

All You Need is Love

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“*All you need is love*”, sang the band who were bigger than Jesus.

“*Stand by me*”, pleaded a smooth-voiced soul singer.

“*You belong with me*”, insisted a young, guitar-toting girl from Tennessee.

It’s self-evident – the human desire to connect, the need to belong – so self-evident that we celebrate the formation of unions and mourn their ending, structure societies around the family, and sing along with our favourite songs, the lyrics imprinted into our being through conscious and unconscious repetition.



But back in the early 90's, when researchers spoke of fundamental needs or motivations, they tended to mean something beyond a desire, something we cannot survive effectively without. Whilst researchers recognised the desire people in general have to form interpersonal bonds, it was not characterised as a need, *per se* – more a “nice to have”. In fact it was common to turn to the eternally cited [Abraham Maslow](#) who ranked “love and belongingness needs” above food, water, and safety, indicating they do not emerge until basic needs are satisfied. To view belongingness as a fundamental need was therefore to see it as something akin to food – crucial for survival.

Psychological researchers Baumeister and Leary however saw it differently. In their 1995 article, '*The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation*', they set out to investigate in-depth what most of us already believed, that the 'desire' for connectedness with our fellows is actually a fundamental human need/motivation.

Baumeister and Leary outlined nine criteria that must be satisfied to prove something is a fundamental human motivation. They wanted to show that the need to belong met all criteria.

A fundamental motivation must:

1. Operate in a wide variety of settings
2. Have affective consequences
3. Direct cognitive processing
4. Lead to ill effects when thwarted
5. Elicit goal oriented behaviour to satisfy it
6. Be universal
7. Not be derivative
8. Affect a broad variety of behaviours
9. Have implications beyond immediate psychological functioning

Don't worry if this sounds a bit technical. We'll visit each of these criteria separately. First though, let's take a deeper look at the actual theory of belonging as a primary need.

Remember Maslow's hierarchy of needs? Arguably, belongingness, particularly in very early human societies, is not distinct from but rather inextricably linked with basic human survival. No man could survive alone – particularly through a harsh winter, drought, or when faced with hostile elements, both animal and human. Baumeister and Leary examined this presumed evolutionary basis in some detail, concluding that there is “a set of internal mechanisms that guide individual human beings into social groups and lasting relationships” – in other words, your brain is evolutionarily hardwired to form connections.



Further evidence for the long historical recognition of belongingness as synonymous with survival is the practice of exile. Exile, a punishment recognised as almost equivalent in severity to death, has historically been used on those elements of society deemed corrosive or disruptive. They would literally be cut out from the bonds of society. Socrates himself, the original agitator, was condemned to exile before his continued prognostication earned him a cup of hemlock (death by poison).

To understand the difference between needs and wants, we simply need to look at the consequences of thwarted motivations – failure to eat results in negative physical symptoms (and, for myself, a severe case of “hanger”), while failure to buy a nice new dress causes momentary psychological discomfort. In other words, for belongingness to be a need, we need to actually suffer when the need is not met. We can imagine that Socrates, were he to have holed up on a deserted Greek Island, would have simply withered without his band of young citizens to persuade and inform.

So what do Baumeister and Leary define “belonging” as, exactly? They describe this need as being for “frequent, non-aversive interactions within an ongoing relational bond” – or in human language, the need to interact pleasantly with a partner, friend, or family member. Baumeister and Leary differentiate the need to belong from the need for mere social contact – chatting to the checkout chick at Coles is not the same as speaking with a friend or family member.

Importantly, the authors recognised that merely positive interactions are not enough. Rather, we need *consistent* interactions with *someone who cares* about us. Being a frequent solo traveller, I can offer a case study of one in support of this particular argument – a series of friendly encounters with strangers is not half as satisfying as one meal with a person who loves you. Moreover, knowing someone loves you is not enough without regular contact (their mere nebulous presence, somewhere in the world, is not sufficient). The need to belong is beyond a need for positive interactions, and also beyond the need to know someone cares for you – both must exist in tandem to satisfy the need.



Another interesting component of their definition is Baumeister and Leary's suggestion that, as a need, belongingness can be satisfied by a range of people over time or circumstances. That is, it is not specific to one person or group of people. A romantic partner, for instance, is obviously not easily replaceable, but many people can and do "replace" partners given sufficient time – with much the same effect. Juliet needn't have killed herself over Romeo – much as she loved him, another dissipated young Veronese would eventually have satiated her need for belongingness. This is a marked difference to John Bowlby's work on Attachment Theory, which posited that the relationship with the mother (or mother figure) was the primary motivator for the drive to form personal connections. Bowlby regarded the desire for interpersonal connection as an attempt to recreate or improve on the original relationship with the mother – sort of working through childhood issues à la Freud.

Now let's return to those nine criteria

Baumeister and Leary wanted to show that the need to belong met all the criteria necessary to be considered a fundamental motivation/ need. Let's have a look at how they did.

One of the first predictors of the hypothesis is that social bonds should form easily. This, Baumeister and Leary argue, is the case. While there may be many, including some readers of this piece, who say "Not so!", by and large humans form connections with others with relative speed and on quite large scales. We are not like snow leopards, which live adult lives alone and struggle to interact positively with others of their kind. Indeed, frequently all that is needed is proximity...good news for anyone hoping to marry a celebrity, and able to move to Calabasas.

Secondly, people try to preserve bonds that have formed, and are distressed when this is not successful. Witness any high school reunion, or catching up with distant relatives. In a rather clinical fashion, Baumeister and Leary note that people "cry" and show signs of distress at separation, demonstrating resistance to the dissolution of bonds. In what may be overreach, the researchers observe that people maintain even unpleasant or abusive bonds, citing domestic violence, as potential further evidence of the need for belongingness. While Baumeister and Leary mention that there are methodological concerns about the evidence for this criterion (lab studies on the impact of breaking of bonds are in surprisingly short supply!), overall they find sufficient evidence to indicate support.

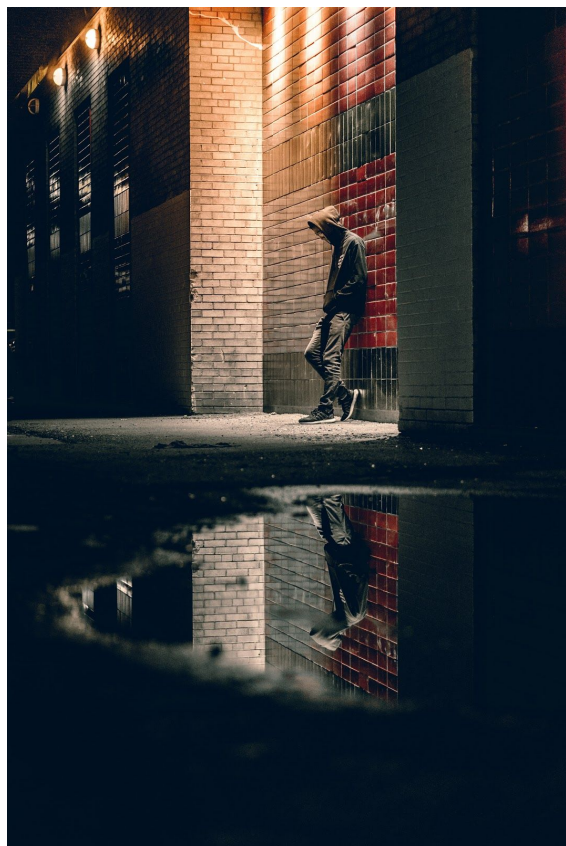


Now we turn to the impact of belonging on cognition and emotion. What Baumeister and Leary describe as “a great deal of human behaviour, thought, and emotion is caused by this fundamental interpersonal motive”. Psychological researchers are not given to hyperbole, but as a mere psychologist I shall endeavour to satisfy; just about every song in existence refers to the bonds of belonging in one form or another (this also satisfies criteria 8). Baumeister and Leary identify a variety of studies demonstrating how ties of belonging shape people’s cognition. Essentially, people tend to apply the same flattering biases and shortcuts they afford themselves to others they care about. They also tend to spend considerable time and energy thinking about and processing interpersonal relationships.

The section on emotion boils down to “strong interpersonal relationships make people feel good, dissolved ones (or lack thereof) make people feel bad!” (I may be paraphrasing here). A key point is the strong positive correlation between happiness and close personal relationships, and, equally, the strong negative correlation with dissolved bonds. Incidentally, the most covered song of all time – “Yesterday” by the Beatles – expresses the regret and sadness experienced following a separation from a loved one.

Delving deeper into the negative impact of a lack of belongingness (the fourth criteria), Baumeister and Leary reviewed evidence that people who lack supportive relationships suffer from greater stress, increased psychological and physical health problems, a decreased immune system, and even higher mortality rates! Further, crime rates are even affected by belongingness – in both positive and negative ways. Strong bonds are an attenuating factor, while strong bonds *within crime* an increasing factor (surely you’ve seen *The Godfather?*). And we are all painfully aware of the paths some disaffected young men take to find belongingness in today’s world. This is probably one of the most interesting sections of

the paper, and certainly the one with the most practical implications for clinicians and lay people alike, as well as the community more broadly. Indeed, much work has been done in therapeutic settings, schools, and even prisons around the need to belong, and how to satisfy this in ways conducive to healthy and productive lives.



The fifth criteria concerned the requirement for “goal satisfying behaviour” to be displayed. Certainly people expend a great deal of effort into seeking and maintaining interpersonal connections (some more than others – there is a gender difference to be explored here), as evidenced by dating services, community groups, and the greeting card industry, to name a few. But do they do so in a way recognisable as satisfying a *need*? That is, do they reach a *point of satiety*? Baumeister and Leary argue that they do. In the same way that people stop eating when they’re full (well, sometimes), people seem to seek a limited number of relationships, beyond which they are subject to diminishing returns. This is why groups of friends don’t typically talk to other people on a night out – they already have all they

need! Moreover, as identified above, in the same way as Pad Thai can, at a pinch, substitute for the bowl of pasta you’re craving, so too can a new partner substitute for an ex (you have to give it a *little* more time).

In order to satisfy the sixth criteria, that of universality, Baumeister and Leary investigated how well the evidence aligned with evolutionary arguments. As discussed earlier, belongingness, particularly in the form of social groups (larger than a family, but quite a bit smaller than Melbourne), was crucial for survival in the infancy of our species. Groups of people could pool resources, share labour, keep each other warm, and while away long nights with campfire tales of mammoth hunting (ok, I'm guessing here). However, research in this area goes a bit further than stating that humans interacted with each other for purely pragmatic reasons. It seems in fact to suggest that our social interactions and our brains evolved together - each shaping the other. Baumeister and Leary cheated a bit here, claiming that the links between universality, innateness, and evolutionary imperatives showed that the need wasn't derivative of other needs - although this is a plausible inference.

Counter Arguments

Playing fair, Baumeister and Leary also examined some counter arguments, looking at psychological phenomena that appear, superficially at least, to contradict their theory. They discuss the Bystander Effect (when people act like callous rat finks in large groups, assuming someone else will help out a person in need), Social Loafing (that annoying student who never participated in group projects but took the credit), and the Prisoner's Dilemma (pitting self-interested criminals against each other) in turn. The authors concluded the following: while while we may be slack in a group of strangers, if we have even the most tenuous form of connection with our fellows we fall over each other to help out someone in an emergency; if people think their contribution matters, they'll put in the effort even if they don't get noticed; and finally that if "prisoners" think they might run into this crook again, suddenly they're all equality.

Shyness or personal reserve, another potential spanner in the works, Baumeister and Leary categorise as a rather brilliant way of protecting oneself from rejection. You may not form a bond by withdrawing from others, but it's on *your terms*, damnit!

Most interestingly, Baumeister and Leary looked at unreciprocated love, anticipating the criticism that if we're so driven to form bonds, why do we pass up perfectly good opportunities to do so? They conclude that actually, most people do want a relationship, but they won't settle for any old Dobbin that comes along, and they try to let people down gently.

Final Thoughts

Baumeister and Leary conclude with a summary of the implications they believed their theory had for psychology and other fields. They argue that many areas of social psychology, such as our drive for achievement, approval, and power, may well be linked to or derivative of our need to belong. Beyond psychological theory, Baumeister and Leary believe that the need to belong offered an alternative and more meaningful explanation for human societies than prevailing arguments at the time. Cultural materialism sees human culture as something shaped primarily by economics, and this view was in vogue in the 90s. The need to belong, on the other hand, suggests that our cultures have formed and adapted to satisfy basic psychological needs. Baumeister and Leary argue that cultures use belongingness to both reward and punish, demonstrating its centrality, and that even the most powerful among us have a strong desire to be loved as well as feared (Machiavelli was wrong on this one).

