to belong.

alive; today it pushes us to seek a feeling of social embeddedness.

We propose that there are two aspects of this need for social embeddedness that lead to unique and novel predictions. First, because the need for social embeddedness is so broad, it stands to reason that it can be filled by any activity that makes a person feel as if they are embedded in their larger social context (Paravati et al., 2021). Second, because of its primitive nature, we suggest that the need for social embeddedness often functions at an implicit level (Gabriel et al., 2010). In other words, people are drawn to activities that give them a sense of social embeddedness without realizing why.

On the basis of these two aspects, we propose when people are drawn to watching television or a movie, reading up on a favorite celebrity, or attending a concert, they may think that they are just filling hedonic needs (and thus feel guilty) when they are really doing the important work of making themselves feel as if they are a part of the social fabric of the world around them—they are feeling socially embedded (see Fig. 1).

Methods of Feeling Social Embeddedness

We argue that the need for social embeddedness evolved during a time when it was not necessary (or even possible) to distinguish between a feeling of embeddedness from actual other people or from the facsimiles that come from modern media. We did not evolve to distinguish between the people who are

actually around us and the people who we follow on social media. Indeed, research suggests that the human brain reacts similarly to both kinds of people (e.g., Kanazawa, 2002; Reeves & Nass, 1996). This suggests that humans had a wide variety of means to feel socially embedded. It also suggests why some seemingly non-social activities are so rewarding. Our research suggests that people can fill their need to be socially embedded through parasocial bonds, narratives, and immersion in crowds (Gabriel et al., 2016).

Through parasocial bonds

The popular media often suggests that bonds with celebrities are unhealthy. However, established psychological theory suggests that parasocial bonds—social bonds to noninteracting targets such as celebrities and YouTubers—might help sustain social connections rather than detract from them (e.g., Schiappa et al., 2005). For example, our work has found that, 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 et al., 2008) and that feeling connected to celebrities can make people feel less lonely (Gabriel, Read, et al., 2017).

Within the proposed framework, we argue that the connection to parasocial relationship partners is not filling dyadic needs but is instead filling a need for social embeddedness. First, let's acknowledge that

people know very well that celebrities are not actually their friends. Your favorite movie star will not help you move, and your beloved musician will not bring you chicken soup when you are sick. Relying on parasocial bonds as relational bonds would suggest some kind of pathology because people do not know them in person. But that is not the real benefit of those bonds. Instead, we suggest that parasocial bonds provide a sense of social embeddedness. Yes, we feel connected to the celebrity, but that also brings a connection to the entire world associated with the celebrity—all the other people who value them and the community that surrounds them. In support of the link between parasocial bonds and social embeddedness, findings from a large cross-sectional sample and an integrative analysis of four daily studies involving more than 2,700 participants found that engaging with social surrogates protected people against social rejection by filling a general (and not relationship-specific) feeling of social connection (Murray et al., 2023). Thus, we propose that parasocial bonds fill the need for social embeddedness.

Through narratives

Research from our lab suggests that engaging with narratives (e.g., TV shows, movies, books) can fill the need for social embeddedness. We call this the social surrogacy hypothesis—that thinking about valued narratives leads to feelings of belonging and protects against the negative consequences of rejection, social isolation, and loneliness (Derrick et al., 2008). We found that people reported turning to favored television programs when feeling lonely and feeling less lonely when viewing those programs (Derrick et al., 2008), consistent with our hypothesis. In a related laboratory experiment, we found that when belongingness needs were aroused by having people write about times when they were rejected, writing about their favorite television show (compared with writing about whatever was on) eliminated the negative psychological consequences of rejection (see Fig. 2).

What does this have to do with social embeddedness? Narratives cannot fill a need for actual relationships. As previously mentioned, all healthy people know that the characters in shows are not really their friends or candidates for romantic partners. So how do they fill social needs? We argue that this happens because narratives increase a feeling of social embeddedness—narratives make us feel like we are connected to the groups described in the narrative. For example, watching old episodes of *The Office* does not make us believe that Pam and Jim are really our friends (if only!); instead, it provides the psychological experience of being a part of the collective of employees of Dunder

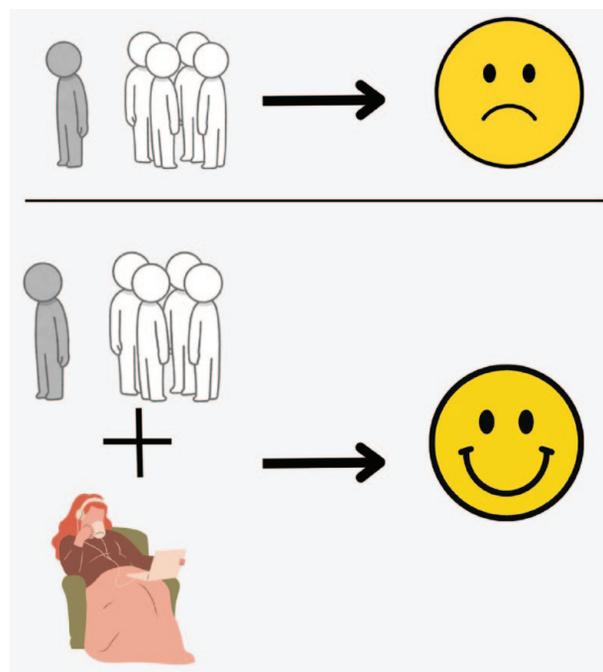


Fig. 2. Effects of favorite TV shows on wellbeing. Participants reminded of rejection experienced lower mood, felt more rejected, and had lower self-esteem (top). When rejected participants were allowed to think of their favorite TV shows, those effects went away (bottom).

Mifflin. In other words, narratives fill our need for social embeddedness, not our need to belong. To test that, we proposed and examined the narrative collective-assimilation hypothesis—that experiencing narratives leads one to psychologically become a part of the broad collective described within the narrative (Gabriel & Young, 2011). In one study, we had participants read passages from either the Harry Potter or Twilight books. After participants finished reading, they completed an identity implicit-association test (IAT) that assessed the degree to which they identified with the group “wizards” and the group “vampires.” Specifically, it tested how much people linked words such as “I” and “me” to words related to either vampires (e.g., “blood”) or wizards (e.g., “wand”). We also assessed well-being and mood. As predicted, participants who read the Harry Potter books psychologically became wizards, whereas those who read the Twilight books psychologically became vampires. This effect was strongest for people who were high in collective self-construal (i.e., people whose groups are important to them), but it was also robust in those who claimed to not care about groups. The degree to which the participants assimilated the social world, as reflected in their IAT scores, predicted increased life satisfaction and mood, two primary outcomes of belonging. In summary, our research suggests that engaging with narratives makes people feel

connected to others because it gives them a broad sense of social connection to the collectives described in the narratives.

Through immersion in crowds

Although crowds can feel lonely or overwhelming, they can also induce a sense of exuberance and connection, in particular when the crowd is focused on a unifying activity (Gabriel, Valenti, et al., 2017). On the basis of Durkheim's writings, we call this experience *collective effervescence*. Collective effervescence describes the feeling of social connection and sensation of sacredness that individuals sometimes experience when they are a part of a crowd (Gabriel, Valenti, et al., 2017). Our research suggests that all that is needed to feel collective effervescence is immersion in a music concert, sporting match, or other large group event (Gabriel et al., 2020). These experiences are important: Experiencing collective effervescence is linked to life satisfaction, having more meaning in one's life, and decreased anxiety and depression (Gabriel, Valenti, et al., 2017). These effects are found even when we control for other kinds of social connections, such as friendships and families and romantic partners. In other words, when we run regression analyses in which we first account for other relationships and group memberships and only finally for collective effervescence, we still find that collective effervescence leads to well-being and increased connection. But how? Being in a crowd of strangers does not increase your close relationships. It does not increase the number of groups that play a meaningful role in your life. Instead, we argue that it increases social embeddedness. It makes people feel as if they are a meaningful part of something bigger than themselves (Gabriel & Paravati, 2021). Standing in a crowd of people who are all experiencing the same thing as we are gives us a sense that we are embedded in a larger society. And research from our laboratory strongly suggests that this contributes to well-being (e.g., Gabriel et al., 2020).

Implications and extensions

Our central proposition—that there is a primitive system that pushes us toward a sense of social embeddedness—is also supported by work from other labs. Other researchers have shown that fleeting interactions with strangers makes people feel connected, happy, and well. For example, students instructed to talk to people who sit near them in class or with a cashier at a coffee shop showed increases in happiness (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2013), and eye contact with a stranger decreases feelings of disconnection (Wesselmann et al., 2012).

Furthermore, people seem unaware of these effects. For example, people vastly underestimate the degree to which small acts of kindness from strangers (e.g., being given a cup of hot chocolate or a compliment) affects the well-being of the receiver (Amit & Epley, 2023; Boothby & Bohns, 2021). Finally, people predict that talking to strangers will make an experience less positive when really it makes it more positive (Epley & Schroeder, 2014). Why do people feel good when they talk to strangers or have a conversation with an acquaintance? We propose that it is because they are filling their need for social embeddedness. A stranger is, by definition, not your friend. They are, however, fellow members of society. When you connect to strangers you feel more socially embedded in society. Why do people not realize that they will feel good when they do these things? Because this need operates at a mostly implicit level.

This need to feel socially embedded may also be part of the reason behind the seemingly illogically strong reactions people have to ostracism. A great deal of research suggests that being ignored in an electronic game of catch by strangers is highly upsetting (Williams, 2007). This has been demonstrated even when the other players were members of the Ku Klux Klan (Gonsalkorale & Williams, 2007), when participants were forewarned that a ball would not be thrown to them because of a computer problem (Eisenberger et al., 2003), and when people were offered financial gain if the ball was not thrown to them (Van Beest & Williams, 2006). In fact, 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). When looked at from the perspective of the need to belong to close relationships, this doesn't make much sense. In each of these examples, the entities doing the rejection aren't your friends or even candidates for friendships. So why does this hurt so much? We argue that it is because humans have a strong need to feel embedded in a larger society and these rejections from strangers threaten that need, not the need to belong. The people doing the ostracizing are not friends, but they are fellow members of society.

This perspective also explains why a seemingly ultra-social species tends to spend its time on seemingly non-social activities. On average, only 13% of adults' leisure time is devoted to socializing (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006). The remaining time is primarily spent watching television and movies (56%), reading books (7%), and being on the Internet (9%). Even some activities that are done in the presence of others, such as going to sporting events, concerts, and movies, are done with very little to no actual social interaction.

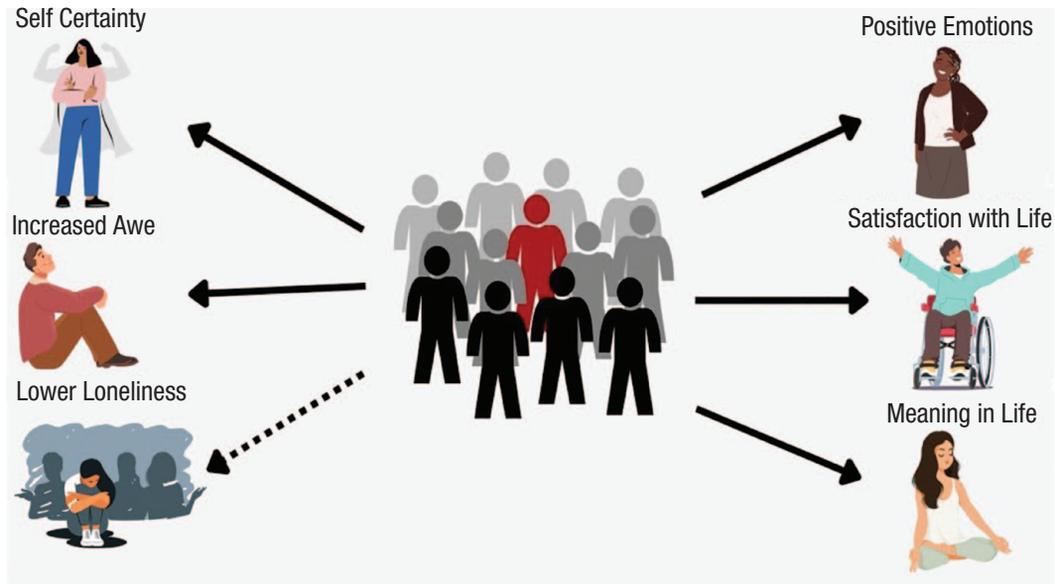


Fig. 3. Some of the positive effects of a feeling of social embeddedness.

How can we reconcile a view of humans as a fundamentally social species with the knowledge that humans themselves spend most of their free time engaged in solitary activities? Because these activities are all in service of the drive to feel socially embedded.

We argue that the primitive evolutionary system that drives the need for social embeddedness leads people to feel bad when it is thwarted and good when it is met. However, hedonic benefits are not the only ones that arise from filling this need. Our research suggests that feelings of social embeddedness lead to increases in satisfaction with life (e.g., Gabriel & Young, 2011), meaning in life (Gabriel et al., 2020), feelings of self-certainty (Paravati et al., 2021), increased awe (Gabriel et al., 2020), and lower loneliness (Derrick et al., 2009), just to name a few (see Fig. 3). Although we have not studied them, there are also likely many pragmatic benefits to being embedded in a social network such as increased professional connections and opportunities for new experiences.

The research we describe here only begins to explore the various ways that these and other behaviors may fill the need for social embeddedness. For example, we describe how engaging with narratives fills the need for embeddedness by making people feel like a member of the collective described within the narrative. However, we have also found that couples use these shared narratives to increase their connection to one another via sharing a social collective (Gomillion et al., 2017). In addition, it is also possible (and likely) that people also feel connected to the collective of other people who are engaged with, and enjoying, that

narrative (i.e., the fandom). Finally, we describe how the need for social embeddedness may be behind why we talk to strangers, but it may also play a role in why research suggests that we are very likely to help strangers (e.g., Philpot et al., 2020).

We should note that a wide and desperate variety of explanations exist for all the phenomena that we describe in this article. For example, researchers have argued that connections to celebrities fill relational needs (Horton & Wohl, 1956) and that rejection from strangers hurts because it signals that we may be rejected from more important relationship partners (Sjåstad et al., 2021). What we offer here is a parsimonious explanation for all these disparate findings that relies on just one motivation: that for social embeddedness. Of course, most human behaviors are complex and driven by multiple factors. Thus, acceptance of the need for social embeddedness as a driving force behind these behaviors does not mean that all other interpretations of these behaviors are inaccurate.

In sum, we argue that humans have a need for social embeddedness that is separate from the need for close relationships (i.e., the traditional conceptualizations of the need to belong). These two needs independently predict well-being (Paravati et al., 2021). In other words, people are happiest when their needs to belong and to be socially embedded are both met (Paravati et al., 2021). Our work has examined how seemingly nonsocial behaviors can be understood as outcomes of that need. Why does rejection hurt, even when we have no desire to feel connected to someone? Because it threatens our sense of embeddedness in a larger collective.

Why is seeing a concert in person worth the inconvenience and steep price when the quality of the sound can be just as good when you listen to the music at home? Because large collective activities make us feel embedded in a larger collective. Why do we spend the majority of our free time watching narratives on screens? Because it makes us feel embedded in a larger society. People waste a lot of time feeling guilty for all of these things, and we are firmly arguing that they should not. These behaviors are not the result of hedonism, laziness, or oversensitivity. They are the results of being a person who cares about connections and does what they need to feel those connections. They are the result of being human.

Recommended Reading

- Gabriel, S., Naidu, E., Paravati, E., Morrison, C. D., & Gainey, K. (2020). (See References). Shows how important interactions with strangers are for well-being and that thinking about valued narratives leads to feelings of belonging and protects against the negative consequences of rejection, social isolation, and loneliness.
- Gabriel, S., Valenti, J., & Young, A. F. (2016). (See References). Reviews evidence that people's social needs operate outside of conscious awareness and are responsible for a wide variety of behaviors.
- Gabriel, S. & Young, A. F. (2011). (See References). Provides evidence that engaging with narratives (e.g., reading a book) leads us to psychologically become members of the collectives described within.

Transparency

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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