

What does it mean to belong? Reconceptualizing belongingness across different life domains

Introduction

In an era characterized by rising multipolarity, inequality, and social disconnection (Allen et al., 2022; Bishen, 2023; Kaya, 2025), the concept of belonging has gained renewed interest across disciplines – from education and psychology to organizational studies and public policy (Fong et al., 2024; Ram et al., 2017; Thissen et al., 2023). Despite its pervasiveness, belonging is often treated as a universal, individual-level feeling—something one either has or lacks—rather than as a socially embedded and structurally conditioned construct (Antonsich, 2010). Traditional models, which frame belonging primarily as a fundamental human need (Maslow, 1943; Baumeister & Leary, 1995), fail to capture its dynamic, context-specific, and social power-laden nature (Antonsich, 2010).

In repose to Lu's (2023) provocative question: *"Everyone is talking about 'belonging,' but what does it really mean?"* and Antonsich's (2010) critique of the prevailing conceptual vagueness, this paper reconceptualizes belonging as a dynamic, reciprocal, and context-dependent process. Rather than projecting belonging as a static state, we argue for belonging as a evolving, continuously (re)constructed concept shaped by interactions between individuals, others, and structural conditions across shifting contexts. This fluid, 'in-the-making' perspective is particularly salient for marginalized groups—such as globally mobile individuals (GMIs), expatriates, migrants, and refugees—who traverse multiple contexts and often assume marginalized positions in host societies (Fan et al., 2023; Fitzsimmons et al., 2023; Back & Piekkari, 2024). Together, these critiques and reconceptualizations call for a deeper interrogation of how belonging has been understood, framed, and mobilized in existing scholarship.

Prevailing Understandings of Belonging

Belonging is defined as "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment" (Hagerty et al., 1992, p. 173). Early work frames belonging as a fundamental human motivation, emphasizing its emotional, mental, and psychological significance (Maslow, 1943; Hagerty et al., 1992; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Lee & Robbins, 1995). These perspectives, however, tend to universalize the concept, downplaying its relational, dynamic, and context-sensitive nature (Antonsich, 2010; Allen et al., 2021).

Recent scholarship has moved beyond the static and decontextualized framing, arguing belonging is a fluid, co-constructed process shaped by both internal dispositions and external

conditions (Murphy et al., 2007; Allen et al., 2021; Browman, 2025). Rather than being granted, belonging is negotiated through power, access, and recognition (Yuval-Davis, 2006; May, 2011). Belonging is contingent upon alignment of identity, goals, and resources (Browman, 2025).

Despite conceptual advancement, the literature remains fragmented within disciplinary silos and often treats belonging as a universal experience, downplaying key factors that shape variations of belonging between locals and non-locals, as well as across distinct settings such as schools, workplaces, and entrepreneurial environments. To address these limitations, we propose a model that captures the dynamic, reciprocal, and context-sensitive nature of belonging across key life domains—education, employment, and entrepreneurship.

Proposed Model of Belonging

Belonging is Reciprocally Constructed

Belonging is not simply about feeling at ease with oneself and the surroundings (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Antonsich, 2010; May, 2016); it is a dynamic and evolving interplay between individuals' internal sense of inclusion and the contextual cues signalling acceptance or exclusion. Built on existing people-environment models (e.g., Walton & Cohen, 2007; Allen et al., 2021), our model moves beyond by framing belonging as a reciprocally constructed, and often mutable process shaped by both individuals and the structures they encounter across space and time over the lifespan (May, 2011, 2016; Lähdesmäki et al., 2016). Unlike models that emphasize psychological “fit” alone (e.g., Browman, 2025), we argue that belonging is also about access, recognition, and participation, enabled or conditioned by external, institutional norms, power asymmetries, and relational signals.

As such, we propose that senses of belonging vary along two dimensions: the internal sense of belonging and external cues of belonging (Figure 1). Internal sense of belonging refers to the subjective sense of inclusion, psychological safety, and alignment with a given setting. External cues of belonging refers to the degree to which the other people and surrounding environment convey signals of acceptance, legitimacy, and opportunity through interactions, structures, and norms.

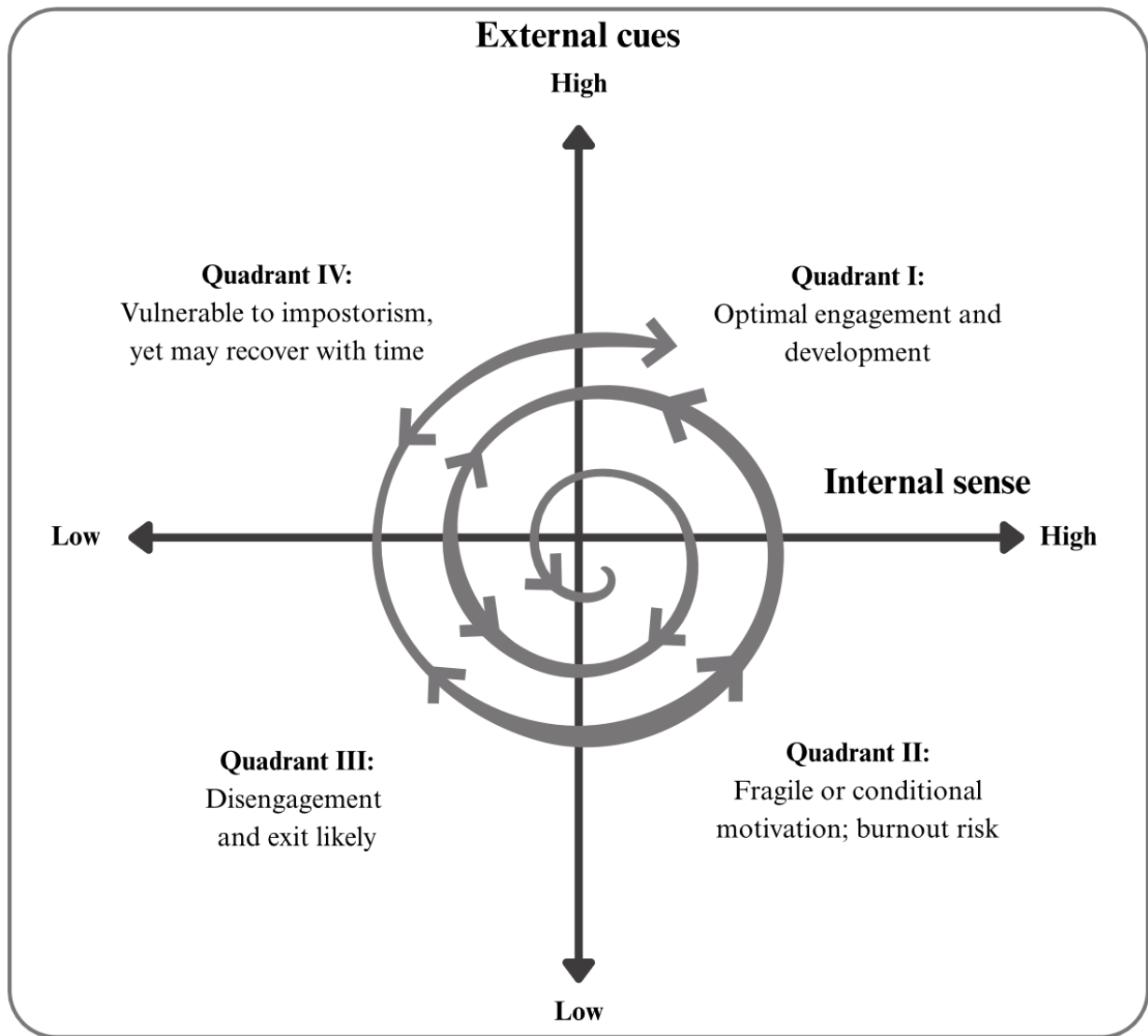


Fig. 1. Belonging Shaped by Reciprocal and Mutable Internal–External Interplays

Our model suggests that belonging is most robust when these two dimensions align. High internal sense and external cues of belonging support sustained engagement, motivation, and integration. Conversely, mismatches, such as high individual need to belong in exclusionary environments or low internal motivation to belong despite external support, can lead to burnout, impostorism, disengagement, or withdrawal. Importantly, following our model, belonging is understood not as a static attribute or fixed state, but as an evolving, reciprocal, and contextually contingent process shaped by individual effort, social position, structural signals and support. We further discuss it next.

Belonging is contextually contingent

Figure 2 illustrates how person–environment interplays shift over time.

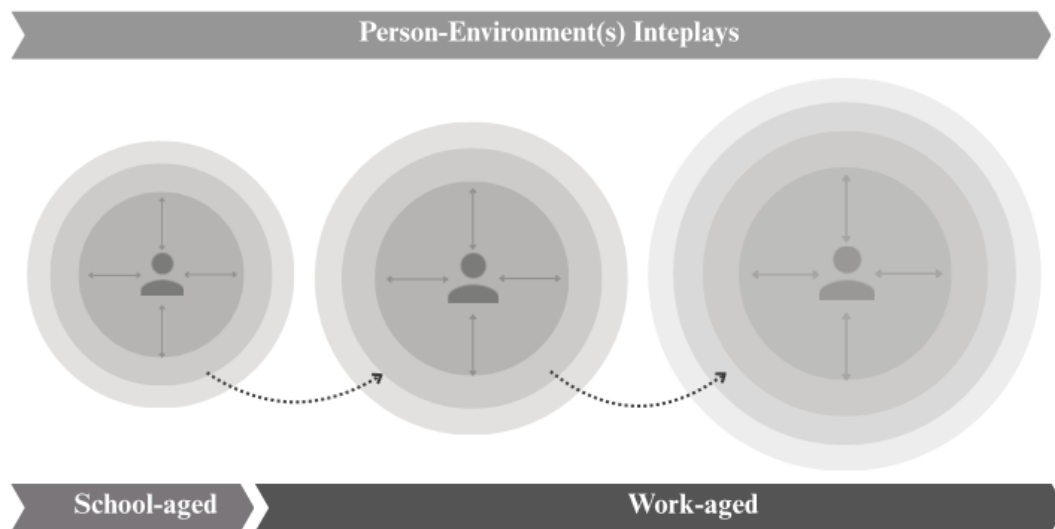


Fig. 2. Evolving Person–Environment Interplays Over the Lifespan

Although belonging is shaped across all domains of one’s life, we focus on three three key domains: education, the workplace, and entrepreneurship. Unlike familial settings, where safety and acceptance is often unconditional, belonging in other domains is a negotiated and reciprocal process between individuals and their environments.

Belonging in Education. Educational institutions are early and formative contexts where belonging becomes salient, especially as students grapple with identity, motivation, and meaning-making (LaCrosse et al., 2020). Traditional views of educational belonging focus on social connectedness, defined as feeling accepted, valued, and supported by peers and instructors (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Osterman, 2000). Anchored in universal psychological needs (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), these belonging perspectives obscure the nuanced ways in which identity and context shape belonging beliefs, especially for marginalized students, i.e., those from racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural minority backgrounds. For these students, belonging uncertainty is easily triggered by ambiguous events, such as social exclusion or critical feedback, which can lead to attentional biases and negative attributions that undermine motivation and well-being (Walton & Cohen, 2007; LaCrosse et al., 2020; Fong et al., 2024). These patterns can also be interpreted as mismatches between internal perceptions and external/ contextual cues of belonging. Taken together, we argue that students’ experiences of belonging are shaped not only by their own interpretations but also by the implicit and explicit cues that educational environments convey.

Belonging in the Workplace. Unlike educational contexts, workplaces are inherently competitive and transactional, where individuals are often considered as replaceable resources and their value is primarily measured against performance metrics. Therefore, belonging at work becomes

less scaffolded and more ambiguous. For GMIs, these challenges are compounded by their minority status in host environments and the demand to navigate unfamiliar cultural, linguistic, and institutional landscapes. Barriers to integration, limited access to informal networks, and difficulties in establishing legitimacy often place GMIs in a precarious position within and outside the organizations (Fan et al., 2023; Fitzsimmons et al., 2023).

While GMIs often strive to integrate, external cues, such as language policies, leadership behavior, symbolic markers, in-group vs. out-group dynamics can either support or undermine their perception of belonging. Further, access to developmental opportunities, such as mentoring, promotions, and leadership roles, hinges on perceived legitimacy and cultural fit. These elements signify the importance of structural conditions in shaping one's sense of belonging in the workplace (Coqual, 2020; Ernst & Young Global Limited, 2023; Thissen et al., 2023).

Belonging in Entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship is often presented as a realm of agency (McMullen et al., 2020), innovation, and independence, implying that belonging is irrelevant or secondary. From this perspective, entrepreneurs are not expected to seek belonging or aim to "fit in." Instead, they are viewed as community builders who shape their own environments for action and influence. Yet recent work shows that belonging, embeddedness, and legitimacy are central to entrepreneurial activities (Jack & Anderson, 2002). Minority entrepreneurs, such as women or migrants, frequently encounter exclusion from dominant networks, underrepresentation, and cultural norms that signal misfit (Stead, 2015; Essers et al., 2021). The concept of mixed embeddedness (Ram et al., 2017) underscores that entrepreneurship is never entirely individualistic, it is deeply rooted in social, cultural, and institutional ecosystems. In these ecosystems, belonging becomes a structural position that can enable or constrain access to funding, trust, and collaboration.

De Clercq and Voronov (2009) therefore note, entrepreneurs must both "fit in" with industry expectations and "stand out" to gain legitimacy. This tension requires recognition, not just assimilation. May's (2016) work also emphasizes belonging is not a passive state of being accepted, but an active process of being seen, acknowledged, and valued. These perspectives underscore the internal-external interplay at the heart of belonging, even within entrepreneurial contexts.

Conclusion

By framing belonging as a contextualized and reciprocally constructed process, this paper moves beyond static, individualistic feeling to offer a more nuanced understanding of how belonging is experienced, negotiated, and withheld by GMIs across diverse life domains. Our model emphasizes that belonging is not merely about personal fit, but also about access, participation, and recognition constrained or enabled by institutional norms, social structures, and power dynamics.

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