

BARRIERS TO BELONGING

Hustling for Approval and Acceptance

In *Atlas of the Heart*, Brené Brown says, “Our yearning for belonging is so hardwired that we often try to acquire it by any means possible, including trying to fit in and hustling for approval and acceptance. Not only are these efforts hollow substitutes for belonging, but they are the greatest barriers to belonging.” This hustle for approval and external validation can make belonging tenuous and conditional.¹ Feeling like an outsider can make us feel worse about ourselves, lead to impulsivity, defensiveness, and underperformance. These behaviors make it harder to fit in, initiating a self-fulfilling spiral.

“Us vs. Them” Mentality

The survival needs of our early ancestors trained the brain to register whether a face looks similar or different within milliseconds. In hunter-gatherer days, we used this biological scan to quickly determine whether someone was safe or dangerous. Staying alive was on the line. Today, our ancient brain still triggers an automatic “Stranger Danger!” alert when someone looks different from us (such as a person of a different race or gender). If we see someone similar or familiar, our brain is relieved by the recognition. This biological bias to survive is where our “us” versus “them” mentality comes from. Seeing “us” activates trust, generosity, and cooperation. Seeing “them” prompts aggression and distrust. It is biologically easier to show empathy and compassion to people who are like us (including those who look like us). It takes a cognitive override and attention to show empathy and compassion to people who are different.²

Exclusion and Estrangement

If belonging is the pull *into* relationships, then exclusion and estrangement are the push *out* of relationships. This is where prejudice, discrimination, alienation, and polarization live. Someone decides (with or without realizing it) that we are a “them,” and pushes us outside the bounds of belonging. This is called **othering**. Othering leads to exclusion, which leads to not belonging.³ Exclusion causes actual pain, activating the same neural networks as physical pain. Like loneliness, hunger, and thirst, this painful response is the brain and body’s way of forcing us into action to stay alive.⁴ Bullying is one of the worst forms of exclusion,⁵ and excommunication from a family or community is one of the worst forms of estrangement. A fear of exclusion and estrangement can cause people to hide their true selves from others.

¹Brown, B. (2021). *Atlas of the heart: Mapping meaningful connection and the language of human experience*. Penguin Random House.

²Sapolsky, R. M. (2017). *Behave: The biology of humans at our best and worst*. Penguin Random House.

³Ginwright, S. A. (2022). *The four pivots: Reimagining justice, reimagining ourselves*. North Atlantic Books.

⁴Cohen, G. L. (2022). *Belonging: The science of creation connection and bridging divides*. Norton.

⁵Yeager, D. (2024). *10 to 25: The science of motivating young people: A groundbreaking approach to the leading the next generation—And making your own life easier*. Avid Reader Press.