



Is psychological membership in the classroom a function of standing out while fitting in? Implications for achievement motivation and emotions☆



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ABSTRACT

Education researchers have consistently linked students' perceptions of "fitting in" at school with patterns of motivation and positive emotions. This study proposes that "standing out" is also helpful for producing these outcomes, and that standing out works in concert with perceptions of fitting in. In a sample of 702 high school students nested within 33 classrooms, principal components analysis and confirmatory factor analysis were each conducted on half of the sample. Results support the proposed structure of measures of standing out and fitting in. Multilevel latent profile analysis was then used to classify students into four profiles of standing out while fitting in (SOFI): Unfulfilled, Somewhat Fulfilled, Nearly Fulfilled, and Fulfilled. A multinomial logistic regression revealed that students of color and those on who paid free/reduced prices lunch were overrepresented in the Unfulfilled and Somewhat Fulfilled profiles. A multilevel path analysis was then performed to assess the direct and indirect associations of profile membership with measures of task value and achievement emotions. Relative to the other profiles, students in the Fulfilled SOFI Profile express greater psychological membership in their classrooms and, in turn, express higher valuing of academic material (i.e., intrinsic value, utility value, and attainment value) and more positive achievement emotions (i.e., more enjoyment and pride; less boredom, hopelessness, and shame). This investigation provides critical insights on the potential benefits of structuring academic learning environments to foster feelings of distinctiveness among adolescents; and has implications for cultivating identities and achievement motivation in academic settings.

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1. Introduction

Identity research reveals that seeing oneself as distinct is not only vital for identity construction, but is a basic human need (Vignoles, Chrysochoou, & Breakwell, 2000). Yet studies that explicitly examine students' distinctiveness perceptions remain

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largely absent within the metanarrative of psychological research in education in general, and within research on students' personal and social identities more specifically. Learning environments that are attuned with adolescents' identity needs produce students with more positive emotions who also are more motivated to achieve (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Roeser, Peck, & Nasir, 2006). For this reason, distinctiveness research may have applied significance for psychologists who provide critical insights to educators on ways to structure learning environments that are socially inclusive, emotionally safe, and motivationally supportive.

The dearth of research on distinctiveness may be because researchers tend to prioritize adolescents' desires to fit in at school (Crosnoe, 2011)—with an assumption that standing out and fitting in represent opposite ends of a continuum. Some psychologists contend, however, that adolescents strive to simultaneously stand out and fit in (Eccles, 2014), and that the concurrent satisfaction of these desires will result in adaptive patterns of achievement motivation (Gray, 2014). If it is possible for students to satisfy their desires to simultaneously stand out and fit in, and if doing so serves as a platform for identity maintenance and construction at school, then examining these desires may provide new pathways for understanding influences on student identities and motivation in achievement contexts.

This article focuses on students' psychological experiences related to their desires for both distinctiveness and similarity, and on how students are fulfilled in the context of a classroom—referred to as standing out while fitting in (SOFI). Recognizing an individual's personal qualities (such as opinions, perspectives, and experiences) serves to affirm the individual's unique existence (Codol, 1984; Demir, Şimşek, & Procsal, 2013)—ultimately contributing to a “valued sense of singularity” (Schachter & Rich, 2011, p. 229). In line with prior identity research (Jansen, Otten, Van der Zee, & Jans, 2014; Shore et al., 2011), the present study advances the argument that the perception of feeling distinguished from one's classmates does not necessarily come at the expense of sharing commonalities with classmates. This study provides an examination of whether SOFI predicts motivation and accompanying achievement emotions in the context of high school classrooms. Guided by optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991), this study also investigates whether SOFI indirectly predicts these outcomes through perceptions of psychological membership (i.e., identification) in the classroom. A careful reading of the literature on SOFI reveals multiple perspectives that converge on similar predictions. This article highlights consistencies in previous work, using terms such as (a) distinctiveness and uniqueness, and (b) social identification and psychological membership interchangeably to inform the current state of SOFI research.

1.1. Standing out while fitting in: theory and research

One of the most widely accepted notions in psychology and education is the fundamental importance of the need to belong. Belongingness constructs pervade several frameworks of achievement motivation (Martin & Dowson, 2009) and serve as a foundation for understanding how students' social experiences in school shape their beliefs and behaviors in academic settings. What establishes belonging as a need is the overwhelming evidence showing the damaging effects of experiencing a lack of belonging. When this need is left unfulfilled, individuals can experience stress, health and cognitive decrements, and even mental and physical illness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Moreover, a sense of belonging—even in its most basic form (i.e., perceiving similarity and fitting in)—can produce profound effects on students' attitudes, behavior, and cognition. For example, Walton, Cohen, Cwir, and Spencer (2012) demonstrated across three experiments that sharing commonalities with other students can increase perceptions of belonging, heighten achievement motivation, enhance persistence, and positively influence choices to engage in more challenging tasks. Additional research provides consistent support for the importance of fitting in within achievement contexts (Crosnoe, 2011; Martin & Dowson, 2009). Yet even taking into consideration the decades of theoretical and empirical support, education researchers could still come to understand even more about the role of belongingness constructs if they also accounted for perceptions of distinctiveness.

Since the 1970s, scholars have established empirically that humans desire to feel a sense of distinctiveness (e.g., Codol, 1984; Lemaire, 1974; Maslach, 1974; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Using the terms uniqueness and distinctiveness interchangeably, Vignoles and colleagues (Vignoles, 2009; Vignoles et al., 2000) describe distinctiveness as a necessary precondition for establishing a sense of self-definition. Further, cross-cultural research shows support for a human desire for distinctiveness in both Eastern and Western societies (Becker et al., 2012).

1.2. Fulfilling the desires to stand out and fit in: implications for social identity

Psychologists use the term social identity to refer to the importance individuals place on their membership in groups (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Above and beyond group membership, people who identify with a particular group come to see the world through the lens of being a member of that group. The optimal distinctiveness theory of social identity (Brewer, 1991) can serve as an organizing framework for understanding SOFI. In this framework, the desires to stand out and fit in are social identity needs that individuals seek to satisfy simultaneously. Moreover, Brewer and Roccas (2002) conceptualize these social identity needs as being separate from one another—allowing for individual variation in how much distinctiveness and similarity an individual requires for both needs to be met.

Standing out is not necessarily experienced at the expense of fitting in (Vignoles et al., 2000); and researchers highlight factors that can facilitate SOFI. Previous associated work suggests that SOFI can occur from any of the following: participating in groups that celebrate distinctiveness, playing a unique role inside of a group, perceiving oneself as a loyal but nonconforming group member, or perceiving oneself as a prescriptive deviant (such as deviating in ways that are consistent with how other group members strive to behave) (Hornsey & Jetten, 2004). The notion of SOFI also corroborates with Ellemers and Jetten's (2013)

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