

Need for belonging, relationship satisfaction, loneliness, and life satisfaction

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Abstract

Loneliness and the need to belong are two subjective states that, on the basis of prior research and theory, would appear to be related both to one another and to wellbeing. This study explored these relationships with a sample of 436 volunteer participants drawn from the Australian Unity Wellbeing database. Participants completed a survey that included a measure of satisfaction with personal relationships embedded in the Personal Wellbeing Index, the UCLA Loneliness scale, a measure of life satisfaction, and the Need to Belong Scale. While loneliness was weakly related to need to belong, it was strongly associated with the discrepancy between need to belong and satisfaction with personal relationships, which we used to measure unmet need for belonging. People living alone reported a lower need to belong and less satisfaction with personal relationships than those living with others. However, the discrepancy scores, life satisfaction scores and loneliness scores did not differ between these groups. Loneliness mediated the relationship between unmet need for belonging and wellbeing (life satisfaction). These findings support Baumeister and Leary's "belongingness hypothesis" and clarify the relationship between these variables.

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1. Introduction

As social beings, most humans live in a matrix of relationships that, to a large extent, define their identity (I am a daughter, wife, mother, student, etc.), and our personality (I am extraverted, friendly, and kind). Moreover, the importance of such connections transcend cultural differences (for reviews, see Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Kitayama & Markus, 1994; Silvera & Seger, 2004). Given such dependency on relationships with others, it is not surprising that factors such as belongingness and loneliness are important predictors of psychological health (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ernst & Cacioppo, 1999; Townsend & McWhirter, 2005). In this

paper, we investigate the relationship between these two factors and life satisfaction.

1.1. Belongingness

In their defining article on the importance of belongingness to wellbeing, Baumeister and Leary (1995) proposed the "belongingness hypothesis", which suggested 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). Failure to have belongingness needs met may lead to feelings of social isolation, alienation, and loneliness. Thus, a sense of belongingness is not only a precursor to social connectedness but also a buffer against loneliness.

In their detailed analysis of the relevant research, these authors argued that the need for belongingness is more than the need for social contact. It is the need for positive,

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and pleasant social contacts within the context of desired relationships with people other than strangers. That is, the need for belongingness is satisfied by an interpersonal bond marked by “stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future” (p. 500). It is this relational context of interactions with other people that is essential for satisfying the need to belong.

They also propose that, through satiation, people who are well-enmeshed in social relationships should have less need to seek and form additional bonds than people who are socially deprived. As their need for belonging has been met, and is no longer such a significant drive, they do not express or display the need for belonging as strongly as those for whom this need has not been met. Importantly, however, individuals differ in the strength of their need to belong. As Kelly (2001) points out, some people with lower need to belong may be satisfied by few contacts, while others with greater need to belong may need many such contacts. It is the lack of satisfaction with personal relationships relative to their need to belong that puts the individual at risk of loneliness.

1.2. Loneliness

Loneliness is characterised by unpleasant feelings that arise when an individual perceives a discrepancy between their desired and existing social relationships (Perlman, 2004). It is therefore a subjective experience, is distinct from the objective condition of aloneness (Rokach, 2004), and cannot be simply predicted by objective indicators (de Jong Gierveld & Havens, 2004; Perlman, 2004). An individual may have a small social network and yet experience no loneliness. Conversely, an individual may have a large social network yet still feel lonely. This discrepancy may be subjective in relation to the level of felt intimacy, and/or objective, in relation to the number of social contacts (de Jong Gierveld & Havens, 2004). Thus, the common consensus is that the subjective and objective indicators should be separately measured (Andersson, 1998; de Jong Gierveld & Havens, 2004; McWhirter, 1990; Perlman, 2004; Rokach, 2004). While the strongest predictors of loneliness are subjective, certain objective indicators, such as living alone, are also strong predictors of loneliness (Andersson, 1998).

In individualistic Western countries the prevalence of loneliness is relatively high, with (Andersson (1998) estimating that about one in four people report regularly experiencing loneliness. Researchers have found loneliness to be implicated in negative aspects of mental health. For example, it has been found related to depression (Eisses et al., 2004; Nangle, Erdley, Newman, Mason, & Carpenter, 2003), and suicidal ideation (Kidd, 2004; Stravynski & Boyer, 2001). Likewise, loneliness has been found to be negatively related to life satisfaction (Goodwin, Cook, & Yung, 2001; Schumaker, Shea, Monfries, & Groth-Marnat, 1993) and subjective wellbeing (Bramston, Pretty, & Chipuer, 2002; Chipuer, Bramston, & Pretty, 2003). Thus, lit-

erature suggests that higher levels of loneliness are linked to higher levels of psychological distress and lower levels of psychological wellness.

1.3. Loneliness and need for belonging

Loneliness and belongingness share the subjective perception of connectedness to others. Thus, a considerable body of literature has considered aspects of belonging and loneliness together. For example, Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, and Early (1996) found both to be related to social and psychological functioning while Tomaka, Thompson, and Palacios (2006) found both to be associated with health outcomes. However, these studies and the many others that have considered constructs related to belongingness have failed to measure the need for belongingness. This represents an important omission since it may be the unmet need for belongingness that is a risk factor for loneliness, and that loneliness may then be the risk factor for reduced wellbeing. If this were to be the case, then the relationship between need for belongingness and wellbeing should be mediated, or at least moderated by loneliness.

Thus, the major aims of the present study are firstly to explore whether the most important relationship between loneliness, belonging and life satisfaction is the degree to which the need for belongingness is satisfied. That is, rather than need to belong being the primary variable, as assumed by previous authors, it is the unsatisfied need for belongingness that is associated with loneliness. We therefore expect that the relationship between need for belongingness and loneliness will be weak, and that an examination of the relationship between loneliness and the degree to which need for belongingness is unmet will be more informative.

In order to investigate the relationship between unmet need for belongingness and loneliness, we propose to calculate a difference score between self-reported need to belong and self-reported reported satisfaction with personal relationships. This estimate of unmet need for belongingness will allow us to more directly test the ‘belongingness hypothesis’.

Our second aim is to explore whether people who live alone differ from people who live with others in regard to the variables under investigation. Single person households now comprises from one third to one half of the total households in most Western cities (Fleming, 2007). Fleming, using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, reports that in Australia there are now more lone-person households (1,962,100) than there are households made up of couples living with children (1,798,400). This social phenomenon is an important part of our social fabric. While this lone-person demographic would appear to be at most obvious risk of social isolation and alienation, we do not know whether they chose to live alone because they have a low need for belonging, whether they are satisfied with their personal relationships, or whether they are lonely.

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