



Module 4: Opportunities to Belong Research Review

Within youth programs, positive youth development is supported by programs' components, which include a safe environment, positive interactions and relationships, and engaging and enriching activities (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Moreover, there are psychological and emotional experiences, such as perceptions of belonging and connectedness, that play a role in youth's involvement in programs' environments, relationships, and activities. As such, a successful youth program has multiple features and characteristics that provide opportunities to enhance youth's sense of belonging and connectedness. Feeling connected to or a sense of belonging within an environment is a bidirectional process in that it includes feeling cared for by individuals in the environment as well as caring about those same individuals. Furthermore, youth's sense of belonging is related to available opportunities in their surroundings (e.g., schools, youth programs) and their abilities to take advantage of those opportunities (Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008). Youth programs are well-positioned to not only provide stimulating activities and a safe environment but also positive experiences that can lead to a greater sense of belonging and connectedness among youth participants.

What is Belonging?

There are many aspects to the definition of belonging. As a general term, belonging has been referred to as the feeling of individuals who "want to feel like they fit in and matter in a group" (Akiva, Cortina, Eccles, & Smith, 2013, p. 209). In describing positive youth development, belonging has been defined as occurring in settings "where youth perceive they are cared for and empowered within a given context" (DiFulvio, 2011, p. 1612). Belonging has been frequently studied in academic settings and within the context of youth's school experiences (Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, & Shochet, 2013), belonging has been defined as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). Regardless of the setting, an underlying theme of belonging is feeling that one has a place in whichever setting they inhabit and that their presence is valued in that particular setting. Aside from belonging or belongingness, this construct has been referred to as connectedness and relatedness; all of these terms will be used throughout this review.

Theories Related to Opportunities to Belong

The need to belong has been well-documented among social science researchers as a fundamental need and motivation for all people across the lifespan (Taormina & Gao, 2013). This need for belonging is theorized to manifest as motivation to become engaged in meaningful relationships (Maslow, 1943) and in activities that are interesting and provide a challenge (Deci & Ryan, 2000). However, the need to belong is probably most directly an extension of attachment theories (e.g., Ainsworth, 1989). Generally, attachment theories propose that people are predisposed to behavior that attains or maintains strong bonds and proximity with individuals who are thought to be better able to

cope, survive, or thrive in their shared environment (Bowlby, 1982). Although people are believed to form attachments with only a select group of individuals in their immediate environment (e.g., caregivers), the need to belong persists throughout their lifetime (Ainsworth, 1989). However, this need presents itself differently, depending on the individual's developmental stage. From pre- to late adolescence, youth continue the need to establish bonds and relationships with others, especially peers, although their motivations likely differ from when they were younger. Specifically, under conditions of healthy development, most youth do not seek attachment bonds based on security and trust (which characterized attachments during infancy and early childhood), but rather they seek relationships that serve more social, relational, and intimacy needs. Further, youth's manifestation of these bonds becomes more symmetrical in nature as they mature in that these relationships tend to be based on mutual needs that increase in reciprocity (Ainsworth, 1989). The need to belong was first embedded in theories by researchers and clinicians who aimed to explain individuals' motivation and functioning (e.g., Maslow, 1943); however, the concepts of belonging and need to belong have evolved into their own theory to explain why and how individuals develop bonds and relationships (Gere & MacDonald, 2010).

Based on theories of belonging in the context of attachment, Baumeister and Leary (1995) proposed two features of the need to belong as part of their belongingness hypothesis (that the need to belong is a "fundamental human motivation" p. 497): the need for frequent personal interactions with others and the need for a relationship or bond that includes stability, emotional concern, and maintenance into the future. In order to satisfy the need to belong through frequent personal interactions, the interactions are ideally positive or neutral and free from major conflict. To meet the need to belong through a stable, affective, and long-lasting bonds, individuals must perceive that the other person with whom they have bonded cares for their welfare and shares mutual affection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Although both features are not necessary to feel a sense of belonging, it is proposed that having both aspects of belonging will lead to optimal satisfaction of the need to belong. From this theory, there are other assumptions put forth regarding the need to belong that include the following: bonds should form without requiring unique or specialized circumstances; individuals should avoid breaking bonds as well as attempt to preserve bonds; and individuals will devote substantial effort and energy to cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions that relate to their need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gere & MacDonald, 2010). Specifically, individuals will devote time and effort to processing information (i.e., cognitive processes) about belonging because of the significant role relationships and bonds have in their lives. Further, high levels of belonging will yield positive affect and behaviors, while potential deprivation or actual loss of bonds will lead to emotional distress and/or problematic behavioral responses (e.g., emotional processing and problematic behavioral responses; Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

In summary, the need to belong is a strong motivator believed to have both psychological and physiological underpinnings and cognitive, emotional, and behavioral implications (Gere & MacDonald, 2010). Also, as previously mentioned, the manifestation of this need will be different, depending on an individual's stage of development. For example, during adolescence, youth may seek out opportunities to address their need to belong in a variety of adaptive (e.g., joining a sports team) or maladaptive (e.g., joining street gangs) ways. This need to belong varies from a sense of belonging in that the need to belong refers to an intrinsic motivating force while a sense of belonging refers to an emotional and psychological experience of one's connectedness to a group (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014). Youth programs offer numerous opportunities for youth to feel a sense of belonging that can support their positive

development; however, in order for a sense of belonging to have a positive impact on youth development, the feeling of connectedness must be with a positive, prosocial group or environment.

Opportunities to Belong and Youth Development

The field of positive youth development supports the belief that all youth have potential for positive change and encompasses the study of youth's strengths, skills, and positive attributes (Benson, 2006). Part of the study of youth's development includes exploring the numerous impacts on adolescent's behavior; the need to belong and the drive to find opportunities to belong are both strong influences on youth's social and interpersonal behaviors (Newman, Lohman, & Newman, 2007). The concept of belonging has been studied across the spectrum of child development from school-aged children (e.g., Green, Emery, Sanders, & Anderman, 2016) to emerging adults (e.g., Pittman & Richmond, 2007). However, a review of the literature yielded limited empirical studies about belonging or connectedness within the context of youth's participation in a youth program. Of the studies found, one recurring theme was the relationship between belonging and youth participation or attendance in a youth program (e.g., Hensley, Place, Jordan, & Israel, 2007). For example, how often youth attended a youth program in a month was positively associated with self-reports of belonging while number of years attending the youth program was negatively associated with belonging. Also, youth worker practices that were viewed as welcoming (e.g., being friendly with youth) were positively related to youth's sense of belonging (Akiva et al., 2013). Since the Akiva et al. (2013) study is cross-sectional, it is difficult to determine the direction of these relationships, but it is notable that type of attendance and staff practices may have some bearing on youth's sense of belonging in a youth program. Overall, offering youth positive, nurturing settings with opportunities to belong will provide more occasions for positive development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The following section highlights literature that yields data about how belonging is related to positive youth outcomes and experiences across community and school settings.

Youth Outcomes

A majority of the empirical literature about youth and the need to belong is focused on the sense of belonging in school settings (e.g., Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). Yet, many of the outcomes from those studies can be applied to youth programs. For example, not only was a sense of belonging to the university positively related to reports of scholastic competence (Pittman & Richmond, 2008) and a sense of belonging at school associated with greater self-efficacy among school-age youth (O'Neal & Cotten, 2016) but both scholastic competence and self-efficacy are also important constructs within youth programs. Furthermore, scholastic competence and self-efficacy might have a bearing on youth's sense of belonging with youth programs. Youth who chose to join a youth program because of intrinsic factors (e.g., relatedness, or a desire to feel connected) reported more autonomy, self-efficacy, and prosocial behaviors than youth who joined because of extrinsic factors (e.g., parents told them to join; Berry & Lavelle, 2016). Similarly, a negative relationship has been found between belonging and increased risk of substance abuse and antisocial behaviors among youth in a youth program. That is to say, more belonging is related to decreased risk of substance abuse (Anderson-Butcher & Conroy, 2002). Among middle and high school students, greater sense of belonging was associated with fewer internalizing and externalizing problems (Newman et al., 2007). Within an academic setting, youth's perceptions of belongingness were positively related to youth's engagement in school and positive youth adjustment; both relationships were significant over a five month interval (Van Ryzin, Gravelly, &

Roseth, 2009). Overall, the data support that a sense of belonging is positively associated with youth outcomes related to well-being and adaptive behaviors.

Youth Experiences

There are aspects to youth's functioning that are not always defined as outcomes (e.g., identity development) but that are equally as important to study and may be related to belonging. For example, since adolescence is a period where youth's multiple identities become more developed (Sharp, Coatsworth, Darling, Cumsille, & Ranieri, 2007), the opportunity to belong within their different environments becomes more salient and meaningful as they explore their identities (e.g., Theriault & Witt, 2014). As a result, youth may seek out more opportunities to feel a sense of belonging with various groups (e.g., youth programs or clubs at school) with which they identify or with which they would like to identify. Further, youth's report of connectedness across multiple domains (e.g., peers, community) is associated with well-being (e.g., positive affect, confidence; Jose, Ryan, & Pryor, 2012). In order to teach and support positive attributes youth can incorporate in their identity formation, youth programs can integrate curriculum that offers numerous opportunities for belonging and connectedness.

For many youth, finding opportunities to belong may be in the form of civic and community engagement that is offered by or facilitated through youth programs. Among youth in one youth program, a sense of belonging was positively linked to youth's sense of social responsibility, which includes beliefs about respecting the rights of others, engaging in adaptive behaviors, and avoiding maladaptive behaviors (McDonough, Ullrich-French, Anderson-Butcher, Amorose, & Riley, 2013). Programs that engage youth in experiences that actively contribute to their communities and neighborhoods may increase youth's connection to the youth program itself (Borden & Serido, 2009). Within academic settings, a greater sense of belonging has been found to be related to youth's interpersonal relationships and academic-related experiences (e.g., perceived academic fit; Green et al., 2016) as well as youth's intentions to persist and stay engaged in their academic setting (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). Further, among middle school students, increases in a sense of connectedness in a school setting was positively related to increases in youth's report of life satisfaction (Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, & Zumbo, 2011). Moreover, the more interpersonal support youth perceived and the fewer experiences of school-related stress, the more youth reported a sense of belonging within their school (McMahon, Parnes, Keys, & Viola, 2008). Similar findings were found in a sports youth program where more reports of youth's belonging within the program were related to increases in their reports of leadership emotional support from youth workers (Byrd & Martin, 2016; Martin et al., 2016). As evidenced by the findings from the previous studies, belonging is associated with different aspects of youth's functioning and development. However, there are several methodological concerns across studies, such as the various definitions of belonging or connectedness, so a brief review of methodological concerns is warranted.

Methodological Considerations


The assessment of youth's sense of belonging or a youth program's available opportunities to belong can be a challenge. One of the major methodological concerns for measuring both aspects is if researchers should rely on youth's or youth workers' self-report or observational data. For surveys and questionnaires to gather youth's self-report data (e.g., Anderson-Butcher & Conroy, 2002), another concern is divergent validity, which refers to ensuring a measure of belonging is not assessing another

construct with a different definition, such as youth's engagement, attendance, or perceived social support. Since belonging is more of a psychological and emotional experience rather than behavioral experience from youth's perspective, having content items that reflect the psychological and emotional sense of belonging is vital. However, when obtaining data from youth workers, opportunities to belong might focus more on available activities and programming in which youth can participate than on subjective feelings of belonging or connectedness. Therefore, when assessing opportunities to belong within a youth program, content of self-report measures will vary, in part, based on who (youth or youth workers) is completing the measure. Although not able to fully address this concern, operational definitions of belonging may help to reduce the variability across studies to help better compare and contrast their findings.

Observational data can provide information to complement self-report data from youth or youth workers as observable behaviors can serve as a proxy for internal motivations and experiences. Further, observational data can be especially informative to support or contradict youth workers' perceptions about how connected they perceive youth in their program to be. In summary, notable methodological concerns of opportunities to belong and sense of belonging relate to divergent validity of the construct(s), differences in who is reporting on which construct, and whether the data are self-report (quantitative or qualitative) or observational.

Implications for Youth Programs

There are several implications for understanding how the ways youth develop a sense of belonging can inform how youth programs can build and maintain opportunities to belong. As previously mentioned, there are few studies that examine belonging and connectedness in youth programs (e.g., McDonough et al., 2013); therefore, most data about belongingness among youth is from the literature on belonging in school (elementary, middle, high school, and university) settings. Similar to academic settings (e.g., Green et al., 2016), a sense of belonging within youth programs may be related to youth's ability to feel successful or productive within the program. In other words, the less that youth feel they are learning the skills and knowledge offered within a youth program, the lower their sense of belonging may be to that program. Also, opportunities for belonging and connectedness may increase the more youth workers are trained on issues directly related to youth they are serving (e.g., race, culture, sexual orientation, immigration) in order to strengthen the opportunities youth have to connect to workers and the program (Theriault & Witt, 2014). A meta-analysis of outcomes associated with school belonging suggests teacher support/relationship is one of the strongest predictors of school belonging (Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2016). This finding has implications for youth programs in that program administrators may need to reconsider the role of youth workers (as compared to peers) in youth's sense of belonging and connectedness in youth programs. Opportunities to belong within youth programs may be impeded by youth's experiences or observations of prejudice and discrimination in their youth programs or in the neighborhood and communities where the youth programs are located. Therefore, it is important that youth workers and administrators continue efforts to maximize inclusion efforts (e.g., diversity among staff, cross-cultural programming) across activities to provide opportunities for youth to feel a sense of belonging within the program. Moreover, there is evidence that youth's sense of belonging may be different across cultures in that different indicators of belonging (e.g., involvement with peers) could be more salient to different ethnic groups (Faircloth & Hamm,



2005). Taken together, youth programs can build on current efforts to maximize opportunities to belong by implementing strategies previously used in school settings and strengthening their inclusion efforts.

Conclusions and Future Directions

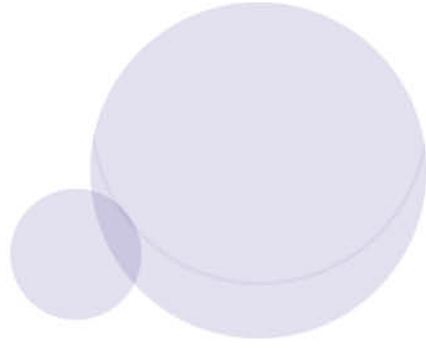
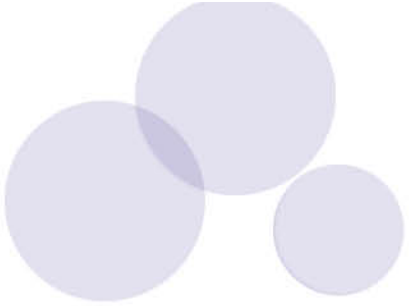
Youth programs have several characteristics that directly and indirectly support positive youth development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002); one such feature is affording youth numerous opportunities to feel a sense of belonging. Theoretically, there is strong evidence (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995) to support the importance of the need to belong across the lifespan, especially for youth during adolescence. Through a combination of activities, social interactions with peers, and interpersonal interactions with youth workers, youth programs are well-suited to help fulfill youth's need to belong. Based on data from school settings, a sense of belonging or connectedness is negatively related to maladaptive behaviors (Anderson-Butcher & Conroy, 2002) and positively related to well-being and adjustment (Jose et al., 2012). However, more research is needed to explore the many types of relationships between belonging and youth outcomes and experiences in youth programs although current data suggest similar findings as are found in school-based settings (Berry & Lavelle, 2016). Specifically, there is a need for more studies that test curricula and programming aimed at improving the amount, type, and breadth of opportunities to belong within youth programs. Also, as social norms and expectations for youth evolve, more qualitative data about what helps youth feel more connected and a greater sense of belonging in youth programs will help to improve how well youth programs engage youth from all backgrounds. As youth workers and administrators continue to increase and sustain efforts to provide opportunities to belong, youth's sense of belonging may be reflected in increased retention rates within programs as well as increases in engagement and participation at youth programs' activities. Overall, youth programs must consistently provide opportunities for youth to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness as one way for youth programs to foster positive youth development.

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Appendix A

Glossary of Terms

Positive youth development: a strengths-based, holistic approach to studying and working with youth that focuses on promoting healthy development. Positive youth development research and practice tends to emphasize environmental rather than internal influences on development, altering systems that may foster positive and healthy youth development. In research and practice, the term “positive youth development” may refer to a developmental process, an approach to youth programming, or a specific program or organization.

Youth programs: programs that foster youth’s personal development (e.g., social, ethical, emotional, physical, and cognitive competencies), participation, and empowerment while fostering relationships between supportive adults and young people. Youth programs are diverse in their structure, goals, and the youth they serve. These programs may be referred to as after-school, out-of-school, and/or youth programs; throughout this report the term “youth program” refers to any of these programs.

Youth workers: volunteers and paid staff, including administrators and individuals engaged in direct service, who engage in youth development work in a variety of settings and programs outside the regular school day. Similar terms include youth development professionals, after-school providers, and youth leaders. For the purpose of this paper, the term “youth worker” will be used to describe all professionals who work in youth programs.



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