

## Chapter 2

# The Need to Belong

**Abstract** The literature clearly indicates that having a sense of belonging is good for people. The most compelling of this research demonstrates marked benefits both during school years and throughout life. Belonging has been related to higher levels of well-being and life satisfaction and less distress and mental illness; healthier behaviours, and better physical health, social relationships, and educational and occupational outcomes. In this chapter, we define belonging and review predominant theories from psychology and sociology that are relevant to a sense of belonging. We consider the psychological and physical health benefits. And from a developmental lens, we consider why belonging is particularly important for adolescent development.

**Keywords** Belonging • School belonging • Adolescence • Wellbeing

Mike did not fit anywhere. The abandoned son of a heroin addict, he was in and out of foster homes from an early age. As he spent time in various homes, he felt envious of children he saw who had a stable family and a place to call home. As he entered school, other kids made fun of him. He dressed the wrong way, spoke inarticulately, and could not break through the various cliques. He increasingly skipped class to avoid the judging gazes and the harsh taunts of classmates. He started smoking and drinking as a young teenager as a way to cope with the sense of loneliness that consumed him. He dropped out of school by the age of 13 and took to the streets.

That's when he ran into the local gang. The leader saw a look of desperation in the young boy's eyes, and invited him in. Mike found a group of haphazard youth with similar stories to that of his own. After proving himself in a hazing ritual, he became a core part of the gang, running amuck on the streets of the city. For the first time in his life, he belonged.



**Fig. 2.1** Words indicating a sense of belonging

## **2.1 What Is Belonging?**

Belonging matters. We will get into the research later in this chapter, but as a preview, considerable research shows that having a general sense of belonging is vital to psychological and physical health—for years into the future (Daley & Buchanan, 1999; Hagerty, Williams, & Oe, 2002; Hale, Hannum, & Espelage, 2005; Poulton, Caspi, & Milne, 2002; Wadsworth et al., 2001).

A sense of belonging has been studied and written about since the 1950s. Through the years, researchers have come up with various definitions of what belonging is, even coming up with various terms to describe the same general idea (see Fig. 2.1).

A common theme across various definitions of belonging is a need to connect with other people. For example, Rogers (1951) described belonging as a need to be regarded in a positive way by others. McClelland (1987) suggested that at a core level, we are motivated to affiliate with others. Vallerand (1997) discussed an innate desire to relate with others. Self-determination theory includes relatedness as a basic need that we all have (Deci & Ryan, 2001) and Friedman (2007) described a sense of belonging as the development of the self and identity building.

A sense of belonging is not dependent on participation with, or proximity to, others. Rather, it relies on perceptions about the quality of social interactions. Therefore, belonging reflects one's perception of his or her involvement in a social system or environment (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992). A general sense of belonging fulfils an individual's innate psychological drive to belong to groups, take part in meaningful social interactions and is so fundamental that it can be as "compelling as the need for food" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 498).

**Table 2.1** Theories relevant to belonging

Theory	Key elements	Type
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1968, 1971)	An individual has four basic needs: physiological, safety, belonging and esteem. Belonging needs include those concerned with one's social spheres such as close friends and family	Motivational
Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2001)	Behaviour is believed to stem from intrinsic motivation (cognition and thoughts, e.g., goals), extrinsic motivation (behaviour, e.g., performance and motivation) and amotivation (the absence of motivation). Psychological relatedness (or belonging) is a fundamental intrinsic need involved in self-determination	Motivational
Glasser's Choice Theory (1986)	Five basic needs that propel motivation: belongingness, power, freedom, fun and survival. The first four needs are deemed to be psychological needs, while the last one (survival) is a biological need	Motivational
Belongingness Hypothesis (Baumeister & Leary, 1995)	The need to belong is a fundamental human motivator; and thus, individuals are innately determined to find belongingness and maintain it	Motivational
Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969)	Infant attachment with his or her primary caregiver influences development and improves survival. Furthermore, the development of different types of attachment impacts the individual's relationships later in life (including the relationships formed at school)	Relational
Epstein's Framework of Parental Involvement (1992)	Parents and communities are important for fostering caring school environments. School–family partnerships enhance the student's ability to achieve in school. Parental involvement improves school climate	Relational
Putnam's Social Capital Theory (2000)	Social capital represents the networks of relationships between people. Family systems, school settings, communities and societies are common settings in which social capital is manifested	Relational

(continued)

**Table 2.1** (continued)

Theory	Key elements	Type
Fiske's Theory of Social Motives (2004)	Belonging is one of the five core motives alongside understanding, controlling, enhancing self and trusting	Relational
Belongingness and Boundary Constructs in a Community (Cohen, 1982, 1985)	Communities play a significant role in creating belongingness among its members	Sociological
Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (1994)	A child's development is influenced by a combination of factors ranging from micro (e.g., biological, personality, individual aspects of the individual) to macro (e.g., culture, environment,) aspects, which intersect and influence one another throughout development. The child is a relational being within a complex inter-related web of inner and outer influences	Sociological/ecological

## 2.2 Theoretical Underpinnings

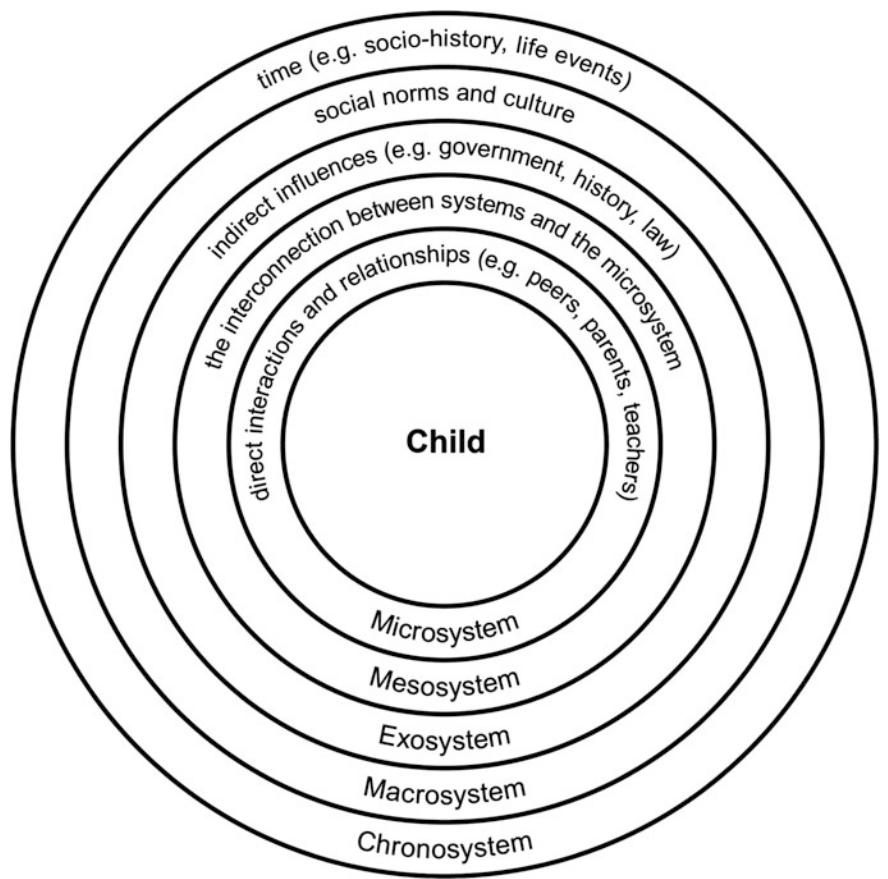
Various theories include the concept of belonging. Table 2.1 summarises some of these theories, noting what the theory is and the main elements of the theory.

While several of the theories that describe belonging are concerned primarily with the individual and his or her pursuit towards fulfilling the need to belong, Bronfenbrenner's (1994) bioecological framework explicitly acknowledges that people are innately intertwined within complex systems and group processes. According to this theory, a child's development is largely influenced by his or her environment, and in particular, their interaction with the layers of systems that this environment entails. Bronfenbrenner's framework defines five layers of the environment that influence and interact with a child's development (Fig. 2.2). The individual layer represents the unique characteristics of the child (e.g., sex, age, health); the microsystem represents the structures in which the child has the closest contact, like family and school; the mesosystem connects the child's microsystem to other systems within the broader environment; the exosystem represents the broader social system (e.g., neighbours and the workplace of parents); and the macrosystem represents culture, law and customs. Each system is interconnected and dynamically influences one another over time.

2.3 The Benefits of Belonging

A lot of things contribute to how healthy you are and how well you feel. We have basic needs, and when these are not met, it impacts how we function and feel. We need clean water to drink, healthy food to eat and a safe place to live. But once these needs are met, a sense of belonging can be just as important as eating and breathing.

A good deal of research demonstrates that there are psychological benefits to belonging. Individuals who report belonging to groups and networks are more likely to exhibit positive psychological functioning across a range of variables, including higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy, greater life satisfaction and



**Fig. 2.2** Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model. The child is a part of an interconnected web of increasingly broader influences, ranging from internal aspects (biological and genetic) to distant external aspects (culture and environment). Each layer is interconnected and influences one another (adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1995)

better transitioning into adulthood (Daley & Buchanan, 1999; Haslam et al., 2009; Iyer, Jetten, Tsivrikos, Haslam, & Postmes, 2009). Those who belong experience lower levels of stress and are less likely to suffer from psychological disorders, such as depression, anxiety and more extreme psychiatric conditions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Belonging also provides physical health benefits. Those with a greater sense of belonging have faster recovery rates from infectious disease (Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2009). They are at lower risk for heart disease, and recover faster when heart disease does occur (Tay et al., 2012). Belonging even relates to longer life (Boden-Albala et al., 2005; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Taylor, 2010). For instance, across a 9-year period, men who felt connected with others lived 2.3 years longer than those who felt disconnected, and women lived 2.8 years longer (Berkman & Syme, 1979).

In contrast, there are clear risks for not belonging. Loneliness, social isolation and a lack of social support have been linked to greater mortality, poor health behaviours, psychological distress, mental illness, self-harm behaviours and greater risk for suicide (Cacioppo & Hawley, 2003; McMahon, Singh, Garner, & Benhorin, 2004; Shochet, Dadds, Ham, & Montague, 2006; Resnick et al., 1997; Seeman, 1996; Seeman, Lusignolo, Albert, & Berkman, 2001; Tay et al., 2012; Taylor, 2010). Indeed, the impact of not belonging is similar to the adverse health effects that occur from smoking, obesity and high blood pressure (Haslam et al., 2009; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). An individual's positive sense of belonging could be seen on par with diet and exercise as a protective factor against psychological or physical ill health (Jetten et al., 2009).

To illustrate, let us look at a few of the thousands of studies that have been done on this topic. Boden-Albala (2005) studied people who had experienced a stroke. Those who felt socially isolated were twice as likely to have a second stroke, a heart attack or die than those who felt connected with others. In contrast, being connected to several social groups predicted successful stroke recovery and rehabilitation. Similarly, Haslam et al. (2008) demonstrated that stroke sufferers who reported belonging to several groups prior to their initial stroke recovered better than those who did not belong to groups. They also reported having a greater sense of well-being.

In another study, Haslam et al. (2008) considered the impact of belonging for 73 older aged-care home residents. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups: group therapy, individual therapy or a social group. Both of the group-based interventions had better outcomes than individual therapy. Participants in the group therapy had improved memory performance, and those in the social group felt less depressed and reported a better quality of life. Other research also supports improved cognitive effects following social interaction (e.g., Berkman, 2000; Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2009; Fratiglioni et al., 2000).

Caspi and his colleagues (2006) followed a cohort of children in 1972 from birth to young adulthood. Their findings suggested that social isolation during childhood was associated with poor cardiovascular health in adulthood. This is consistent with retrospective studies that have reported a link between a perceived lack of social

support in childhood and chronic health conditions (Russek & Schwartz, 1997; Shaw, Krause, Chatters, Connell, & Dayton, 2004) as well as behavioural, psychological and social difficulties (Offord & Bennett, 1994) later in life. There is clear evidence that adverse childhood experiences influence health in adulthood—and social isolation has one of the greatest impacts.

In one of the most interesting studies, Cohen and his colleagues (1997) took a group of people and quarantined them for a week. They intentionally infected the participants with a cold or flu virus. Those with a greater number of social ties were less likely to get sick. If they did get sick, the illness was not as bad and they recovered faster.

## 2.4 Belonging During Adolescence

Adolescence is the period of development that occurs after childhood and before adulthood. While the exact ages that are considered to be adolescence range by historical and cultural context, we define adolescence as the general teenage years from age 12 to age 18.

A sense of belonging plays a fundamental role in adolescent development. While the development of a sense of belonging is important for children of all ages (Quinn & Oldmeadow, 2012), priorities and expectations in respect to belonging change from childhood to adolescence, making the issue particularly salient during this period (O'Brennan & Furlong, 2010).

Adolescence is a time of identity formation (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Davis, 2012). Teenagers are challenged with determining who they are, as separate identities from their parents and family, and how they fit amongst peers, classmates and others in their social context. During adolescence, young people spend an increasing amount of time with peers, rather than families and other adults. As such, friendships play a pivotal role in the formation of identity (Quinn & Oldmeadow, 2012). Good friendships provide social support and acceptance, and provide a foundation for well-being. Those who feel a sense of belonging with peers exhibit better psychosocial adjustment and easier transitions into adulthood (Hill et al., 2013; Tanti, Stukas, Halloran, & Foddy, 2011).

By mid-adolescence, a growing number of young people are at risk for depression, anxiety and other internalising and externalising disorders (Allen & McKenzie, 2015). It is a time when disconnection from school and peers is frequently reported (O'Brennan & Furlong, 2010). At a time when young people need support and connection, they are at the greatest risk of becoming disconnected and isolated. Negative social experiences during adolescence can have a profound effect on psychosocial adjustment (Allen et al., 2014). For example, early onset of puberty may lead to a lack of assimilation with peers, which increases risk for psychosocial maladjustment (Mensah et al., 2013).

Using data from the Australian Temperament Project, a longitudinal study that has followed a large sample from infancy into young adulthood, O'Connor et al.

(2010) provided strong evidence for the key role that belonging plays for many young people. How students felt about their school—particularly their relationship with their teachers and the perception that school was a place where they felt respected and had a voice—was more strongly associated with their well-being than any other factor investigated. Other studies similarly find that school belonging has a major impact on the psychosocial adjustment of young adults (e.g., Lonczak, Abbott, Hawkins, Kosterman, & Catalano, 2002; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009; Sari, 2012).

Indeed, adolescence may offer a critical period for facilitating a sense of belonging, with long-term benefits. Many of the mindsets and behaviours that a young person carries into adulthood are developed during this time. While adolescents may have a sense of belonging in many facets of their life, such as family and peers, undoubtedly, schools provide a particularly salient domain. Most young people spend a considerable part of their adolescent years within the school setting. As we saw in Chap. 1, a sense of school belonging can provide a deep sense of connection that a young person carries with them into young adulthood and beyond. Without it, the young person can feel lost, disoriented and alone, without the social skills needed to effectively function in their adult years. As such, we now turn more specifically to understanding what school belonging is and why it matters.



School Belonging in Adolescents

Theory, Research and Practice

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