

## Re-thinking belonging

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*'I didn't use that service because I didn't think anyone else in my year would.'*  
[Student]

### Introduction

A sense of belonging is a key indicator of success for student retention (Tinto, 1995; Tinto, 2000). Baumeister says that we have a basic human need to belong (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Maslow includes the need to belong in his 'Hierarchy of Needs' (Maslow, 1943).

Lack of belonging (social isolation) is a cause of various difficulties. It is associated with ill health (Haslam *et al.*, 2009). It is linked to clinical depression (House, 2001; House, 2002). It is associated with impaired memory and language function (Cacioppo *et al.*, 2000).

From this, we can see that a sense of belonging needs to be understood not just in terms of economic costs to different stakeholders. It is related to student mental health, student wellbeing, learning performance and socialisation. Having stressed the importance of belonging we need to develop a better understanding of how it is formed and developed. For this, we need to understand the relationship between belonging to one group relative to another. Drawing on a social identity perspective (Tajfel, 1969; Tajfel, 1974; Turner, 1975; Turner and Oakes, 1986; Turner *et al.*, 1994), we look at group membership (social identities) and the values, practices and beliefs (social norms) pertaining to those groups.

This is a necessarily brief summary of this theoretical framework and should in no way be seen as complete. For a more comprehensive view of the theory see elsewhere (Turner and Reynolds, 2010).

This article closes with suggestions for practice, particularly relating to student induction, transition and retention as times of uncertainty. These guidelines are based on the social identity perspective.

### Belonging to social groups

We could think about groups as structures for teaching and learning. We can also think of them as an aggregation of individuals brought together for a particular task. However, to do so would overlook the influence groups have on our thinking, our feelings and on our behaviour.

Groups should be recognised as a psychological entity as well as a physical entity (Tajfel, 1969). They exert an active influence on us (Haslam *et al.*, 2012) even when other members are not physically present. Evidence of this can be seen in the quote above.

In social psychology, the groups to which we belong are known as social identities (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel, 1982; Turner *et al.*, 1994). These are the sense each of us has as members of a particular group. There are many different social identities. They include age, gender, ethnicity, nationality *etc.* as those which come most readily to mind. There are also a great many others. The groups to which we belong bestow benefits for members. For instance, they give us comfort and security. We care about belonging to these groups. We have an emotional attachment to them. As a consequence, rejection by other members of those groups may be more hurtful than insults from non-members. We partly define ourselves in terms of our membership of these groups (Turner, 1975). However, belonging to certain groups, in particular situations, can also work against us (Steele and Aronson, 1995). Sometimes, we are categorised by others as belonging to a particular group. Those identities may generally be of little personal significance. However, if we feel that we are being stigmatised based on one of our social identities, and that identity is personally significant, then we may feel psychologically threatened (Steele, 1997; Walton and Cohen, 2011).

### **Defining belonging as social norms**

We can give dictionary definitions of belonging. They would include ideas of how well we fit into different groups and how well we are accepted, welcomed or judged by others.

This could seem quite static. It could appear as though there was little variation in our sense of belonging across time and in different contexts. It also says little about the multiplicity of groups to which we may belong and the relationship of one to another.

Acknowledging this concern, we can think of belonging in terms of the meanings attached to/by the membership of different social groups. Each social group has a shared understanding amongst its members. These are the values, practices and beliefs associated with that particular group.

These 'social norms' have a practical use. They tell us what to do in group-related settings (Abrams *et al.*, 1990; Frith and Frith, 2012). They show us how to be with each other and they coordinate social interaction when we engage in group-related activities (Abrams *et al.*, 1990).

These norms also help members to measure their level of fit in the group. They inform our view of others. They even provide the basis for others to judge

whether or not we belong. These group-situated norms therefore define belonging in a particular moment of social interaction.

Put simply, social norms are a working model (prototype) for understanding group membership in a particular setting. As such, belonging should be understood as fluid rather than static and in this sense, there are a myriad of definitions of belonging.

### **Faulty norms**

The internal representation we have of a group, and what it means to belong, may be problematic in different ways. For instance we may have an incomplete representation of the group norms. Our internal representation may also be flawed.

This may arise from an inability to imagine what it means to belong to a group (Burford, 2012). For example, a student that has no family history of going to university probably has a less developed prototype for 'being a student' than someone who comes from a long line of family members who have studied in different universities.

As an example, we may not have a very good sense of the final year compared with the first year at university (Burford, 2012). In the first year, we might have heard there are lectures and fresher's fairs. However, we may have a more impoverished notion of the final year and writing a dissertation.

If the representation of the social group is flawed, students may wrongly feel they do not belong. For example, if a new student feels their peers would not use a support service, they may also avoid using that service (see quote above) even though it is quite likely that in reality some of the peer group will use such services.

Social experience, including trial and error, can help to counter idiosyncrasies and adjust flaws in the individual perception of these norms (Hogg and Reid, 2006). However, on arrival at university students are yet to have that experience. Much of higher education is also designed around individualistic models of learning and yet these problems are often related to group membership. As such any flaws may remain an active influence.

### **Uncertainty and belonging**

Arriving into a university, and into each year of a course, is a time of great uncertainty for many students, but when there is no objective measure available how can we gauge whether we belong? One way this can be done is through comparison with others.

Interestingly, comparisons are more likely to be made in situations of uncertainty than in contexts where we know what to do (Hogg *et al.*, 2007). By definition, education and learning are all about uncertainty, which is heightened at key times such as final year exams and induction.

When we are uncertain about what to do, we are most likely to align with one of the groups to which we feel we belong. Aligning to one of our groups offers us security. We can follow the norms for that contextually relevant group. This may help alleviate stress and reduce uncertainty.

This would also be a group which is both accessible and a social category which fits with the social context. Being a 'student' would be a contingent example when arriving at university.

Group alignment is further heightened when the active identity has a greater sense of entitativity (Campbell, 1958; Hogg and Reid, 2006; Hogg *et al.*, 2007). In other words, the greater the coherence and definition of the group and its norms the stronger will likely be the level of identification (Campbell, 1958; Hogg and Reid, 2006). As a consequence, the sense of belonging to that given group will be similarly stronger (Hogg and Reid, 2006; Hogg *et al.*, 2007).

For new students, this probably means that a comparison is easier to make with a peer group ('students') than with 'tutors.' That superordinate group ('academics') is initially harder to use as the basis for a comparison because the semantic gap may be too great. Either way, social groups are an interesting issue both as an influence and as a solution to uncertainty reduction.

### **Developing belonging**

So, what does all this mean for developing practice? Based on the above, we have a number of identifiable features of first year students as a social group:

- 1) They are likely to be uncertain about what to do and where to go for different issues and activities
- 2) They may be uncertain about their abilities to study at this level
- 3) Their membership of 'being a student' or 'being a student at this university' is likely to be psychologically active on arrival
- 4) That membership is likely to be the most accessible social identity in their first weeks (and possibly beyond)
- 5) They will have a prototype of some sort for these active social identities
- 6) Their prototype may be flawed
- 7) Their prototype may be incomplete
- 8) These flaws raise significant implications for students, staff and institutions
- 9) Students will be more likely to be motivated to belong in their course-group (greater entitativity and accessibility) than 'the university' (low entitativity and less accessible)

10) Their course group is quite likely to form the basis of comparisons they may make for purposes of self-evaluation

Therefore, it makes sense to use the course group (or the classroom) as the focus for developing a sense of belonging. To do this, here are a number of suggestions for practice:

- 1) Create an awareness of the group level in the room
- 2) Facilitate dialogue around what it means to be here at the university. Help them to share concerns
- 3) Help students to listen to each other even if they do not discuss those concerns
- 4) Help students to co-construct a view of their conversation as a summary of their emergent norms
- 5) Do not seek to achieve a consensus on the summary. Aim to show some level of diversity within the group
- 6) Help students to co-construct a representation of their group on the group-relevant issue
- 7) Help make that representation visible and communicate the representation of the *ad hoc* norms to everyone in the room. This will help correct flawed prototypes or deepen underdeveloped prototypes. It will also show common ground as a basis for belonging
- 8) Invite responses to the issues raised in the discussion from within the group. This will deepen a sense of ownership and group-awareness
- 9) Provide additional responses contingent with the issues raised
- 10) Supplement those responses with additional information once those group-situated concerns have been addressed.

These ideas have already been turned into an emerging practice. Student-Generated Induction (Bowskill, 2013a; Bowskill, 2013b) has been developed and implemented in various institutions throughout the UK. This is a practice which began with the combination of the snowball group discussion technique supported by electronic response technologies (clickers). Since the initial implementation, this technique has been developed into an established practice with many variations within and between sessions.

Even so, the guidance above points to a shift away from an individualistic view for the design of belonging. Individualistic conceptions of learning design are exemplified by the frequent use of presentations and the conceptualisation of the students as an audience. This is particularly true of some contemporary approaches to student induction.

The social identity-based practice outlined above also marks a required shift 'from methodological individualism to methodological relationalism' (Ho and Chiu, 1998). This is the need to think about the design and development of a sense of belonging based at the group level of relationships as the primary focus. Key

questions for researchers are: 'What is the active group?' and 'What are the norms which influence members?'

A sociocultural perspective may not be enough to show the complexity of social relationships when compared with a psychological point of view. We need to move beyond 'individuals in landscapes' (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2010) towards a view of the 'groups in individuals' (Turner, 1975; Turner and Oakes, 1986; Turner *et al.*, 1994).

Finally, this social identity perspective on belonging may be equally valuable for the design of learning, teaching and support. There are additional applications of this view of belonging for student health and wellbeing.

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For Bowskill, N (2013) Student-Generated Induction: A Social Identity Approach: A Staff Development Guide, see: <http://amzn.to/1a3rxFF>