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**Sense of Belonging:
Understanding the Emergence and Experience of the Construct,
With a Focus on the Country Context**

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ABSTRACT

This work is a review of the body of literature and research on the emergence and the experience of sense of belonging. It looks at the various frameworks, concepts, and tools of measurement within the large literature, aiming to understand the complex construct of belonging. Since the late 1960s, the multifaceted concept of belonging has gathered interest from various academic fields. Although the consensus on a definition has yet to be reached, belonging is generally defined as the subjective experience of feeling "at home", connected to, respected, and appreciated by a group, person, or institution. It is considered a basic human need and analysed as a dynamic contextual experience. This study highlights the contextual nature of the construct, drawing from political, social, and individual aspects within frameworks of belonging, with a particular focus on experiences of belonging in connection to the context of a country.

Keywords: *Belonging, Sense of Belonging, Country Context, Construct, Country Belonging, Experience*

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1. INTRODUCTION: EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF BELONGING AS A CONSTRUCT

1.1 Some Definitions of Belonging across different disciplines

Belonging is a complex construct that has been gathering interest from various disciplines since the late 60s. It can be described as a feeling of being “at home” and “safe” in relation with a place or with others. From a psychological perspective, belonging is considered a fundamental human need and motivation, being placed right after physiological and safety needs in Maslow’s motivational hierarchy. Anant mentions Maslow’s inclusion of “Love and Belongingness Needs” and describes belonging as “personal involvement (in a social system) to the extent that the person feels himself to be an indispensable and integral part of the system.” (Anant, 1966, p.22-23, as cited in Anant,1967). According to Baumeister and Leary’s highly influential 1995 paper, all humans have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), Based on their “belongingness hypothesis”, the “need to belong” has an innate quality and belonging is a personal experience that is created and evolved by and with interpersonal relations. The satisfaction of the need to belong results in a sense of belonging and the failure to satisfy this need can result in negative outcomes on an intrapersonal level. Belonging has also been investigated as a mental health concept, with results indicating that sense of belonging plays an important part in the emergence of negative mental health outcomes such as depression (Choenarom et al., 2005).

Much interest was put on the process of belonging, how it evolves and affects the individual, yet there is no single answer for these questions as belonging is analysed and proposed to be a highly contextual construct. We can agree on the fact that all human beings share a need to belong, to varying degrees and subjectable to individual differences; but the question of how that need is satisfied in a given context is a much more complicated issue.

In an attempt to conceptualize belonging, going through the vast and diverse theoretical and methodological literature, Allen et al. proposed a distinction between the constructs of “belonging” as a “trait” which represents the core universal psychological need to belong; and “belongingness” as a “state” which corresponds to the “situation-specific senses of belonging” (Allen et al.,2021). Aligned with their differentiation of the construct, as the subjective, contextual experience of belonging; and “belongingness”, the innate need to belong which motivates one to belong therefore serves as a facilitator in establishing and maintaining a sense

of belonging, most research and work on belonging focuses on a specific social location or context. For example, school belonging (see Goodenow et al. 's definition of "school belonging" in *Table 1*) emerges as an area that produces its own definitions and methods to conceptualize and measure belonging, which highlights the lack of consensus and overall commonality of the concepts throughout the belonging literature.

Author	Definition of Belonging
Anant (1966; 1967)	"personal involvement (in a social system) to the extent that the person feels himself to be an indispensable and integral part of the system."
Hagerty et al. (1992)	"The experience of personal involvement in a system or environment"
Baumeister& Leary (1995)	"Strong desire to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments"
Goodenow et al. (1993)	"the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment"
Yuval-Davis (2006)	"Belonging is about emotional attachment and being 'at home' "Belonging can be an act of self-identification or identification by others"
Antonsich (2010)	"Personal, intimate feeling of 'being at home' Where home stands for a space of familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment
Allen et al. (2021)	"The subjective feeling of deep connections with social groups, physical places and individual and collective experiences"
Mahar et al. (2013)	"A subjective feeling of value and respect derived from a reciprocal relationship to an external referent that is built on shared experiences, beliefs of personal characteristics"

Table 1: Definitions of Belonging Across Various Disciplines

This distinction between the "trait" and "state" is important, also highlighted by Pardede & Kovač (2023) in their study attempting to distinguish between "need to belong" and "sense of belonging". The "trait" which would correspond to "need to belong" in their study is a "motivating factor of a sense of belongingness" (Pardede & Kovač, 2023, p.332) which is the state, the experience of a sense of belonging which is a "response to our emotional appraisals of our relations and interactions with others in the given conditions" (Pardede & Kovač, 2023,p.332). They argue that a sense of belonging, "in contrast to the fundamental need to belong, is inherently contextual" (Pardede & Kovač, 2023, p.332).

Looking at the large body of work from various disciplines spanning from political sciences to psychology, belonging emerges as a construct that has been studied as a mental health concept, an innate need to form meaningful relations and as a complex concept that has seen various attempts to be conceptualized but has yet to be agreed upon.

1.1.2 Perspectives on Belonging

From a psychological perspective, a sense of belonging is a person's experience of being valued or important to an external referent and experiencing a fit between self and the referent (Hagerty et al., 1992). Thus, belonging is a relationship between the individual and the roles they partake in social processes. Considering this, belonging is an important construct for group processes from a social psychology standpoint. "Individuals' need to conform to the groups they belong to out of fear of exclusion, and the ways individuals' interpersonal relationships are deeply affected by their membership or lack of membership in particular groups, as well as their positions in these groups" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p.198) affects and shapes their belonging experience. According to the belongingness hypothesis suggested by Baumeister and Leary (1995), these interpersonal relations need to be long-lasting, positive, stable, and significant, plus, they should also "take place" through frequent physical interaction and reach a minimum number, which can vary from person to person.

Belonging was analysed as a mental health concept in a 1992 paper by Hagerty et al. as having two dimensions: "(1) valued involvement: the experience of feeling valued, needed, accepted; and (2) fit: the person's perception that his or her characteristics articulate with or complement the system or environment" (Hagerty et al., 1992). Their conceptualization highlights the affective and evaluative nature of the construct. Authors highlighted that when we discuss a person's sense of belonging, it is required to identify the corresponding referent because belonging emerges as a product of the reciprocal relationship between the person and the object (which in this case could be a place or a social entity). According to their analysis of the construct, belonging occurs when certain defining attributes are present; "(1) the person experiences being valued, needed, or important with respect to other people, groups, objects, organisations, environments, or spiritual dimensions; and (2) the person experiences a fit or congruence with other people, groups, objects, organisations, environments, or spiritual dimensions through shared or complementary characteristics" (Hagerty et al., 1992). Additionally, they mention several consequences that they propose will emerge from a sense of belonging: "psychological, social, spiritual, or physical involvement; attribution of

meaningfulness to that involvement; and fortification or laying down of a fundamental foundation for emotional and behavioural responses” (Hagerty et al., 1992).

1.1.3 Politics of Belonging

From a political sciences perspective, belonging is defined as a dynamic process, constructed, and negotiated along multiple axes of difference, such as class, race, gender, stage in life cycle, sexuality, and ability (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Yuval-Davis, who differentiated between two seemingly different experiences of belonging as “belonging” which translates to an emotional attachment and feeling “at home” and a belonging as “politics of belonging” which “comprises specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectivities that are, at the same time, themselves being constructed by these projects in very particular ways” (Yuval-Davis, 2006 p.197). She argues that belonging should be studied on three analytic levels: social locations; identifications and emotional attachments; ethical and political values. She posits that belonging on the social location level is related to the axis of power. Each category a person “belongs” to (race, gender, class, nation) has a different power and their dynamics in turn affect individuals’ sense of belonging. She argues that people tend to “judge their own and others’ belonging/s.” (Yuval-Davis, 2006) based on their ethical and political values which is also interrelated with their social locations, as they are probably being generated by within group relations. Talking about social locations, she makes the point that “A man or a woman, black or white, working-class or middle-class, a member of a European or an African nation: these are not just different categories of social location, but categories that also have a certain positionality along an axis of power, higher or lower than other such categories.” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p.199). This axis of power is initially something we “belong” to. Which is being created on qualities that we often do not have ‘power’ to change or choose. This creates an individual experience of belonging and at the same time a group experience of belonging; and these two interrelated experiences of belonging cannot be reduced to one another. She furthers this point, touching upon the identifications and emotional attachments level of belonging, by explaining that identities are “narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not),” which may or may not relate directly to group membership, but often reflect how individuals see themselves in relation to collective categories such as ethnicity, nationality, or culture (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Building on this, Yuval-Davis further elaborates on how the “politics of belonging” operates not just through institutional mechanisms, but through the drawing and redrawing of symbolic boundaries that determine who is perceived as part of the

community and who is excluded. These boundaries are not static or neutral; rather, Yuval-Davis argues, they are shaped by acts of imagination that reflect specific political, cultural, and ethical frameworks. Belonging, then, becomes an active and contested process, people do not just “belong” naturally, but are positioned as belonging or not through collective acts that include some and exclude others. These imaginative constructions of community are influenced by individuals' social locations, lived experiences, and how they define themselves, but even more so by the values that underpin these definitions. In this way, the politics of belonging is not simply about identity or legal status, but about negotiating the meaning of community itself. The struggle over who gets to belong involves ongoing debates over which identities are recognized, whose narratives are legitimized, and how different social positions shape access to inclusion. Thus, Yuval-Davis emphasizes that belonging is inherently political, related to struggles over meaning, recognition, and power.

1.2 Frameworks within Belonging Research

1.2.1 Belonging from a Multidisciplinary Lens

The concept of belonging, particularly with regards to social and political identity, has inspired various theoretical frameworks across the literature. Antonsich proposes an analytical framework that conceptualizes belonging as personal affections and overarching socio-political narratives, highlighting that these dimensions interplay to form complex relational dynamics (Antonsich, 2010). According to this analysis, belonging should be analysed on two interrelated yet distinct levels: “place-belongingness” which corresponds to feeling “at home” in a place; and in line with Yuval-Davis’ conceptualization, the politics of belonging, which relates to the “discursive resource which constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion” (Antonsich, 2010, p.645). This analysis demonstrates how belonging is not a homogeneous experience but a collection of identities that coexist within varying contexts of power, influence, and societal norms. Antonsich’s work highlights not only the emotional attachment aspect of belonging but also the sociocultural contexts influencing individuals' perceptions of belonging.

Yuval-Davis, who produced one of the most enriched conceptualizations of belonging from a political perspective, differentiates between intrinsic feelings of belonging and the politicized discourse surrounding it. Her intersectional analytical framework suggests that belonging is influenced by social identities, such as class, ethnicity, and gender, which together shape the "politics of belonging". When addressing the politics of belonging, Yuval-Davis (2006)

highlights that it is fundamentally about delineating the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion within a political community. These boundaries are never neutral or fixed; rather, she explains that “any construction of boundaries... that includes some and excludes others involves an act of active and situated imagination.” (Stoetzler & Yuval-Davis, 2002, as cited in Yuval-Davis, 2006, p.204). This notion of “situated imagination” underscores the deeply contextual nature of belonging, it is not simply about universal criteria or static group memberships, but about how belonging is imagined, justified, and enforced in particular historical, cultural, and political settings. The criteria for belonging, who is seen as a legitimate member of “us” versus “them”, are shaped by the specific sociopolitical context in which they are constructed. These imagined boundaries shift across time and place, depending not only on institutional frameworks but also on people’s social locations, their lived experiences, and their personal and collective value systems (Yuval-Davis, 2006). As Yuval-Davis (2006) points out, the boundaries of belonging are shaped “probably even more importantly by their values” (p. 204) than by objective markers of identity. For example, what counts as belonging in one context (legal citizenship) may be insufficient in another, where emotional, cultural, or ideological alignment is demanded. This highlights how belonging is a fluid, contested process, deeply tied to the historical moment, power relations, and group-specific meanings. The politics of belonging, then, involves ongoing struggles over the meaning of membership, not just in legal or administrative terms but in symbolic, emotional, and normative dimensions. Yuval-Davis (2006) stresses that this includes disputes over “what is involved in belonging, in being a member of a community” (p. 205) and how that membership is defined and policed. Such struggles are embedded in systemic and intersecting structures of power, where dimensions like race, class, gender, and religion shape both access to belonging and the narratives that legitimize it. Belonging in one context may be marked by inclusion and safety, while in another, it may be shaped by exclusion, surveillance, or conditional acceptance (Yuval-Davis, 2006). This makes the politics of belonging not only highly contextual but also consequential for individuals’ rights, participation, recognition, and identity. This perspective is also echoed in the work of Tuan Mohd Zawawi et al. (2022), who analyses the layered realities of belonging among different ethnic groups in Malaysia, demonstrating how external societal structures and internal community dynamics negotiate individuals' affiliations with their national identity (Zawawi et al., 2022).

Research by Johansson and Rosell reinforces these ideas, asserting that belonging is a relational process stemming from individual experiences and social interactions (Johansson & Rosell, 2021). Their study uses Yuval-Davis’s theory of the politics of belonging as a point of departure, and argue that the idea of “situated-intersectionality” is central to Yuval-Davis’s

conceptualization of belonging. “Situated intersectionality underlines how varying ways of seeing the world are constructed in— and between—social structures and categories, individual emotions, and individual and collective value preferences.” They argue that belonging is an intersectional phenomenon because the factors at play for the emergence of a sense of belonging “constitute and are constituted by one another.” (Johansson & Rosell, 2021, p. 5). Ultimately, they consider emotional and structural aspects and define belonging as a political phenomenon emerging from the intersections of social positions, emotional connections, and values and suggest that belonging is linked to emotional bonds to places but also to contexts, communities, and the practices within them.

In their review of the belonging research, Mahar et al. (2012) identified 5 elements that are central to the understanding of the construct: subjectivity, groundedness, reciprocity, dynamism, and self-determination. Central to their argument is that belonging is a subjective experience, a personal perception of being valued, respected, and fitting in. They emphasize that this feeling is distinct from objective indicators like formal group membership or physical participation, asserting that “achieving a sense of belonging requires that the individual perceive that they are valued, respected or otherwise subjectively engaged.” (Mahar et al., 2012, p. 5). The authors also stress the importance of groundedness, meaning that the feeling of belonging must be attached to a specific external referent such as a group, institution, or community, because, as they note, “one belongs to something” (Mahar et al., 2012, p.5). Reciprocity involves mutual recognition and shared experiences between the individual and the referent, extending beyond superficial traits. The fourth element, dynamism, reflects how belonging is influenced by shifting environmental and social contexts. Finally, self-determination refers to the individual's agency in choosing where and with whom to belong.

In light of their conceptualization, the authors define belonging as “a subjective feeling of value and respect derived from a reciprocal relationship to an external referent, grounded to the context, to whom one chooses, wants and feels permission to belong.” (Mahar et al., 2012, p.6).

1.2.2 An Integrative Framework for Belonging

In their 2021 article, Allen et al. propose an integrative framework for understanding the construct of belonging, which they recognize as “a central construct in human health, behaviour, and experience” (Allen et al., 2021, p.91). Reviewing the vast belonging research across disciplines, the authors propose a framework comprising four core components (Figure 1): competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions. This framework acknowledges that belonging is neither static nor universally experienced, but rather a dynamic and context-

dependent phenomenon that evolves “as an individual traverses temporal, social, and environmental contexts and experiences” (Allen et al.,2021, p.92).

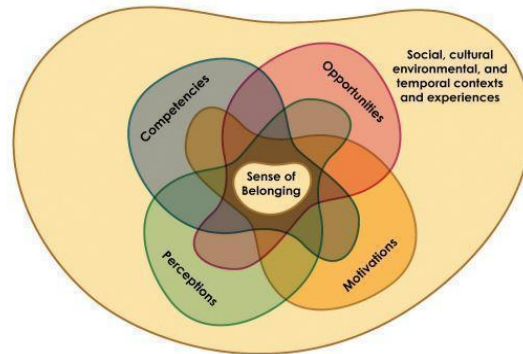


Figure 1: An integrative framework for understanding, assessing, and fostering belonging. (From Allen et al.,2021)

The first component, *competencies*, refers to the cognitive, emotional, and social skills necessary to form and maintain connections with others. These competencies are often developed and reinforced through socialization and inclusive experiences (Allen et al., 2021). The reasoning behind this component is the assumption that connection requires a degree of competence in interpreting social cues, regulating emotions, and communicating effectively.

Opportunities refer to the structural and environmental conditions that enable individuals to engage in social interactions, such as inclusive institutional policies or accessible community spaces. As the authors note, “the ability to connect with others is useless if opportunities to connect are lacking” thus highlighting the systemic nature of inclusion (Allen et al., 2021, p.92).

The third component, *motivations*, underscores the intrinsic human drive to seek out social bonds, as seen in Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) work on Need to Belong. The motivation to belong can be facilitated or suppressed by past experiences of acceptance or rejection. These motivations can shift, leading individuals to pursue alternate forms of connection, even potentially harmful ones, when traditional paths to belonging are blocked.

Finally, *perceptions* refer to the subjective and interpretive processes that shape how individuals evaluate their sense of belonging. The authors argue that the perception component is connected to the motivation to belong as it may “act as feedback mechanisms that increase or decrease one’s desire to connect with others.” (Allen et al., 2021, p.94)

According to Allen et al. (2021), perceptions of belonging are formed through repeated experiences of connection, rejection, and inclusion, which means that even when competencies and opportunities are present, belonging may still be undermined if these perceptions are negative or distorted. By integrating these four elements, the authors provide a framework that

captures the complexity of belonging and offers a valuable lens for analysing belonging-related phenomena in psychological, educational, and sociocultural contexts.

They note that regardless of identifying four components needed for belonging to emerge, it remains unclear that “how much of each of these components is needed, whether specific sequencing amongst the components matters” (Allen et al., 2021, p.96). Highlighting the importance of cultural factors in the emergence of belonging, as they suggest it can “intensely affect an individual’s competencies for belonging, opportunities to belong, motivations to belong, and even perceptions of belonging” (Allen et al., 2021, p.96), they make a case for the examination of the contextual factors in any future research aiming at measuring or conceptualizing belonging.

2. MEASURING BELONGING

As reviewed above, belonging is a multifaceted construct. Therefore, a tricky one to measure. Most of the attempts to measure sense of belonging is limited to the context that facilitates belonging, with some others aiming to measure a more general sense of belonging. Employing a qualitative design, belonging tools capture the individual factors that constitute belonging, identifying factors that constitute it. This chapter will be a review of the tools and the implications of the methodological features of their design.

2.1 Tools and Their Use

Among the earliest and most prominent attempts to measure belonging in a more general sense, “*Sense of Belonging Instrument*” (*SOBI*) was developed by Hagerty & Patusky (1995), who theorised sense of belonging as a mental health concept, highlighting its relation to loneliness, depression, and other negative mental health outcomes (Hagerty et al.,1992). Their theoretical formulation of sense of belonging as a mental health concept served as the conceptual basis for the development of the tool which has 2 different dimensions. *SOBI-Psychological Experiences* (*SOBI-P*) and *SOBI-Antecedents* (*SOBI-A*), with the former measuring the psychological experience of belonging and the latter correlating to the ability and desire to form a sense of belonging. Both scales highlight the fact that the sense of belonging is a subjective construct that emerges as the result of the shared experience between the self and the referent. It is established that belonging is more than a mere membership; it is a dynamic psychological experience that connects personal identity with external environments.

Another prominent endeavour to measure belonging was undertaken by Lee and Robins, who has adopted Kohut’s self-psychology theory as the framework for the development of the tool. Kohut's theory (1984) emphasises the importance of belongingness as a psychological need, proposing that people seek to confirm a subjective sense of belongingness to avoid feelings of loneliness and alienation (Lee & Robins, 1995). They defined belonging by three aspects: companionship, affiliation, and connectedness. However, similarly to Hagerty & Patusky (1995) their factor analyses yielded on two factors and in turn resulted in two separate measuring scales: *Social Connectedness and Social Assurance*. They concluded that these scales only measure aspects of belonging and not the whole construct.

In their 2012 article where they developed a tool to measure a general sense of belonging, Malone and colleagues highlighted the negative-worded item structure of most tools aimed at

measuring belonging, suggesting that they are “indirectly measuring a sense of belonging by assessing a lack of not belonging”. This issue also corresponds to the *Need to Belong Scale*, developed by Leary & Kelly, which aims to measure people’s motivations to belong, with less motivation predicting a greater sense of belonging, thus initially inferring a sense of belonging from the lack of this need. Moving from this concern, Malone and colleagues aimed to develop a tool that measures an achieved sense of belonging, *General Belongingness Scale (GBS)* and were the first to demonstrate that “a measure of achieved belongingness is conceptually distinct from the need to belong.” (Malone et al., 2012, p.316). Another key element of their study was the process of examining the correlation between a sense of belonging and the Big Five personality traits. Regardless of the results, the consideration of Big Five personality traits highlights that belonging is a process that is personal and is highly dependent on the characteristics of the person.

By its nature, a sense of belonging is constructed and maintained by interactions with our social systems, whether that be school or the community we live in. Following the idea that belonging is created and evolved by subjective experiences, with the influence of “external referents “. It is important to note that “to measure a sense of belonging, one must specify the external referent that serves to ground the individuals’ subjective perceptions.” (Mahar et al.,2013, p.5).

Before diving further into the development and level of analysis addressed in these scales, a distinction between the “need to belong” and a “sense of belonging” needs to be made. Pardede and Kovač (2023) contributed significantly to this distinction in their work by examining how the experience of belonging emerges and evolves under various personal appraisals and under different conditions. Their work is important because its chief aim is “nuancing concepts traditionally used interchangeably, such as the need to belong and the sense of belongingness” (Pardede & Kovač, 2023, p.340). They posit that although the need to belong is fundamental and clear, it might be expressed differently under different conditions, where other powerful social processes are accentuated. To address this, the study examined the relationship between the need to belong, measured as a dependent variable, and five personal appraisals: exclusion, shame, social-worthiness, emotional self-expression, and prosocial-relating behaviour, under two different belongingness-conditions: “Social-emotion support”: situations where people experience support when they are allowed to be themselves and express their true emotions, and “Social-value representation”: situations where people experience that it is important to be valued and not compared to others. By placing participants in these distinct conditions and then measuring their need to belong and related appraisals, their work highlighted how the expression of the fundamental need to belong differs depending on the specific context or

condition of belongingness being experienced, which they call “belongingness conditions.” Their work is also influential on the basis that it posits belonging as a contextually mediated experience.

Table 2 describes some prominent tools used in belonging research, with their identified “belonging” factors.

Author(s)	Scale Name(s)	Identified Factors / Dimensions Measured	Aim and Scale Development
Hagerty & Patusky	Sense of Belonging Instrument (SOBI): SOBI-Psychological Experiences (SOBI-P) and SOBI-Antecedents (SOBI-A)	SOBI-P: valued involvement and fit SOBI-A antecedents to belonging	Developed self-report instruments to measure sense of belonging in adults. Factor analysis yielded 2 separate scales despite the theorized single scale with 3 factors.
Lee & Robbins	Social Connectedness Scale and Social Assurance Scale	Social Connectedness (8 items) and Social Assurance (8 items).	Developed 2 self-report scales to measure theoretical aspects of belongingness based on self-psychology theory. Both scales use negatively-worded items reflecting a lack of belongingness.
Leary, Kelly, Cottrell & Schreindorfer	Need to Belong Scale (NTBS)	Measures a single construct: Need to Belong	Developed a 10-item self-report measure assessing individual differences in the desire for belonging.
Malone, Pillow, & Osman	General Belongingness Scale (GBS)	Acceptance/Inclusion and lack of Rejection/Exclusion.	12-item measure of general belongingness across multiple levels.
Arslan & Duru	School Belongingness Scale (SBS)	Two dimensions: Acceptance/Inclusion and Exclusion/Rejection.	Developed and validated a short, 10-item measure to assess students' sense of belonging to school.
Nichols & Webster	Single-Item Need to Belong Scale (SIN-B)	Measures a single construct: the Need to Belong, with the item "I have a strong need to belong"	Developed a single-item measure of the need to belong as a brief alternative to the multi-item NTBS. The item was selected based on its high correlations with the full NTBS.

Table 2: Different Tools Used in Belonging Research

2.2 What are we measuring? Tools and Analysis When Measuring Belonging

Measuring belonging involves diverse scales, each built upon distinct theoretical foundations and employing varied methodologies, reflecting different levels of analysis, and engaging with the contextual nature of belonging in specific ways.

2.2.1 An Innate Drive

The *Need to Belong Scale (NTBS)* is grounded in the fundamental human motivation to form and maintain enduring interpersonal attachments, as theorized by Baumeister and Leary (1995). This 10-item self-report scale was initially developed from a pool of 23 statements assessing the desire for acceptance, seeking social group opportunities, and negative reactions to being shunned or rejected (Leary et al. 2013; Malone et al., 2012). The *NTBS* focuses on the individual differences in Need to Belong (NTB), the “need” or “desire” for acceptance and belonging, distinct from the “perception” of social acceptance or having met this need.

They posit that while the “need” is universal, individuals differ in the intensity that they feel this need. Based on this, it can be said that the scale is fundamentally aimed at measuring the “trait” rather than the “state.” Their theorization of need to belong implies the role of motivation, the personal drive to belong, to seek valued interpersonal relations; partially resulting from the fear of exclusion and our evolutionary need of human connection.

While mentioning the motivation to form and maintain interpersonal connections, they also highlight the intrapersonal aspects that come into play, suggesting the intrapersonal aspect of the NTB have significant implications for the interpersonal experiences arising from, or resulting from NTB, and consequently for belonging. In their 2013 article where they conducted various studies to map the nomological network of Need to Belong (NTB) Leary and colleagues established NTB as conceptually and empirically distinct from related constructs such as extraversion, sociability, and affiliation motivation, with only moderate correlations. It correlates most strongly with measures assessing the desire to be accepted and fear of rejection, but is not significantly associated with rejection sensitivity or perceived social support, emphasizing its motivational basis rather than a reactive trait. (Leary et al., 2013). The *NTBS* was also found to correlate positively with extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism, and with valuing secure and satisfying interpersonal relationships. As already mentioned above, the *NTBS* aims to capture the intra-personal dimension of belonging by accounting for the individual differences in the strength of an internal desire or motivation to be accepted and to belong. This internal state is distinct from the individual's perception of whether they are

accepted or the adequacy of their existing inter-personal relationships or social support. In other words, NTB is related to, but does not fully comprise of whether that need is met, or to what degree it is met. However, this intra-personal desire has significant inter-personal implications. A strong need to belong motivates behaviours aimed at obtaining and maintaining interpersonal acceptance and relationships. This includes affiliative tendencies, seeking social interactions, being cooperative, being sensitive to social cues, and valuing social aspects of identity (Leary et al.2013). For instance, “people who scored high on a measure of the need to belong demonstrated greater cooperation when working in groups, presumably because being cooperative helps to establish them as a member-in-good-standing in the eyes of other members (Leary et al. ,2013; DeCremer & Leonardelli, 2003).On the other hand, “people with a higher need to belong sometimes construe social situations in ways that help to maintain their sense of belonging, for example, by failing to perceive instances in which they are a target of discrimination.” (Leary et al.,2013). Fundamentally, their work highlights the belonging experience as an intrapersonal one that is constantly in play with the interpersonal aspects that shape it, either by motivating and hindering.

The *Single-Item Need to Belong Scale (SIN-B)* was later developed based on *NTBS*, for use in research settings where longer measures are impractical. It employed the item "I have a strong need to belong." from the *NTBS* which was found to best represent the construct based on their examination of the average inter-item correlations between each item and the other nine, and the correlation between each item and the full *NTBS* score. Studies showed the *SIN-B* had acceptable concurrent validity with the *NTBS*, good reliability, and explained most of the *NTBS's* variance, demonstrating similar relationships with constructs like need for consistency and public self-consciousness. Like the *NTBS*, *SIN-B* also aims to measure a trait-like motivation, and while studies using them can examine contextual influences on the “expression” or “appraisal” related to this need, the scales themselves primarily assess the underlying motivation to belong rather than the subjective experience of belonging in a specific context.

2.2.2 A General Sense of Belonging

In contrast, the *General Belongingness Scale (GBS)* aims to measure a “general sense of achieved belongingness” (Malone et al., 2012) that transcends specific interpersonal relationships, extending to a broader connection with the world. Its theoretical basis acknowledges the evolutionary importance of belonging and the concept of achieved belongingness. Development involved generating a pool of items based on literature, including

a balance of positive and negative wording to capture both inclusion and lack of exclusion. Using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, the scale was refined to 12 items, revealing a two-factor structure: Acceptance/Inclusion; and lack of Rejection/Exclusion. Despite the strong support for two factors, the high inter-factor correlation allowed the factors to be combined into a single, unidimensional scale for most applications. The authors designed the *GBS* to assess belongingness across multiple levels of specificity (Malone et al., 2012). This ranges from connection with close friends and family to societal others, and importantly, to an “overarching sense of belonging that transcends interpersonal relationships” (Malone et al., 2012). This suggests an attempt to capture aspects of belongingness that might relate more to an internal or broader connection rather than specific social interactions. This aligns with concepts suggesting achieved belongingness can be influenced by associations with groups, as well as one’s construal of relationships with objects, animals, nature, ideologies, and the spiritual, thereby transcending interpersonal relationships (Hagerty et al., 1995; Malone et al., 2012). Their work was first to examine the link between the achieved sense of belonging and intra-individual personality traits like Neuroticism and Extraversion, highlighting the link between intrapersonal component and the experience of belonging, further solidifying the personal nature of the construct.

They theorized a possible link between an achieved sense of belonging and the Big Five personality traits based on the reasoning that a sense of belonging requires stable relationships and these intrapersonal traits might play a role in facilitating such relationships (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Malone et al., 2012). Analysis of convergent validity demonstrated strong positive correlations with measures like the *Social Connectedness Scale* (1995) and the *Sense of Belonging Instrument-Psychological Experiences (SOBI-P)* (1995), and strong negative correlations with measures of Loneliness. Discriminant validity was established by showing that the *GBS* correlated only moderately with the *Need to Belong Scale (NTBS)*, supporting its distinction from the motivation to belong, in other words, it showed that the “trait” which is the innate need and motivation to belong; and the “state” which is experience of having that need met or not, are psychometrically different. While designed as a general measure, its two factors predicted different well-being outcomes when analysed separately. “Acceptance/Inclusion” predicted life satisfaction and happiness; “Rejection/Exclusion” predicted depression. This further suggests that even a general sense of belongingness encompasses distinct psychological processes that could be influenced by different aspects of one's environment and experiences, highlighting that contextual factors play an important role in facilitating this sense.

Hagerty & Patusky (1995) embarked upon one of the first attempts to develop an instrument grounded in their conceptualization of belongingness as a mental health concept, comprising valued involvement, fit, and antecedents. Their initial work aimed to develop a scale that could function as a screening tool to assess the presence or absence of a “general sense of belonging” (Malone et al.,2012). The development process involved generating an initial pool of items based on literature, clinical experience, and feedback from students and 33 items were selected for initial testing. Despite the theoretical framework proposing three components (valued involvement, fit, and antecedents), factor analysis resulted in two separate measures rather than a single scale with three factors. The “*Sense of Belonging Instrument-Psychological Experiences*” (*SOBI-P*) emerged from the items intended to measure valued involvement and fit, assessing the psychological experience of belongingness. This scale consists of 18 items, 17 of which are negative worded, and is rated on a 4-point Likert scale. It emerged as a valid tool to assess the subjective experience or feeling of belonging related to valued involvement and fit. The second scale that appeared from the factor analyses was the “*Sense of Belonging Instrument-Antecedents*” (*SOBI-A*), consisting of 14 items, also rated on a 4-point Likert scale, derived from those designed to assess antecedents or precursors to belonging. This scale measures the potential and energy for meaningful involvement with others. It can be said that the *SOBI scales*, particularly the *SOBI-P*, measure the sense of belongingness or achieved belongingness, distinct from the need to belong, by focusing on the subjective experience of inclusion and being valued in a system or environment, while the *SOBI-A* measures factors that contribute to, and facilitate this sense.

Based on Kohut's self-psychology theory, the *Social Connectedness Scale* and *Social Assurance Scale* were developed to measure distinct aspects of belonging related to frustrations of the "alter ego" need. Item development focused on the subjective sense of belonging, the “state,” using only negatively-worded items to reflect the “lack” of belongingness, initially trying to assess the experience of belonging by detecting the lack of it. Principal components analysis initially yielded two factors, though theoretically, three aspects were considered: companionship, affiliation, and connectedness. The *Social Connectedness Scale* taps into a general emotional distance, while the *Social Assurance Scale* reflects a need for reassurance from others. These scales were developed using a split-sample procedure on a large sample of college students. They showed high reliability and good test-retest stability. The emergence of only two factors, instead of the theoretically hypothesized three, was noted as a potential limitation. This could be influenced by the nonclinical nature of the development sample compared to Kohut's clinical focus, or it might suggest that only two distinct empirical aspects

emerged in this population, implying that the manifestation and measurement of these aspects might be context dependent.

2.2.3 Context-Specific Measures of Belonging

Scales such as the *School Belongingness Scale (SBS)* are explicitly developed to address the experience of belonging in a specific context. It conceptualizes belongingness as arising from person-environment interactions within the school context. Item development was guided by criteria reflecting subjective feelings and relationships “at school,” including subjective feelings of being a valued part of the school, relational self in person-environment interactions, relationships with teachers and friends, and capturing both the achievement and absence of belonging. Using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, a two-factor structure with 10 items was established. The factors that emerged were Acceptance/Inclusion and Exclusion/Rejection.

Another scale that was specifically developed to address the experience of belonging in a set context and its influences on the achieved belonging is *Belongingness Scale—Clinical Placement Experience (BES-CPE)*. Levett-Jones and colleagues (2009) defined belonging as a “deeply personal and contextually mediated experience” (p. 154) which involves a person feeling secure, included and in harmony with the referent group. Their conceptualization of the construct is consistent with the literature regarding how belonging emerges as an innate need on a personal level that is then mediated by and in turn influences the relationships one forms and the people’s reactions to whether that need is satisfied. Their specific interest was on the nursing students’ experiences of belonging in their clinical placements which further reinforces the contextual nature of the belonging construct. Psychometric evaluation of the scale yielded 3 factors: esteem, connectedness, and efficacy. These components that emerged as, say building blocks of belonging with respect to the specific context addressed in their work highlight the inter and intra personal aspects that influence the emergence and experience of belonging.

Most scales rely on self-report measures and employ factor analysis in their development to identify underlying structures. Many touch upon the distinction between inclusion/acceptance and exclusion/rejection, either as distinct factors (*GBS*, *SBS*), or as appraisals related to the need. However, they differ significantly in their theoretical starting points leading to different levels of analysis.

Fundamentally, they address context differently: while the *NTBS* and *SIN-B* measure a fundamental need whose relationship with appraisals might vary by context, scales like *GBS* and *SOBI-P* aim for generality. The *SOBI*'s distinction into psychological experience (*SOBI-P*)

and antecedents (*SOBI-A*) represents a different level of analysis compared to the trait-like need measured by the *NTBS* and *SIN-B* or the specific psychological aspects in the *Social Connectedness/Social Assurance* scales. The *SBS*, in contrast, explicitly measures belongingness within a defined context, illustrating how the contextual nature directly influences the tool's design and item content. The *SOBI* scales (*SOBI-P* and *SOBI-A*) are significant in the way that they provide a measure falling somewhat between a general sense and a highly context-specific experience, focusing on the subjective feeling and potential for connection. In contrast, *SBS* is explicitly developed to measure belonging, the “state” in a specified context. The development of these context-specific scales underscores that the contextual nature of belonging influences the measurement of the construct, requiring instruments tailored to the environment. This suggests that belonging is not solely a stable internal state or global feeling but is shaped by, and experienced differently across environments and relationships, thus influencing the design and interpretation of the tools aimed to measure it.

2.3 Characteristics of the Construct and Scale Design

An important takeaway from the review of these tools aimed at measuring belonging, whether the “trait” need to belong or the “state”: the experience of having that need satisfied, is the quantitative nature of them. Almost all the scales employ Likert-type self-report questionnaires to arrive at either a general measure of a sense of belonging or the measure of a context-specific experience, and convert the experience of belonging into numerical data. The quantitative approach requires operationalizing a concept into measurable items and relies on statistical methods to uncover its properties and relationships with related concepts. It is important to remember that the methodological features of the scales also offer a definition of belonging. Scale development typically starts from a theoretical background which informs item generation, for instance Mahar et al. (2012) used Baumeister and Leary’s work (1995) as their theoretical departure point. Items are then generated to reflect specific feelings, perceptions or behaviours related to belonging, consistent with theory. Items are typically rated on Likert-type scales, assigning numerical values to subjective experiences. This might have advantages such as quantifying for the subjectivity, as belonging is commonly described as being an individual experience. Likert scales are also beneficial as they provide a structured way for individuals to

report, or rate the degree to which they experience belonging, rather than yes/no questions, (Levett-Jones et al., 2009; Malone et al., 2012; Arslan & Duru, 2017), highlighting belonging as a continuous experience.

Quantitative methods like Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) are used to empirically determine the underlying dimensions or factors of the construct as measured by the items. This statistical process groups items that correlate highly, thereby defining the empirical borders of belonging, captured by the tool. The *General Belongingness Scale (GBS)*, for example, identifies two correlated yet distinct factors: Acceptance/Inclusion and Rejection/Exclusion, while the *Belongingness Scale-Clinical Placement Experience (BES-CPE)* reveals a three-factor structure comprising Esteem, Connectedness, and Efficacy. Similarly, the *SOBI* development led to the creation of two separate measures (*SOBI-P* and *SOBI-A*), and the *SBS* demonstrated a two-factor structure specific to school settings. Quantitative approaches also facilitate the distinction between belongingness and related constructs, like loneliness, social support, adult attachment styles, and personality traits. (Malone et al., 2012; Arslan & Duru, 2017; Nichols & Webster, 2013), through convergent and discriminant validation, thus clarifying the unique identity of the construct. Additionally, the reliance on self-report measures reveals the subjective nature of belonging, emphasizing individuals' subjective perceptions and feelings of connectedness rather than objective indicators of group membership or social behaviour. For instance, the *SBS* explicitly targets students' perceived sense of being valued and supported within their school environment, and the *Social Connectedness Scale* taps into a phenomenological (Lee & Robbins, 1995), felt sense of social closeness. The quantitative approach employed in the development of tools aimed at measuring belonging, tends to define it in terms of individual perceptions, rather than the external reality of their social situation.

2.4 Implications of tools used in Measuring Belonging

Drawing from the methodological features of these tools, some implications can be made about the nature of the construct of belonging. First of all, belonging emerges as a multidimensional construct, as the scales consistently identify multiple underlying factors or components of belongingness (Malone et al., 2012; Arslan & Duru, 2017; Lee & Robbins, 1995). The factors identified are either have a *relational* dimension, highlighting interpersonal components, such as Acceptance/Inclusion (as seen in *GBS* and *SBS*), and Connectedness (as seen in *BES-CPE*

and *Social Connectedness Scale*), or a *personal/subjective* dimension, reflecting intrapersonal components, perception, or agency related to these interpersonal relations. For instance, the Esteem and Efficacy factors of *BES-CPE* instrument. In addition to emphasizing the multidimensional nature of the construct, this dual nature also reflects the understanding of belonging as arising from the interaction between the individual and their environment/social context. Additionally, belonging emerges as either a general or context-specific experience. The existence of general scales (*GBS*, *SOBI*, *Social Connectedness/Assurance Scales*) and context-specific scales (*BES-CPE*, for clinical placement, *SBS*, for school) implies that belongingness can be understood as a stable, general trait or as a contextually mediated experience tied to environments and relationships.

Another key implication arises from the fact that the developed scales capture both the positive experience of acceptance/inclusion and the negative experience of rejection/exclusion, suggesting that belongingness encompasses a spectrum from positive connection to negative disconnection. To achieve this, scales often include both positively and negatively worded items to reflect the full range of belongingness experiences, underscoring that feeling included and not feeling excluded are both essential aspects of the construct.

2.4.1 Quantitative Nature of Belonging Tools

The quantitative design of these belongingness tools that we have reviewed so far, while offering significant advantages in terms of measurement and validation, also offers potential disadvantages or limitations for understanding the nature of the construct. One primary concern is the reliance on subjective self-report data, which captures, as mentioned, individuals' perceptions of belonging rather than objective indicators of social integration. This approach is susceptible to response biases, including the tendency to provide socially desirable answers (Levett-Jones et al., 2009). Moreover, the generalizability of findings is limited due to the specific samples often used in validation studies (such as the college student sample from USA for *GBS* (Malone et al., 2012) and the adolescent sample from Turkey for *SBS* (Arslan & Duru, 2017)). The findings regarding scale structure, reliability, and validity, as well as relationships with other constructs, are initially validated within these specific groups. This limits the generalizability of the scales and the derived understanding of belongingness to other populations, cultural contexts, or age groups.

2.4.2 Possible Limitations

As a consequence of factor analysis and item selection, quantitative scales might end up measuring only specific aspects or dimensions of the broader, complex construct of belongingness, rather than encompassing its entirety (Lee & Robbins, 1995). For example, the *Social Connectedness/Assurance* scales were reported to reflect aspects of belonging rather than the whole construct and further research involving diverse samples is explicitly recommended. Another possible limitation arises from the dual-valanced item structure of most scales, raising a concern that they might be primarily measuring the lack of belongingness or the distress associated with exclusion, rather than directly capturing the positive experience of feeling connected or included (Malone et al., 2012). While efforts were made to include positive items in some scales such as the GBS and SBS, the reliance on negative items in others is noted as a limitation (Malone et al., 2012; Lee & Robbins, 2015).

While some scales are developed for specific contexts (*BES-CPE* and *SBS*), scales quantifying for a more general sense of belonging might arrive at their desired measure by averaging experiences across different environments (Malone et al., 2012). The specific quantitative items selected might not fully capture the unique factors influencing belongingness within particular contexts or relationships, which might be better illuminated by qualitative methods. For instance, Levet-Jones et al. (2009) incorporated a qualitative phase, interviewing participants to explore the factors that impact their experience of belonging, then thematically analysing the data, to inform the development of *BES-CPE* scale. This suggests that even within a context like clinical placement, understanding why differences in belongingness exist might require exploring contextual factors beyond the scale itself.

2.5 Negative Item vs Positive Item Structure: Possible Implications for the Nature of the Construct

A notable difference in the construction of instruments designed to measure belonging lies in their use of positively-worded items (reflecting inclusion or acceptance) versus negatively-worded items (reflecting exclusion or lack of belonging). This variation in item structure is not merely a technical detail; it carries significant implications for precisely what aspect of the complex construct of belonging is being captured. While the measurement of belonging spans a variety of scales drawing from different theoretical frameworks and targeting different levels of analysis, the wording of items also offers implications for how belonging is conceptualized and measured.

Negatively worded items (e.g., “I feel excluded”) are routinely reverse-coded in psychological measurements so that their scoring direction aligns with positively worded items (e.g., “I feel accepted”). The underlying assumption behind this practice is that reverse-scoring a negative item yields a conceptual opposite that is equivalent to a positive item, essentially treating "not feeling excluded" as identical to "feeling included." However, research has challenged this assumption, showing that negatively worded items do not always function as the direct opposites of their positive counterparts. Item wording, particularly the inclusion of both positively and negatively worded items within the same scale, has significant effects on the construct being measured. While often intended to make respondents more attentive and prevent biases like acquiescence, this practice frequently threatens the validity and reliability of the scale (Barnette, 2000; DiStefano & Motl, 2006; Kam & Meyer, 2015, as cited in Bulut, 2021). Specifically, this practice tends to distort the intended factor structure of unidimensional scales, frequently resulting in artificial two-factor solutions where items group according to wording valence rather than conceptual content. This phenomenon has been observed in widely used instruments, for instance the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Theoretically unidimensional, the scale consistently showed a two-factor solution, differentiating positively and negatively worded items (Marsh et al., 2010 as cited in Zeng et al., 2020) Although an initial exploratory factor analysis yielded this two-factor structure for the RSE, further construct validation suggested the RSE was best represented by a single substantive factor, and the two-factor solution was attributed to “method effects” associated with item wording (DiStefano & Motl, 2006, as cited in Zeng et al., 2020). Method effect refers to artefactual relationships and/or dimensions within a scale that are caused by the way items are worded, rather than the content the items are supposed to measure. (Zeng et al., 2020). It represents a systematic tendency to respond based on criteria unrelated to the construct of interest. Method effects introduce “irrelevant systematic variance” (Zeng et al.,2020), thereby reducing internal consistency and threatening the overall validity and reliability of the instrument. These effects are explained through several mechanisms. First, negatively worded items require more complex cognitive processing, which can lead to inconsistent response patterns (Podsakoff et al., 2003, as cited in Zeng et al., 2020). Second, respondent characteristics such as age, reading ability, and cognitive development significantly influence susceptibility to method effects, especially among younger or less literate individuals (Bulut, 2021). Additionally, personality traits, such as fear of negative evaluation and self-consciousness, appear to predict the extent to which individuals are affected by item phrasing. A prominent explanation is that method effects represent a response style, which is considered a measurable personality variable or trait (Jackson &

Messick, 1958, 1962, as cited in DiStefano & Motl, 2009) and defined as “a behavioural consistency operating across measures of several conceptually distinct content traits (Bentler et al., 1971 p. 188)” (DiStefano & Motl, 2009 p.442). Other contributing factors include social desirability biases and motivational tendencies such as approach and avoidance orientations. Contextual variables, such as the specific domain of the scale and linguistic features of the items, also play a role.

Importantly, cultural context further shapes how item wording is interpreted and responded to (Zeng et al., 2020). For example, in collectivist cultures like China, social norms that promote modesty can lead to stronger method effects for positively worded items when measuring constructs like self-esteem, confirmed by the studies conducted by Farh and Cheng (1997), as cited in Zeng et al., 2020.

These issues also have significant implications for belongingness scales, especially those composed largely or entirely of negatively worded items. Many belongingness scales, such as the *Sense of Belonging Instrument-Psychological Experiences (SOBI-P)* and the *Social Connectedness Scale*, rely heavily or exclusively on negatively worded items to assess the absence of belonging, assuming that reversing these responses yields a conceptual opposite equivalent to presence or achievement of belonging. This has significant implications for construct validity, especially when a scale aims to assess a general sense of belonging yet relies on indicators of exclusion, rejection, or isolation. “For example, some individuals may report a sense of belonging because they feel included, whereas others may report a sense of belonging because they do not feel excluded” (Malone et al., 2012).

In contrast, tools like the *General Belongingness Scale (GBS)* intentionally balance both positive and negative phrasing, capturing not just the lack of exclusion but also the experience of inclusion and acceptance. This structure led to the identification of two interrelated but distinct factors, Acceptance/Inclusion and Rejection/Exclusion, each shown to predict different well-being outcomes (happiness vs. depression). This suggests that belonging is not simply the inverse of rejection but may involve dual psychological processes. The *School Belongingness Scale (SBS)* similarly reflects this two-dimensional structure within a specific context, showing how item wording and context does and should interact to shape measurement.

Ultimately, the linguistic structure of items, whether they affirm connection or detect disconnection, intersects with the scale's theoretical focus (trait vs. state, general vs. contextual) and its level of analysis (subjective appraisal vs. behavioural engagement). The *SOBI-P*, for example, while theoretically aimed at capturing the psychological experience of belonging, may fall short in measuring positive belongingness due to its overwhelming reliance on negatively

phrased items. On the other hand, tools with balanced items like the *GBS* or context-specific measures like the *SBS* better capture the multifaceted and context-dependent nature of belonging.

3.BELONGING: A CONTEXTUAL CONSTRUCT

As already mentioned, sense of belonging is a subjective experience that is influenced by outside constraints. Sense of belonging can be defined by its contextual nature that it is a subjective feeling of value and respect derived from a reciprocal relationship to an external referent that is built on a foundation of shared experiences, beliefs, or personal characteristics. In their 2009 paper where they developed the context-specific SEB-CPE, Levett-Jones and colleagues defined belonging as a contextually mediated experience. Furthermore, Mahar et al. (2013) proposed that belonging is context-dependent, shaped by environmental and personal factors that either facilitate or inhibit one's connection to a group or place. Overall, belonging is consistently defined throughout the respective literature as a subjective sense of value and mutual respect, emerging from reciprocal interactions that affirm one's place within a community. Importantly, Mahar et al. recognized belonging as a fluid and multidimensional experience, one that can fluctuate according to situational changes, highlighting that it is as much about self-perception as it is about interpersonal and environmental cues.

3.1 Belonging and Life Context

The development of a sense of belonging occurs in a complex social context, unfolding through a gradual involvement in social systems that range from micro to macro levels (Kolesovs, 2019). This person-context interaction is dynamic, potentially changing individual experiences and expectations regarding belonging across different levels, including community or country. Life context significantly shapes this sense, as contextual opportunities and constraints influence its development (Kolesovs, 2019). Factors contributing to the feeling of being "at home" in a place, a key dimension of belonging ("place-belongingness"), are deeply embedded in one's life context (Antonsich, 2010). According to Antonsich's analytical framework, this sense of being "at home" comprises various factors. Autobiographical factors include personal experiences, relations, and memories, with childhood memories often playing a key role. The continued presence of family or memories of ancestors in a place also contributes to this feeling. Relational factors are crucial, encompassing personal and social ties with friends, family, and even weaker ties from occasional interactions; these ties need to be long-lasting, positive, stable, significant, and involve frequent interaction to generate a strong sense of belonging (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Antonsich, 2010). Cultural factors, notably language, along with traditions and habits, can evoke intimacy and familiarity, contributing to the generation of a sense of

belonging. According to him, economic context also matters, as secure and stable material conditions and building a professional life can make a person feel they have a stake in the future of the place where they live. Legal factors are experienced as producing security and the right to participate; immigrants, for instance, distinguish between the rights/responsibilities of political belonging (often linked to citizenship) and the identity dimensions of cultural belonging, rooted in place of birth or traditions (Brettell, 2006).

Personal feelings of being "at home" are also conditioned by the broader social context and the politics of belonging, which is defined as discourses and practices of inclusion and exclusion by Antonsich, who states that "politics of belonging involves two opposite sides: the side that claims belonging and the side that has the power of 'granting' belonging. This means, that a process of negotiation....is always in place, either at the individual or at the collective scale or both (Skrbiš et al., 2007, 261–262)." (Antonsich, 2010, p.650). Feeling excluded or not welcomed can inevitably spoil one's personal sense of belonging. Social exclusion or marginalization are contextual factors that significantly interact with individual predispositions of the need to belong, and in turn the achieved sense of belonging (Bäck et al., 2015). Ultimately, belonging is not something that just happens; it is something that is created through engagement with one's life context.

From the early sections of this work, I emphasized a distinction between the "trait" belonging and "state" belonging. The "trait" which is the fundamental, innate need all humans have. It motivates us to seek and maintain meaningful relationships; which represents an interpersonal component; which is then shaped by context and intrapersonal appraisals such as one's eagerness to satisfy said need. On the other hand, there is the "state" belonging, a contextually (again) mediated response (Pardede & Kovač, 2023) to our relations and interactions; essentially an emotional experience of having the need to belong met, or not. This experience is inherently dynamic and shaped by a multitude of factors. As established through the literature review, these factors are highly context-specific. A specific interest of this work is how belonging is constructed on the country level and how it is experienced in this context.

3.2 Country Context: Belonging to a country

3.2.1 Person–Context Interaction and the Nature of Country Belonging

Person-context interaction is dynamic which means that an individual's experiences and expectations regarding belonging can change across different levels, such as community or country. As stated, context significantly influences the sense of belonging, and in the case of

country belonging, specifically because contextual opportunities and constraints shape its development. The sense of belonging to a country comprises perceived social, historical, and geographical ties, which are experienced in association with a particular community and locality (Miller, 2003; Kolesovs, 2019).

Country belonging includes a relational component reflecting the need for belonging and relatedness, emphasizing personal involvement in social relationships and perceived acceptance from others and a spatiotemporal component, which links individual interaction with particular places and time, manifesting as a personal commitment across different temporal frames (Kolesovs, 2019). The formation and shaping of country belonging were examined from a bioecological perspective as a “proximal process of interaction between the person and the social environment, where gradual involvement in social systems adds new facets from micro to macro levels” (Kolesovs, 2019). This perspective highlights that communities are considered nested ecological systems within the broader level of the country. (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006 as cited in Kolesovs, 2019). Following an ecological perspective while studying predictors of country belonging in Latvia, Kolesovs & Melne (2017) theorized the sense of belonging to a country as a process that manifests itself in different levels of social systems. An important level they included was the community level, which was thought to involve “perceived opportunities for need fulfilment and individual views of the future of the community” (Arcidiacono et al., 2007; Tartaglia, 2006 as cited in Kolesovs, 2019). Given the nested structure of social systems and the significance of local territorial belonging, the researchers concluded that the level of a community should be involved in the analysis of belonging to a country (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Arcidiacono et al., 2007 as cited in Kolesovs, 2019). Kolesovs’ 2019 study aimed to compare models predicting belonging in different ethnolinguistic groups in Latvia, where prior work (Kolesovs & Melne, 2017) suggested possible differences in predictors of belonging due to ethnic group effects on belonging at the community level and perceived opportunities.

3.2.2 Community-Level Influences and Structural Predictors

Kolesovs & Melne’s 2017 study where they aimed to develop a structural model to predict factors that influence belonging to Latvia, in a sample of Latvian students. They reported that “For the sense of belonging to Latvia, an effect of ethnolinguistic groups was not significant.” (Kolesovs & Melne, 2017, p.550). Their preliminary model suggested that direct predictors of belonging to the country are revealed at the country level for Latvian students. The main predictor of belonging to a country emerged as perceived opportunities provided by Latvia for

fulfilment of personal goals, at the macro level, the country level. This finding highlights the contextual opportunities in goal setting, planning, and individual socialization (Nurmi, 2004; as cited in Kolesovs & Melne, 2017). Their 2019 study aimed to update this model as they predicted ethnolinguistic factors to play a significant role and reveal predictive factors more strongly at the community level.

The study's structural model, therefore, involved factors at both the community and country levels as predictors of belonging. The results confirmed significant connections between these nested ecological systems, finding that belonging to a community positively predicted belonging to Latvia in both Latvian- and Russian-speaking residents. As they hypothesized, the Russian-speaking students showed a lower sense of belonging to Latvia and a higher sense of belonging to a community, the local place of living, than the Latvian-speaking students. "These findings concur with the tendency to compensate belonging at a community level, associated with relatively higher safety and relatedness (Kumar et al., 2015)" (Kolesovs, 2019 p.258). "From a bioecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), a lower level of the sense of belonging to the country characterizes relatively lower involvement of the ethnolinguistic minority group in the society." (Kolesovs, 2019 p.258).

3.3 Proposed Models of Belonging in the Country Context:

The research by Kolesovs & Melne (2017) explored predictors of the sense of belonging to the country using an exploratory path model. In this model, the sense of belonging was defined as the perceived ties with the country or community, measured as the level of association of personal life with it in the present and in the future. The model incorporated multiple levels of social systems, from the meso-system (perceived support) through the community level (perceived opportunities for need fulfilment, views of the future of the community, and sense of belonging to the community) to the macro-level (perceived opportunities and personal evaluation of the present and future of Latvia). Perceptions at the macro-level were considered important elements of associating personal life with the country. The model expected that variables at the community level, such as belonging to the community, could predict variables at the country level, such as belonging to the country. Evaluation of the community was expected to predict evaluation of Latvia, and perceived opportunities at the community level were expected to predict perceived opportunities in Latvia. Perceived opportunities at the country level were selected as predictors of the evaluation of the country. Additionally, the model expected that perceived opportunities (at both community and country levels) would

predict the evaluation of the situation (community or country). When the model was tested, direct predictors of the sense of belonging to Latvia were revealed at the level of the country, specifically perceived opportunities provided by Latvia for fulfilment of personal goals and positive view of the future of Latvia. Belonging to the community was not a significant predictor of belonging to Latvia in the tested model.

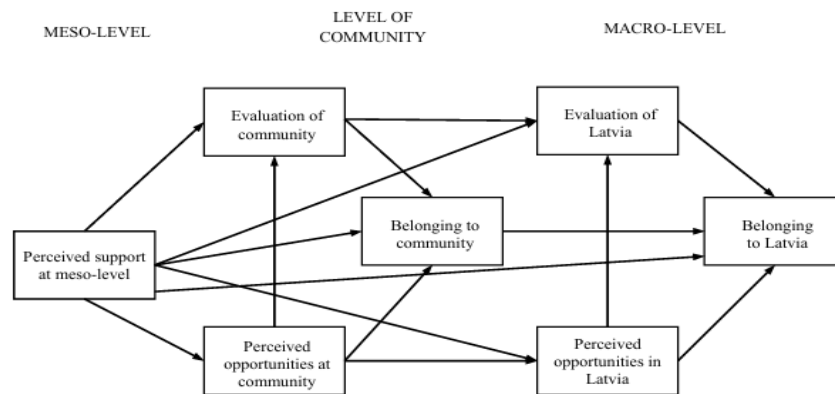


Figure 1: "A model of predicting the sense of belonging to the country" (From Kolesovs & Melne, 2017)

Building on the 2017 model, Kolesovs (2019) examined a structural model predicting the sense of belonging to Latvia in Latvian and Russian-speaking residents. This model involved opportunities for the fulfilment of personal goals and views of the situation in Latvia and the community as predictors of the sense of belonging at both levels of ecological systems. The model considered the view of a community to include personal control over the situation, the attractiveness of the living place, and evaluation of the situation. The view of the country included personal control, evaluation of the situation, and perceived power and stability of Latvia. Within this updated model, perceived opportunities for the fulfilment of personal goals remained the main predictor of the sense of belonging at both community and country levels.

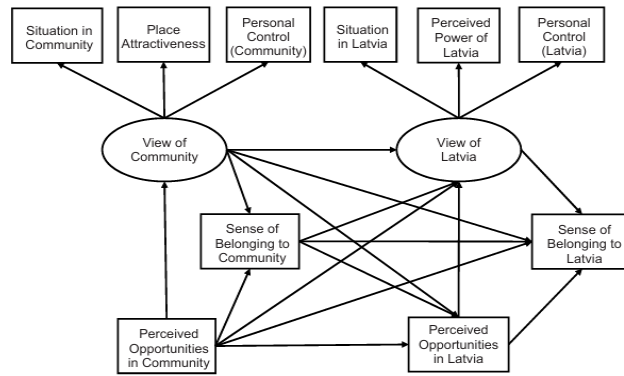


Figure 2: "The model suggested for predicting the sense of belonging to Latvia." (From Kolesovs, 2019)

The 2019 study emphasized the structural differences in the model between the ethnolinguistic groups. For the Latvian-speaking group, the view of Latvia (including evaluation of the situation, perceived control, and power) was a significant predictor of belonging to Latvia. For the Russian-speaking group, this connection was absent, suggesting more pragmatic ties based on perceived opportunities. (Tartaglia, 2006, as cited in Kolesovs, 2019). The connection between perceived opportunities at the community and country levels was significant only for the Russian-speaking group, indicating the importance of the local community for their perception of opportunities in Latvia.

Contributing further to the study of this complex construct at the country level, Kolesovs proposed and assessed a two-dimensional model that is consistent with the framework of Antonsich (2010). This model includes a relational component and a spatiotemporal component. In the context of belonging to the country, the relational component encompasses personal involvement, perceived acceptance, a sense of commonality with people, and the feeling of being "at home", a common phrase used in definitions of belonging. As mentioned above, Antonsich proposes a similar distinction, although using different words, he argues belonging should be analysed in two dimensions: the place-belonging which corresponds with the relational component of Kolesovs' model; and the politics of belonging, which Antonsich (2010) posits is a socio-spatial resource of inclusion/exclusion dynamics, which corresponds to the spatiotemporal component of Kolesovs' 2021 model. It represents personal commitment to the country across a broad range of temporal frames, including the recent past, present, and future; and it is difficult if not impossible to disregard the politics at play that constitute and direct it. Antonsich's conceptualization of belonging highlights that belonging encompasses individual feelings of connection but is also inherently tied to larger structural frameworks that dictate inclusion and exclusion dynamics within society. This aligns with findings on political

belonging, which assert that notions of national belonging are often constructed socially, leading to hierarchies where some individuals are deemed to belong more than others (Saey & Skey, 2016) This framework is important to consider in studies of country belonging as it provides insight into how the political landscape can impact an individual's feeling of belonging, particularly for marginalized groups, including immigrants and ethnic minorities. The 2021 article's model is different in structure as it focuses on the components within the sense of belonging to the country itself and how these components predict emigration. While it confirms that Latvian speakers have higher overall belonging (both relational and spatiotemporal) compared to Russian speakers, it does not test predictors of belonging from community or perceived opportunities in the same way the 2017 and 2019 studies do. However, the finding that perceived opportunities are significant for belonging is a consistent theme across all three papers, viewed as a key factor for individuals associating their life prospects with the country. The 2021 study empirically tested this two-factor model using confirmatory factor analysis and found an acceptable fit for the model. Both components were found to be reliable and demonstrated convergent validity with an explicit single-item measure of belonging, although the relational component was more closely associated with this single item. The study concluded that the sense of belonging to the country is indeed a complex construct, and these two components are identifiable.

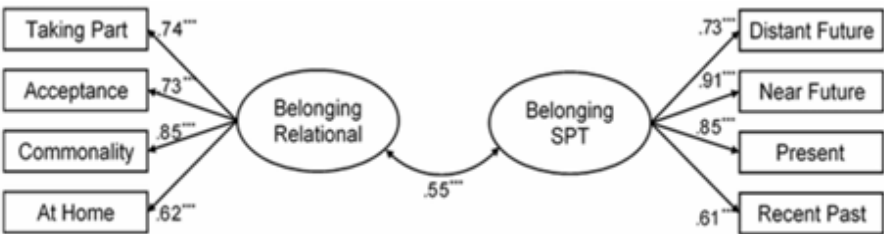


Figure 3: "Standardized factor loadings and covariance between the relational and Spatiotemporal (SPT) factors of the sense of belonging to a country. *** $p < 0.001$ " (From Kolesovs, 2021)

A key result from the 2021 study regarding the functional differences between the components was their different roles in predicting emigration. The spatiotemporal component was a direct, negative predictor of considering emigration, meaning a higher spatiotemporal belonging was associated with lower consideration of emigration. The relational component, while correlated with spatiotemporal belonging, showed no direct effect on considering emigration in the model. This highlights the importance of the temporal aspect and continuity of belonging, including its projection into the future, in understanding emigration intentions.

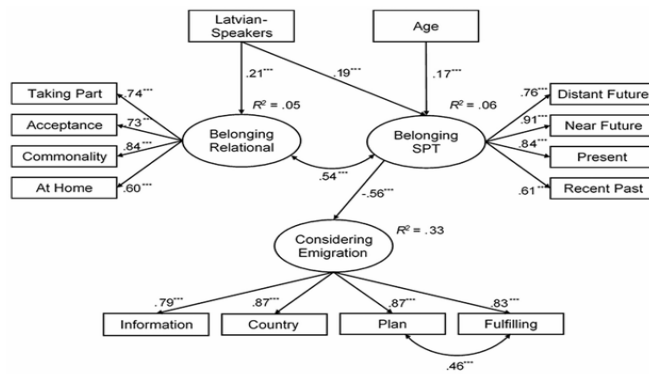


Figure 4: “Relational and spatiotemporal (SPT) factors of the sense of belonging to the country and demographic indicators predicting university students’ consideration of emigration. *** $p < 0.001$.” (From Kolesovs, 2021)

Another important contribution that should be considered in studies of country belonging is the work of Hirsch & Clark (2019) who proposed four ways to achieve a sense of belonging: “a communal-relationship path, a general-approbation path, a group-membership path, and a minor-sociability path” The article suggests that these paths are not necessarily independent but can combine and interact. They can be additive, where pursuing multiple paths simultaneously boosts belonging. They can also substitute for one another, where achieving belonging through one path reduces the motivation to pursue another. Although the Hirsch & Clark article does not focus specifically on country belonging, its framework offers valuable implications for understanding this construct. The theory suggests that feeling accepted and valued by one's country is not necessarily achieved through a single mechanism but can be pursued and attained via multiple, potentially interacting paths.

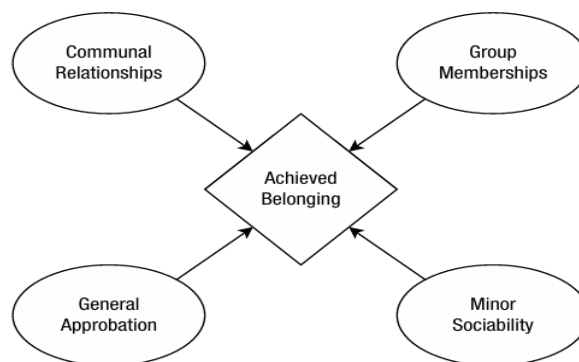


Figure 5: “Four paths to achieving belonging.” (From Hirsch & Clark, 2019)

Applying their paths to the national level, they theorized that sense of belonging to a country could arise from: (a) communal-relationship ties with fellow citizens or within national sub-groups, reflecting a feeling of connection and mutual support on a collective scale; (b) achieving

general approbation through success, status, or identification with the country's achievements, leading to a sense of being a valued member of the national collective; (c) group membership by identifying with the national group itself, or through membership in national organizations or communities within the country; and (d) minor social interactions with other residents of the country in everyday life, contributing to a pervasive feeling of being connected to the social fabric of the nation. The Hirsch & Clark model implies that individuals may rely on different combinations of these paths to establish and maintain their sense of belonging to their country. Furthermore, the paths could substitute for one another; for example, strong identification with the national group or pride in national achievements might compensate for a lack of deep communal ties at the national level, or vice versa. For policies aimed at fostering integration and belonging, particularly in diverse societies like Latvia, Hirsch & Clark (2019) suggest that a multifaceted approach is needed, addressing not just opportunities and views (as highlighted in Kolesovs's predictor models), but also facilitating opportunities for positive communal interactions, fostering positive national group identification, acknowledging diverse ways of contributing to national life, and recognizing the value of everyday social connections across different groups.

Hirsch & Clark present a more general theory of how a sense of belonging, defined as feeling accepted and valued by others, can be achieved. A key conceptual difference lies in their primary focus. Kolesovs investigate the structure and predictors of belonging to a country, a set context, highlighting components of belonging itself (relational, spatiotemporal) and external factors influencing it (opportunities, views, community belonging). Hirsch & Clark, on the other hand, focus on the different ways or paths individuals can take to achieve a general sense of belonging. While the relational component in Kolesovs's (2021) work (involvement, acceptance, commonality) conceptually overlaps with aspects of Hirsch & Clark's communal-relationship, group-membership, and minor-sociability paths, the Kolesovs models also incorporate a unique spatiotemporal dimension of belonging, which is not explicitly present as a distinct path in Hirsch & Clark's framework. Conversely, the distinct ways of gaining acceptance via status and admiration described in Hirsch & Clark's general-approbation path are not directly presented as components of belonging in the Kolesovs's models, though they might relate to factors like "perceived opportunities" or "view of the country". Kolesovs's research also specifically examines belonging within a particular socio-cultural and political context, which as we established throughout this review as a significant contextual factor, detailing observed differences between groups, whereas Hirsch & Clark's paths are proposed more generally, which might call for future cross-cultural research.

Belonging research has seen various attempts to conceptualize belonging through diverse yet complementary models, each grounded in distinct theoretical frameworks. (Kolesovs & Melne, 2017; Kolesovs, 2019), adopts Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory to propose a model of sense of belonging to a country, where individual perceptions of opportunities and the socio-political environment interact with local community dynamics to shape a sense of belonging. His works focused on the context of Latvia, most importantly comparing the Latvian versus Russian speaking population and his findings illustrate that Latvian-speaking participants tend to experience a stronger national belonging, while Russian-speaking minorities express a more localized, pragmatic attachment to community, reflecting their historical marginalization and limited perceived influence within national structures (Kolesovs, 2019). In his later work (Kolesovs, 2021), Kolesovs refines this model by introducing a two-dimensional construct, integrating both a relational component, involving feelings of acceptance and involvement, and a spatiotemporal component, which captures continuity of personal connection to the country across past, present, and future. This approach deepens the understanding of belonging as an evolving process tied not only to immediate social relations but also to temporal self-continuity and life trajectory. In the context of the country, it can be said that "belonging becomes synonymous with identity" (Antonsich, 2010).

Although not proposing a model, complementing these socio-ecological and temporal perspectives, Mahar et al. (2013) suggests belonging emerges from the interplay between individual agency and social structures, as we already mentioned. Drawing upon theories of relational autonomy and intersectionality, they emphasize that belonging is co-constructed through societal inclusion and personal validation, especially critical for marginalized populations. They underscore that belonging is both an internal feeling and an external condition, highlighting how systemic barriers can inhibit full social participation despite individual efforts. Meanwhile, Hirsch and Clark (2018) propose a model that identifies four distinct yet interacting pathways to belonging. Rooted in attachment theory and self-determination theory, their framework underscores the multiplicity of routes through which belonging can be pursued and experienced, illustrating how individuals flexibly navigate social environments to satisfy belonging needs. Unlike the structurally focused models of Kolesovs and Hirsch & Clark highlight the agency of individuals in actively constructing their sense of belonging through everyday relational strategies.

3.3.2 Takeaways from the Models

The review of these models suggest that sense of belonging emerges as a dynamic and multidimensional construct, particularly within a country context. It is not a fixed state but develops through proximal (Kolesovs, 2019) processes that involve continuous interactions between individuals and their social environments. This development is reported to be shaped by reflective engagement with one's goals and coping behaviours in light of perceived opportunities, constraints, and interpersonal relationships (Kolesovs, 2019). The sense of belonging develops through gradual involvement of the person in social systems at different levels, from micro (dyadic relationships) to macro (country). Key contextual factors like perceived opportunities for fulfilling personal goals and evaluations of the situation are highlighted as significant predictors in the development of belonging at both community and country levels (Kolesovs & Melne, 2017; Kolesovs, 2019).

In the context of a country, belonging is best understood as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon with two key components: the relational component, which reflects feelings of acceptance, commonality, and psychological affiliation with fellow citizens; and the spatiotemporal component, which represents one's commitment to the country across time: past, present, and future. These components are interrelated but distinct and must be measured separately for analytical clarity. Furthermore, belonging operates within nested social systems, where local (community) belonging significantly predicts national belonging. It is also shaped by contextual evaluations, including perceived opportunities for goal fulfilment, assessments of national stability and power, and individual perceptions of control. Importantly, belonging is not uniformly experienced across all groups within a country, ethnolinguistic minorities, for instance, may differ in both their level of national belonging and the pathways through which it is formed. Finally, the components of belonging serve different functions: while relational belonging fosters emotional ties, the spatiotemporal dimension more directly influences forward-looking behaviours, such as decisions about emigration. In summary, the models suggest that belonging to a country is a complex interplay of feeling connected and accepted (relational) while also perceiving one's future and history as tied to the nation (spatiotemporal), influenced by opportunities and evaluations of the country, and experienced uniquely depending on one's group membership and position within the social system.

4. BELONGING REVISITED: Final Reflections and New Paths

We have now reviewed numerous definitions of belonging across disciplines and analysed the levels of measurement, aimed at either capturing the “trait” belonging or “state” belonging, and moved to reviewing models regarding the specific interest of this work, belonging in a country context. Adding the country context in belonging research is particularly interesting as belonging is established to be highly subjective and contextual, and countries are practically well-established social systems where individual experiences create collective ones. Since belonging is already a complex construct, it becomes more challenging to conceptualize it at the intersection of these individual and collective experiences. Yet, I believe it is important to study belonging at the country level as it can offer many insights for citizenship practices, policies, and various social phenomena like immigration.

4.1 What Belonging Entails?

In a time where immigration or dislocation stories are common, belonging becomes more important as it directly relates with the experiences and feelings attached to them. Belonging is considered a soft social science concept yet it is central to discussions about the hard issues of immigrant integration and cultural diversity (Skrbiš et al., 2007). Studying sense of belonging is crucial from a country perspective in this regard because it is considered a dimension of broader concepts indicating desirable societal outcomes, such as social inclusion, well-being, social cohesion, social capital, and nationhood. It is seen as a deep-rooted feature of one's identity (Hou et al., 2017) and is fundamentally linked to national identity (Hou et al., 2017; Kolesovs, 2019). An important objective of belonging research emerges from this linkage. Belonging, especially in a country context is vaguely defined and theorized, and it is used interchangeably with terms like ‘national identity.’ Highlighting this point, sense of belonging was studied by Citizenship and Immigration of Canada (CIC), Government of Canada as it was considered to be a contributing factor to monitor how the CIC’s mandate is fulfilled, and it was predicted to be a facilitator of national identity formation. (Government of Canada, 2013)

It is clear that belonging encompasses larger concepts than just national identity in a country context. It is very much connected to personal perceptions and ties with the local community, the ethnic background one might have and the socioeconomic factors that affect them within the context of the country. Therefore, belonging seems to be a crucial concept to study for uncovering how the formation of identity evolves differently for every class, every group and even every individual. It can be theorized that understanding the way national identity

forms and is facilitated can offer insights for the political and policy practices regarding immigration and citizenship participation.

Belonging, as we mentioned, often comes into play with issues related to immigration as it is also a very prominent topic in the current conjecture. So let us think of an example of an immigrant. Even though we have no prior knowledge of their cultural or socioeconomical background, we can posit that they have a challenge at hand; which is adapting to a new environment. For immigrants, feeling accepted, secure, and "at home" in their adopted country reflects their sense of belonging to the receiving society, which is part of their socio-cultural and psychological incorporation (Hou et al., 2017). This process involves navigating integration into an environment often distinct from their home country (Au et al., 2024).

The ways and resources they use and develop facing this challenge cannot be thought separately from the notion of belonging. Because belonging consists of practices and emotions they experience with the challenge at hand and at the same time reflects their new environment back to them. In a way, belonging becomes the currency of a new good life. Therefore, policies and practices aimed at fostering and maintaining belonging is crucial for governments and social workers to address the difficulties immigrant might face and provide a more beneficial transition both for both parties, the people who migrate, and the host culture.

4.2 Some Takeaways from this Work

As we established through this review of the vast literature from various disciplines, belonging is a multifaceted construct comprising many intrapersonal and interpersonal components. It emerges as an interplay of many intrapersonal and interpersonal components that are vaguely defined and studied in the related literature. Its implications as both individual and collective experiences therefore are influenced and shaped by these components. From a psychological perspective, it involves a person's experience of being valued and feeling a fit between self and an external referent. From a political perspective, belonging is a dynamic process, constructed and negotiated along multiple axes of difference such as class, race, gender, and sexuality, underscoring its intersectional nature. With much importance, belonging is particularly contextual phenomenon, constantly interacting with political, social, and individual aspects. Emerging from the literature is the distinction between "trait" belonging, the fundamental, innate human need to seek and maintain meaningful relationships and "state" belonging, the contextually mediated emotional experience of having that need met or unmet.

The conceptualization of belonging is further complicated at the intersection of individual and collective experiences, particularly within the country context, which was the specific interest of this work. It is very rarely studied in this context but I believe studying belonging at the country level is crucial because it offers profound insights for citizenship practices, policies, and various social phenomena, including immigration and cultural diversity. It is considered a dimension of broader societal outcomes such as social inclusion, well-being, social cohesion, social capital, and nationhood, and is fundamentally linked to national identity. Understanding how national identity forms and is facilitated through personal perceptions, local community ties, ethnic backgrounds, and socioeconomic factors, can significantly inform political and policy practices regarding immigration and citizen participation. Ultimately, belonging is not a fixed state but a dynamic and multidimensional process, continuously developed through reciprocal interactions between individuals and their social environments, offering a vital currency for those navigating new contexts. Within the context of a country, belonging is best understood as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon with two key components: a relational component (reflecting feelings of acceptance, involvement, commonality, and being "at home" with fellow citizens) and a spatiotemporal component (representing one's commitment to the country across past, present, and future). This aligns with Antonsich's framework distinguishing "place-belongingness" and the "politics of belonging".

Furthermore, the methodologies used to measure belonging highlight its complex nature. Most scales employ quantitative, Likert-type self-report questionnaires, aiming to capture subjective perceptions rather than objective indicators. The development of these tools often reveals belonging as a multidimensional construct with relational and personal/subjective dimensions, and some are designed to specifically assess belonging within defined contexts, such as school or clinical placements. The very design of these scales, including the use of dual-valanced items, suggests that belonging encompasses a spectrum from connection to disconnection, implying distinct psychological processes for feeling included versus not feeling excluded.

Ultimately, belonging is not a fixed state but a dynamic and multidimensional process, continuously developed through reciprocal interactions between individuals and their social environments, forming a crucial dimension of broader societal outcomes such as social inclusion, well-being, social capital, and national identity, which calls for more precise academic attention.

4.3 Making the case for a Narrative Approach for studying Belonging

Reviewing the literature and how belonging, especially the “state” belonging has been studied, begs the question whether the methods developed to measure it are the most appropriate for a construct that emerges as the interplay of many factors. When dealing with belonging, there is always the possibility of confounding variables since it is highly individual and contextual mediated.

As we mentioned earlier in chapter 2, most endeavours at measuring belonging were with quantitative methods. After spending considerable time researching how belonging is situated and studied in the literature, I consistently realised the absence of a qualitative approach to belonging research. With a construct that evolves as the interplay of individuality and the social systems that surround a person, qualitative methods, particularly narrative analysis, seem to be better suited as they employ a unique capacity to delve into the complexities of individual and shared human experiences, meaning-making, and identity construction (Chinyamurindi, 2018; Nigar, 2020). Narrative inquiry focuses on how humans ascribe meanings to their experiences in various forms, including written, oral, and visual accounts (Nigar, 2020). It is adept at exploring the complexity of individual experiences and the emerging sense-making that accompanies them, whether positive or negative (Chinyamurindi, 2018; Nigar, 2020). This allows researchers to deeply understand how individuals experience and interact with their social world and the meaning it holds for them (Nigar, 2020).

Belonging is often an everyday 'ordinariness' that is unconscious and habitual, making it difficult to research directly through traditional questions about feelings (Bennett, 2014). Narrative analysis, especially when combined with methods like autoethnography, diaries, and photo-elicitation, can uncover these intangible aspects of daily life and the underlying meaning structures of actions that might otherwise be missed (Bekkout, 2015; Bennett, 2014). It allows for a "sideways" perspective, moving beyond conscious thought to reveal how belonging is "done" through practical engagement with the world (Bennett, 2014).

As we mentioned earlier in Chapter 3, belonging is also intrinsically tied to national and personal identity. Narrative methods can also be beneficial in this regard as they allow for the exploration of how people construct their identity, what influences this process, and the strategies they adopt when their identity construction is challenged, both at the country level and individual level. (Nigar, 2020). It can reveal how distressing or undesirable moments shape identity and how individuals reinterpret their being in the world through temporal and relational social interaction (Nigar, 2020). This approach also emphasizes that knowledge is created

contextually and that "truth is relatively experienced through individuals' worldviews" (Nigar, 2020). It reduces the researchers, or the measurement scales' preconceptions and offers a unique insight into the respondents' life-worlds (Bennett, 2014), which can be important for situations regarding migration and minorities since it is an experience unique to the individual yet affected by social and political systems, that can all be revealed in a narrative analysis.

As a concluding note, I would like to highlight Allen et al. 's (2021) mention of how the existing measures of belonging target a state-like assessment of a person's experience of belonging in a given point in time, followed by their suggestion:

“Studies will benefit from examining the best way to capture and track dynamic patterns and identifying (a) when and how a sense of belonging emerges from competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions; (b) the contextual factors needed to enable this emergence to occur; and (c) the feedback mechanisms that reinforce or block the emergence of belonging in a person” (p.95)

This passage represents my concluding belief of how belonging can be examined more comprehensively by considering the dynamic and emergent nature of belonging and taking the contextual and individual factors that aid or hinder its emergence, into account.

4.4 Important Points Summarizing the Work

Multifaceted and Complex Construct

- Belonging is a multifaceted and complex construct that has garnered interest from various academic fields since the late 1960s. While a universal definition is yet to be agreed upon, it is generally understood as the subjective experience of feeling "at home," connected to, respected, and appreciated by a group, person, or institution.

Multidimensionality of the Construct:

- Relational dimension highlights interpersonal components such as acceptance, inclusion, connectedness, valued involvement, and feelings of being "at home".
- Personal/subjective dimension reflects intrapersonal components, perceptions, or agency related to interpersonal relations, such as "fit" between self and referent, esteem, and efficacy.

Basic Human Need and Motivation:

- From a psychological perspective, belonging is considered a fundamental human need and motivation. The "need to belong" is described as a pervasive drive to form and maintain lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships.

Dynamic and Contextual Experience:

- Belonging is analysed as a dynamic, contextual experience. It is shaped by political, social, and individual aspects, and its satisfaction depends on how the innate need to belong is met within a given context.

Distinction Between "Trait" and "State":

- "Trait" belonging (need to belong) refers to the core universal psychological need to belong, an innate drive that motivates individuals to seek and maintain meaningful relationships. Individuals differ in the intensity of this need.
- "State" belonging (sense of belonging) corresponds to the subjective, situation-specific experience of belonging, an emotional response to interactions and relations in given conditions. It is inherently contextual.

Influence of Social and Political Factors:

- Belonging is influenced by social identities like class, race, gender, sexuality, and age, which shape one's position along an axis of power, affecting individual and group belonging experiences.
- *Politics of Belonging:* This concept refers to specific political projects that construct and negotiate boundaries of inclusion and exclusion within a community, often based on acts of "situated imagination" and specific political, cultural, and ethical frameworks. These struggles over meaning, recognition, and power are embedded in systemic structures.
- Belonging emerges as a product of the reciprocal relationship between the person and the external referent

Country-Specific Belonging:

- *Relational and Spatiotemporal Components:* Belonging to a country is best understood as a complex, multidimensional phenomenon with a relational component (feelings of acceptance, commonality with fellow citizens) and a spatiotemporal component (personal commitment to the country across past, present, and future).
- Perceived opportunities for fulfilling personal goals provided by the country are a main predictor of country belonging. Belonging to a local community can also significantly predict national belonging.
- Ethnolinguistic minorities, may exhibit a lower sense of national belonging and a higher sense of local community belonging compared to majority groups, often reflecting historical marginalization and more pragmatic ties based on perceived opportunities.

Importance for Societal Outcomes:

- Studying belonging at the country level is crucial, and calls for academic attention, as it offers insights for citizenship practices, policies, and social phenomena like immigration. It is linked to broader desirable societal outcomes such as social inclusion, well-being, social cohesion, and nationhood, and is fundamentally tied to national identity.
- For immigrants, a sense of belonging reflects their socio-cultural and psychological incorporation into a new environment and can be seen as "the currency of a new good life".

Measurement Challenges

- Most scales use quantitative, Likert-type self-report questionnaires, converting subjective experiences into numerical data. This emphasizes individual perceptions over objective indicators.
- The use of negatively-worded items (e.g., "I feel excluded") versus positively-worded items (e.g., "I feel accepted") has significant implications, as "not feeling excluded" is not always equivalent to "feeling included," suggesting that belonging may involve dual psychological processes.
- While some scales aim for a general sense of belonging, others are explicitly designed for specific contexts, underscoring how the analysis of the context is crucial in belonging research
- A narrative approach to studying belonging can be beneficial as it is a unique way of exploring how individuals ascribe meaning to their experiences and it reveals the social processes underlying the personal perceptions

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