



## Subjective belonging and in-group favoritism



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### A B S T R A C T

Three studies assessed the association between in-group favoritism and subjective belonging. Study 1 revealed that after New Zealanders allocated more positive resources to in-group than out-group members (i.e., Asians), they reported higher levels of belonging. Study 2 showed that when New Zealanders evaluated in-group members more positively than out-group members, they reported an increase in belonging. Study 3 examined the link between belonging and the allocation of negative resources (i.e., white noise) to in-group and out-group members amongst accepted, rejected and baseline participants. Group members who allocated more white noise to out-group than in-group members displayed elevated belonging. Relative to those in the baseline, accepted and rejected participants manifested pronounced patterns of in-group favoritism. Together, the results indicate that (a) different forms of in-group favoritism (i.e., evaluations and the allocation of positive and negative resources) are directly associated with enhanced belonging, (b) both high and low belonging can promote in-group favoritism, and (c) these relationships are not a function of personal esteem, group esteem or group identification.

The primary focus of research investigating the motivational ramifications of in-group favoritism has centred on the role of self-esteem. Decades of work has revealed that the empirical association between these two variables is fraught with contradiction and inconsistency (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Hunter et al., 2004; Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). Some, noting that research in this area is often beset by conceptual and methodological shortcomings, have sought to overcome these problems (Hunter, Platow, Howard, & Stringer, 1996; Iacoviello, Berent, Frederic, & Pereira, 2017; Long & Spears, 1997; Vignoles & Moncaster, 2007). Others claim that self-esteem has been over-implicated in intergroup relations, arguing that other motives may more appropriately explain in-group favoritism (Hogg & Abrams, 1993; Spears & Otten, 2012).

Research emphasizing the role of motives other than self-esteem has, so far, tended to emphasize processes such as uncertainty reduction (e.g., Hogg, 2007), control (Hayhurst, Iversen, Ruffman, Stringer, & Hunter, 2014), fear of death (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2001), social dominance, right-wing authoritarianism (Duckitt, 2001), and distinctiveness and inclusion (Brewer, 1991). Only the latter perspective - encapsulated within

optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT, Brewer, 1991) - has hypothesized a central role for belonging and inclusion.

In many respects this is somewhat surprising, as belonging is generally held to be a core motive in social psychology (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Fiske, 2004; Sherif & Cantril, 1947; Williams, 2009). The mere act of belonging has important consequences for behavior in the most minimal of circumstances (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Moreover, people refuse to dissolve relationships even when not doing so may lead to death - (see Helm's, 2015, p. 339, description of the Romani who begged to be taken to Auschwitz). When achieved, belonging provides an array of psychological benefits (Cruwys, Haslam, Dingle, Haslam, & Jetten, 2014; Fiske, 2004; Scarf et al., 2016). When belonging is frustrated, through rejection or isolation, it is associated with a wide range of negative psychological, behavioral and physical outcomes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary, 2010; Williams, 2009).

The fact that people are “born into and cannot survive outside, the context of, ongoing social relations and interactions” (Stryker, 1997, p. 316), is widely recognized. From an evolutionary perspective, belonging is seen as adaptively advantageous, in so far as those who belong are especially likely to survive and reproduce (Baumeister & Leary,

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1995). From a social learning or socio-cultural standpoint, belonging is an inescapable facet of our social world that is valued and celebrated (e.g., via religion, schools, sports teams and families) throughout life (Brown, 2000a). From the cradle to the grave, we learn that those who accept us (e.g., family, friends) provide food when we are hungry, shelter when we are cold and emotional support when we are sad.

To date, research concerned with assessing the relationship between belonging (defined here as one's subjective sense of acceptance by in-group members) and intergroup attitudes has focused on the reactions of those whose sense of inclusion is threatened (e.g., people who have high need to belong, are on the margins, or who have been temporarily excluded). The evidence from this body of work suggests that group members in such situations often respond with relatively pronounced patterns of in-group favoritism (Jetten, Spears, & Branscombe, 2002; Noel, Wann, & Branscombe, 1995; Vignoles & Moncaster, 2007; Williams, Case, & Govan, 2003), ethnocentrism (Greitemeyer, 2012), out-group prejudice (Nesdale et al., 2010), intergroup hostility (Schaafsma & Williams, 2012), category-based aggression (Gaertner, Iuzzini, & O'Mara, 2008) and a tendency to endorse extreme behavior that supports the in-group (Gómez, Morales, Hart, Vázquez, & Swann, 2011).

These findings are consistent with the premise that belonging is an important motive for intergroup behavior in so far as threats to group inclusion motivate the expression of in-group favoritism as a means of re-establishing belonging (Leonardelli, Pickett, & Brewer, 2010). The need to belong may be especially strong amongst those who are denied full acceptance into their respective in-groups. It is also possible, however, in a more general sense, that social category members may resort to in-group favoritism to enhance their sense of belonging.

This latter proposition may be derived from at least four theoretical frameworks. First, from the perspective of ODT (Brewer, 1991), there is the direct suggestion that in-group favoritism may be motivated by the need for inclusion (Leonardelli et al., 2010, p. 97). Second, on the basis of social identity theory (SIT), Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje (1999) argue that the display of in-group favoritism is often used as a kind of group identity management strategy. That is, in circumstances where it is normative or socially acceptable to display in-group favoritism, category members may display such behavior strategically in order that they achieve in-group acceptance.

Third, from the perspective of the belonging hypothesis (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Leary, 2010) and sociometer theory (Leary, 2005), it has been proposed that many of the social behaviors traditionally thought to be motivated by self-esteem are more readily explicable in terms of belonging. This point is specifically emphasized by Leary (2005) in his discussion of the research pertaining to in-group favoritism and self-esteem. Leary states that the (a) inconsistent findings in this area emerge “because self-esteem is not the critical variable” that underlies in-group favoritism (Leary, 2005, p. 103), and (b) that we might progress our understanding in this area if we replace self-esteem with belonging.

The crucial factors, in this regard according to Leary, are relational value and belonging (Leary, 2005, 2010). To be included (and not rejected) people need to demonstrate that they are good and valuable group members (i.e., they have high relational value). Group serving acts such as displays of loyalty and support of the in-group's goals and values function to achieve this. Indeed, Platow, O'Connell, Shave, and Hanning (1995) found that group members were perceived as more socially attractive when they showed in-group favoritism than intergroup fairness. Thus, in the context of intergroup relations, in-group favoritism can emerge as a means of facilitating acceptance and belonging.

A fourth, alternative way in which in-group favoritism can be linked to elevated belonging is found in the group heuristic approach advocated by Yamagishi and his associates (Yamagishi & Mifune, 2008; Yamagishi, Mifune, Liu, & Pauling, 2008). According to this model the interdependent nature of group life has engendered a generalized

exchange system, whereby people assume that in-group members will reciprocate in the sharing of resources. To ensure that they are included in this process, people (because they are monitored by others in the system) need to demonstrate that they will contribute to the wellbeing of the group. An obvious way of doing this would be to show altruism, kindness and support for members of the in-group. Thus, when category members display in-group favoritism (with respect to the allocation of resources or evaluations) they might report higher levels of belonging as they would, on the face of it, feel more accepted by others within the system.

In sum, on the basis of insights derived from a number of theoretical perspectives there is reason to believe that in-group favoritism may function to enhance belonging. In addition to such theorizing, there is some evidence to suggest that threatened belonging may promote enhanced in-group favoritism (Jetten et al., 2002; Noel et al., 1995). The aim of the current investigation is to examine both of these possibilities. Three studies are reported. Studies 1 and 2 examine the link between in-group favoritism (via the use of allocations and evaluations) and elevated belonging. Study 3 assesses the association between belonging and in-group favoritism (involving the allocation of white noise) as a function of acceptance and rejection. In the first study, we test one hypothesis. This hypothesis is simply that the display of in-group favoritism will lead to relatively high levels of subjective belonging.

## 1. Study 1

### 1.1. Method

#### 1.1.1. Participants

Seven-hundred and fifty-eight first year psychology students took part in this study.<sup>1</sup> The data from 54 participants were excluded because they had either taken part in similar studies ( $n = 24$ ), did not identify as New Zealanders ( $n = 25$ ), or expressed concerns about the true purpose of the investigation ( $n = 5$ ). Our final sample comprised 202 men and 502 women. All received course credit for taking part.

#### 1.1.2. Design

Participants were randomly assigned to 3 broad conditions: a favoritism condition ( $n = 229$ ), 1 of 5 non-favoritism conditions (i.e., parity-allocation,  $n = 50$ ; double in-group,  $n = 50$ ; double out-group,  $n = 50$ ; competitive out-group,  $n = 50$ ; individual,  $n = 50$ ) and a baseline condition ( $n = 225$ ). In the favoritism and non-favoritism conditions, belonging was assessed following the completion of allocation tasks. In the baseline condition, belonging was assessed prior to the completion of distractor tasks.

#### 1.1.3. Materials and procedure

This study was conducted in the Year One psychology teaching laboratories at the University of Otago. Participants were tested in groups of between 8 and 40. The study was introduced as being concerned with the social perceptions, judgments and behaviors of people with different group identities. Because tasks that draw attention to category awareness (or serve as reminders of social connection) may function to enhance (Gardner, Pickett, & Knowles, 2005; Haslam, 2004) or undermine one's sense of belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2007), we specifically sought to make group membership salient at the outset of the study. In so doing, our aim was to reduce the impact of this factor on any observed changes in belonging. Participants in the favoritism and non-favoritism conditions were subsequently informed that the study was

<sup>1</sup> Studies assessing the impact of in-group favoritism upon motivational outcomes (such as self-esteem and control) typically tend to report small effects (Hayhurst et al., 2014; Hunter et al., 1996; Hunter et al., 2011). To avoid the likelihood of a type two error at this stage in our research, we, in following the specific recommendations of West, Biesanz, and Pitts (2000), p. 53, included a sample ( $n = 700 +$ ) large enough to detect a small effect size.

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