



# The need to belong and its association with fully satisfying relationships: A tale of two measures



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## ABSTRACT

The current research compares the Need to Belong Scale (NTBS; Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2013) and the Antecedents subscale of the Sense of Belongingness Inventory (SOBI-A; Hagerty & Putusky, 1995) to determine whether they represent approach or neuroticism-driven avoidance orientations in the need to belong. This research also extends previous research on these constructs to examine direct and moderating associations involving the need to belong and the quantity and quality of personal close relationships. Students ( $N = 869$ ) from a large university in the Southwest USA completed a battery of measures. Results indicated that the NTBS was associated with lower quality “partial” relationships rather than high quality “whole” relationships; this was not the case for the comparative SOBI-A. In addition, greater numbers of whole relationships buffered the effects of the NTBS on depression. The results are discussed in terms of the Belongingness Orientation Model.

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## 1. Introduction

Research on belongingness has received extensive attention in the last 20 years. In their seminal paper that reviewed and extended the previous literature, Baumeister and Leary (1995) proposed that: “human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p. 497). These authors argued that lacking fulfillment of this need results in significant decrements to well-being. Though they surmised that the need to belong is fundamental, they also posited that there are individual differences associated with this need. Assuming that this is the case, it follows that people high in the need to belong should work harder to obtain satisfying relationships and may require a higher number of such relationships compared to individuals low in the need to belong. Moreover, such satisfying relationships should have a disproportionate effect on high need to belong individuals in fulfilling their belongingness needs and protecting them from feelings of negative affect such as depression and anxiety. This paper examines whether this is the case. We start with a review of two instruments proposed to assess this need: the Need to Belong Scale (NTBS; Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2013) and the Sense

of Belonging Instrument–Antecedents (SOBI-A; Hagerty & Putusky, 1995). We compare and contrast the measures—arguing that they tap different approach/avoidance motives (see Gable, 2006) in the need to belong, and thus should differentially relate to variables in the nomological net of belongingness-related variables. We then develop hypotheses regarding expected associations between the need to belong and satisfying relationships.

The NTBS was designed to assess individual differences in “the strength of the desire for acceptance and belonging” (p. 3), and is the most well-known and used measure of the construct. Leary et al. (2013) argued that individuals scoring high in the need to belong regularly worry about acceptance and belonging. As a result, these concerns of being accepted and belonging lead them to “seek a large number of relationships, worry about how they are valued by others, and put a great deal of effort into sustaining interpersonal relationships” (p. 3). This argument alludes to both positive and negative aspects of obtaining and maintaining relationships that are featured in the NTBS. With respect to items assessing the positive aspects of the construct (e.g., “I need to feel that there are people I can turn to in times of need”), the need to belong arguably motivates individuals to behave in ways that yield larger numbers of quality relationships to meet one’s relational needs. With respect to items assessing the negative aspects, the instrument also consists of items that imply difficulties in meeting one’s relational needs (e.g., “It bothers me a great deal when I am not included in other people’s plans”)—consistent with an insecure attachment style. Accordingly,

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Leary and colleagues used a large set of studies to provide evidence that their measure taps into both the positive and negative aspects of the need to belong. For instance, they found that the NTBS has positive associations with the need for affiliation, affiliation motivation, sociability, agreeableness, preference for affiliation, the degree to which individuals regard their social identity as important, and the degree to which individuals value secure and satisfying interpersonal relationships. Yet, the NTBS also showed positive associations with neuroticism, anxious attachment, depression (in one sample, but not another), fear of criticism and rejection, social isolation, shyness, embarrassability, propensity for hurt feelings, and dependent, avoidant, and borderline personality disorders. The latter associations suggest an avoidance orientation where relationships are sought to avoid a negative end state.

In a separate line of research, Hagerty and Patusky (1995) set out to develop an instrument to assess aspects of belongingness. Based on a factor analysis, their items divided into two factors that the authors termed sense of belonging (SOBI-P; Sense of Belonging Instrument-Psychological Experiences) and antecedents to belonging (SOBI-A; Sense of Belonging Instrument-Antecedents). The former measure was designed to assess achieved belonging in terms of valued involvement and person–environment fit. The latter measure, the SOBI-A, assesses the motivation and ability to belong. It not only includes items that assess the desire for belongingness interactions (e.g., “*It is important to me that I fit somewhere in this world*”), but also items assessing the degree to which one feels prepared to contribute successfully to close relationships (e.g., “*Other people recognize my strengths and good points*”). Thus, the item content suggests that the SOBI-A represents a more approach-focused version of the need to belong, and Hagerty and Patusky found that it correlates positively with achieved belonging,  $r = .45$ . That said, the nomological net for the SOBI-A has not been well established in previous research.

Accordingly, the first objective of the current study is to compare and contrast the correlational relations of the SOBI-A against those of the NTBS. Consistent with an approach orientation, we expect that the SOBI-A should correlate positively with achieved belongingness, positively valenced dimensions of the Big Five, and positively valenced measures of well-being (e.g., self-esteem), whereas it should correlate negatively with loneliness, anxious/avoidant attachment styles, and other negatively valenced assessments of personality and well-being. In contrast, we expect the NTBS to correlate positively with neuroticism and display associations consistent with an avoidance orientation, thereby replicating patterns obtained by Leary et al. (2013).

In addition, where previous research has examined the correlates of the NTBS with various trait-like measures and assessments of social support, there are no studies examining how the need to belong is explicitly associated with the quantity and quality of one’s close relationships. Our second objective is to examine this issue. To do so, we used criteria designed by Malone, Pillow, and Fuhrman (2013; unpublished manuscript) to assess each close relationship reported by participants. Specifically, these criteria assess whether each close relationship is fully satisfying or not. The overarching criteria for defining a fully satisfying relationship are defined in the belongingness hypothesis advanced by Baumeister and Leary (1995), and are summarized as follows: “Satisfying this drive [to belong] involves two criteria: First, there is a need for frequent affectively pleasant interactions with a few people, and, second, these interactions must take place in the context of a temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern for each other’s welfare” (p. 497). Based on Baumeister and Leary’s claims, Malone and colleagues constructed seven specific criteria to define fully satisfying relationships—termed here as “whole” relationships. Relationships that fail to meet all the criteria are termed “partial” relationships as they are only partially satisfying.

**Table 1**  
Sociodemographic information.

	%
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	38
Female	62
<i>Ethnicity</i>	
Hispanic	41
Caucasian	35
African-American	10
Asian	10
Other	4
<i>Age (years)</i>	
16–17	2
18–19	73
20–22	15
23–26	4
27–55	3
Missing	3

As such, this study will examine the associations of the NTBS and the SOBI-A with participant reports of whole versus partial close relationships. Assuming that the NTBS taps an avoidance orientation, we expect those scoring high on the NTBS to report fewer numbers of whole relationships and greater numbers of partial relationships. We further expect the SOBI-A to primarily assess an approach orientation in the need to belong, and hence expect that individuals scoring high on the SOBI-A to report greater quantities of whole relationships and fewer quantities of partial relationships. We further expect the implied correlations noted above to be stronger when using partial correlations to isolate the prevailing orientations of the NTBS and the SOBI-A (i.e., partial correlations controlling for the SOBI-A when assessing the prevailing avoidance orientation of the NTBS, and partial correlations controlling for the NTBS when assessing the prevailing approach orientation of the SOBI-A).

Finally, we expect that whole and partial relationships may moderate the positive association between the need to belong and depression. Specifically, greater numbers of whole relationships should at least partially satisfy the need to belong and thus reduce levels of depression.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 869 undergraduate students from a large university in the Southwest USA who participated in Fall, 2010 (see Table 1 for socio-demographics). The original sample consisted of 875 participants,<sup>1</sup> but 6 participants were not included because they had missing data. The Institutional Review Board approved the study and participants received partial course credit for one hour of participation.

### 2.2. Measures

Higher scores for each of the measures described below indicate a greater propensity for each scale consistent with the connotations in the labeling. Coefficient alphas, where applicable ranged from .76 to .96.

<sup>1</sup> Data from the current sample of 875 participants was included in a previous report by Malone, Pillow, and Osman (2012) that reported on the development of a measure of achieved belongingness. That study also reported how the NTBS and the SOBI-A correlated with a measure of achieved belongingness, but did not otherwise report on assessments of the need to belong.

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