Development of a Sense of Belonging for Privileged and Minoritized Students: An Emergent Model

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This article reports findings from a constructionist grounded theory study with 51 first-year college students. We explored student definitions and development of a sense of belonging during their first year of college. Belonging for all participants was shaped by 3 themes: environmental perceptions, involvement, and relationships. Yet, there were vast differences in the ways students from privileged and minoritized social identity groups defined belonging and made meaning of the 3 emergent themes. A model of belonging for privileged and minoritized college students is presented.

In educational settings, a sense of belonging has been associated with academic motivation, success, and persistence (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002). Yet, scholars have argued that developing a sense of belonging can be challenging for students from minoritized social identity groups (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, & Johnson, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012). The purpose of this research was to compare the ways students from minoritized and privileged social identity groups defined belonging as they made the first-year transition into a predominantly White, public university in the Northeast. We also summarize key influences students described as contributing to the development of their sense of belonging.

We defined privileged students as those from historically dominant social identity groups who have “access to power, resources, and opportunities” and who enjoy the “psychological freedoms” associated with “being the norm” (Goodman, 2011, pp. 18–23). Privileged students included those who identified as White, Christian, middle/upper class, heterosexual, or an individual without a disability. Students were categorized into the privileged category if they did not self-identify as a member of at least one minoritized social identity group. We adopted the description of minoritized by Harper (2013) that signifies: the social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in US social institutions, including colleges and universities. Persons are not born into a minority status nor are they minoritized in every social milieu (e.g., their families, racially homogeneous friendship groups, or places of religious worship). Instead, they are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of whiteness. (p. 207)

Even though Harper was specifically referencing people of color, members of other historically oppressed social identity groups (e.g., people with disabilities, LGBT people, people with a low socioeconomic status, or individuals whose religious or spiritual background is not

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Christian) can be minoritized in particular social milieus, namely campus environments. We use the term minoritized to describe students who self-identified as a minority and who discussed being marginalized as a result of membership in at least one historically underrepresented social identity group.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature about the sense of belonging revealed a variety of definitions. Strayhorn (2012) explained how belonging is the “degree to which an individual feels respected, valued, accepted, and needed by a defined group” (p. 87). It has also been described as a phenomenon that “captures the individual’s view of whether he or she feels included in the college community” (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 327). Similarly, Hausmann et al. (2007) defined belonging as “the psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community” (p. 804). In a slightly different definition, Pittman and Richmond (2008) suggested belonging was “connectedness to one’s school or perceived school membership” (p. 344). Because the term community is sometimes used in lieu of belonging (Elkins, Forrester, & Noel-Elkins, 2011; Strayhorn, 2012), literature about sense of community and belonging informed this study.

Despite varied definitions, researchers consistently show that students with a sense of belonging are likely to achieve valuable educational outcomes. In both secondary and postsecondary environments, belonging has been associated with academic success (Freeman et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012), persistence (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002), and psychological adjustment (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Belonging is, thus, a “basic human need and fundamental motivation that drives student behaviors, and facilitates educational success” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 87).

A solid support system, friendships, and social acceptance by peers have been positively related to a sense of belonging (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Positive relationships with caring professors and mentors (Freeman et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012) contribute to a sense of belonging. Involvement in extracurricular activities has been associated with increased belonging, but results are mixed when analyzed by race (Elkins et al., 2011; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2012). Black males in Strayhorn’s (2012) research explained how involvement helped them fit in and acclimate to campus. In contrast, Johnson et al. (2007) found that extracurricular participation was significantly related to a sense of belonging for White and Asian Pacific American students but not for other students of color. Hurtado and Carter (1997) suggested that extracurricular organizations are especially helpful when they connect Latino/a students to supportive communities outside the ivory tower.

Beyond studies of extracurricular involvement, scholars have argued that developing a sense of belonging may be especially challenging for students of color on predominantly White campuses (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Nuñez, 2009). Stephens et al. (2012) explained how students of color experience “a chronic state of belonging uncertainty” (p. 1191). Johnson et al. (2007) found that White students reported a stronger sense of belonging than did African American, Latino/a, and Asian Pacific Islander students. In other studies, Latinos reported less of a sense of belonging than did their White counterparts (Strayhorn, 2008, 2012.) Campus climate has been shown to be especially important for the
development of a positive sense of belonging in students of color (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Locks et al., 2008; Nuñez, 2009; Strayhorn, 2012). Similarly, negative interactions with diverse peers can interfere with the establishment of a sense of belonging for students of color, whereas affirmative diversity experiences contribute to a positive sense of belonging (Locks et al., 2008; Maramba & Museus, 2013; Nuñez, 2009). Maramba and Museus (2013) found that the sense of belonging for Filipino American students was positively influenced by cross-cultural interactions and ethnic group cohesion.

In contrast to the growing literature examining the belonging experiences of students of color, fewer studies have examined belonging for other social identity groups. In a study at a small, liberal arts college, Ostrove and Long (2007) documented a significant relationship between belonging and social class as measured by both socioeconomic status and student self-reports. Stephens et al. (2012) found that feeling like one belonged to the community and working with peers reduced the performance gap between students who identified as first-generation and those who did not. Strayhorn (2012) documented how gay men of color exhibited a deep desire to belong and often found a sense of belonging through campus, spiritual, or relational connections with accepting others. In their study of religiosity and wellbeing, Bowman and Small (2012) suggested an “inclusive religious and spiritual climate” may be a benefit to students’ sense of belonging (p. 503). Finally, the limited literature addressing belonging among students with disabilities focused on issues of safety and accessibility (Strange, 2000) or mastery, self-advocacy, and social relationships (Vaccaro, Daly-Cano & Newman, 2015).

A host of documented benefits are associated with a sense of belonging (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2012). Yet, literature suggests students of color may experience less belonging than do their White counterparts. Far less is known about the development of a sense of belonging for students from other minoritized populations (e.g., LGBTQ students, students from lower socioeconomic statuses, students from non-Christian backgrounds, and students with disabilities). In this study, we drew upon rich qualitative data, as we aimed to fill some of these gaps in the literature.

**METHODOLOGY**

Because our emphasis was on how students defined and made meaning of their emerging sense of belonging, a dual constructionist and critical epistemological framework guided us in this study (Crotty, 1998). Meaning making is a process through which an individual interprets a life event. Social constructionists recognize that meaning making is not solely an individual process; the meaning that individuals attach to people, places, and processes is shaped by social forces that surround them (Crotty, 1998). Meaning making always happens in context. We also utilized a critical paradigm that acknowledges that inequalities are embedded in social structures and impact the lives of nondominant groups in oppressive ways (Crotty, 1998; Guido, Chávez & Lincoln, 2010). This critical theoretical paradigm paired with a social constructionist framework prompted us to question how privileged and minoritized students made meaning of their sense of belonging in the context of a society (and educational institution) where inequality persists.

We employed grounded theory methods, which emphasize theory building through a complex and emergent process, as opposed to a priori assumptions and hypotheses (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Because grounded theory
is designed for generating theories of process, change, or sequence (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998), it was ideal for use in our study about the development of a sense of belonging of first-year students from diverse backgrounds. In alignment with our epistemological framework, we drew largely upon constructivist grounded theory methods as described by Charmaz (2006), who built upon, but also diverged from, earlier and more objectivist grounded theory writings (c.f., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Throughout this section, we use citations to note when we used a procedure common to multiple grounded theorists or when we used strategies that aligned more closely with Charmaz’s constructionist alterations to the method.

The setting for this study was a mid-sized public university in the Northeast. The research institution enrolls approximately 13,000 undergraduate and 3,000 graduate students, with approximately 3,000 new students admitted each year. Unless they live within commuting distance, new students typically live on campus. Close to one-fifth of the student population identified as students of color, and more than half were women. A total of 1,200 students self-identified as having a disability. Data regarding other minoritized social identity groups (e.g., religion, sexual orientation, first-generation, social class) were unavailable or not collected by the university.

Upon IRB approval, our project began with a purposeful recruitment of study participants in locations where we were likely to find first-year students. We posted recruitment flyers in first-year residence halls, advising offices, and campus diversity centers (e.g., LGBT center, women’s center, disability services, Hillel). Twenty-one students volunteered for the first round of data collection. Those students identified largely with privileged social identity groups, with only two students identifying as a student of color and a bisexual, respectively.

A hallmark of grounded theory is constant comparative data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Creswell (2007) referred to the process as a zigzag, whereby researchers gather information, analyze it, and use the analysis to shape further data gathering. During our constant comparative analysis, unique narratives of the two self-identified minoritized students suggested there may have been a more complex story about belonging. Paired with the belonging literature highlighting differences between minoritized and privileged students, we determined further interviews with minoritized students were needed to fully understand the complex process of belonging. We utilized grounded theory theoretical sampling to increase participation of minoritized students (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006).

“Theoretical sampling means seeking pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories in your emerging theory” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 96). Piantanida, Tananis, and Grubs (2004) further explained how theoretical sampling is invaluable for “broadening our appreciation for the complexities and nuances of the phenomenon” (p. 337).

During theoretical sampling, we were more intentional about recruitment through diversity centers on campus. In addition to posting flyers, we also sent recruitment e-mails to diversity center list-servs. Our revised recruitment flyer explained that we were seeking participants who “perceive[ed] themselves to be part of any minority group.” On the flyer we defined a minority as “anyone from a group that has historically been discriminated against.” We also provided a nonexhaustive list of potential minoritized social identities that would make a student eligible to participate. Those were listed as: African American/ Black, Latino/a, Asian American, Native American, Lesbian, Gay,
Bisexual, Transgender, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, or identify as someone from a lower class background or a person with a disability. As a result of theoretical sampling, 30 self-identified minoritized students elected to join the study.

Our total sample comprised 51 first-year students. Racially, the students identified as follows: White ($n = 31$), Asian American/Pacific Islander ($n = 5$), Black ($n = 5$), Latino/a ($n = 3$), and bi/multiracial ($n = 7$). Participants also identified as LGB ($n = 8$), students with disabilities ($n = 8$), and having a religious/spiritual background other than Christian ($n = 14$). The modal age was 18. The sample largely comprised women, with only eight self-identifying as men.

We categorized students as minoritized ($n = 31$) if they self-identified on the demographic form as belonging to at least one historically underrepresented social identity group by race, sexual orientation, ability, or religion. Some of these students had multiple minoritized identities, and others had a mix of minoritized and privileged social group backgrounds. In line with the constructionist notion of valuing participant meaning making, we honored students’ self-identifications as minoritized. With the exception of the bisexual student and the student of color from round one, minoritized students self-selected into the second round of study interviews based upon a recruitment flyer asking for volunteers who “perceive[ed] themselves to be part of any minority group.” We categorized students as privileged ($n = 20$) if they did not list any minoritized identity (i.e., race, sexual orientation, ability, religion) on the demographic form. One caveat is that 17 of these 20 privileged students were women, which is a minoritized category in certain social milieus (Harper, 2013). Yet, none of these women described gender as a minoritized identity or a factor salient to their belonging. This aligns with many scholars who documented how gender salience, gender as a minoritized identity, and feminist identities—stemming from awareness of gender inequality—is not widespread for college women and is typically fostered through college-level women’s studies courses (Eisele & Stake, 2008; Liss, O’Connor, Morosky, & Crawford, 2001; Zucker, 2004). In line with our constructionist paradigm, we did not use gender to assign students into our dichotomous groupings because participants did not acknowledge gender as a minoritized identity nor did it emerge during grounded theory analysis as did other social identities (i.e., race/ethnicity, religion, ability, sexual orientation).

**Procedure**

In-depth interviews are often used in grounded theory studies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The primary mode of data collection for this study was a series of two semistructured, individual interviews. The first interview was held in the Fall and the second during the Spring Semester. Because highly structured interviews can force data to fall within preconceived realms of the researcher’s reality (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we asked broad questions about the ways students defined and developed a sense of belonging in the first interview. Questions asked during the first interview included: “How do you define what it means to belong?”; “Tell me about anything that happened in your first few weeks that influenced your sense of belonging”; “Were there any experiences or people who were especially important in influencing your sense of belonging—positively or negatively?”

The second interview protocol was slightly more focused because we used emergent themes from the first round of interviews to shape the questions. We personalized the second interview by following up on items that students had described in the first interview.
as being salient to their sense of belonging. For the theoretical sample of self-identified minoritized students, we also asked explicit questions about the connections between their sense of belonging and all of the social identities listed on their demographic form. That form included questions about race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social class, religion, and ability. We asked “Can you give me some examples of what it is like to be a [insert social identity] on this campus?” and “How do those identities influence your sense of belonging?” Even though our questions included all of the social identities a student listed on the demographic form, participant narratives largely focused on a single minoritized identity (e.g., race, religion, sexual orientation, ability). It may be that students volunteered for the study because they had one salient minoritized identity they wanted to discuss. Or, as traditional-age students (i.e., mostly 18 years of age), they may not have been developmentally ready to delve into complicated topics of multiple and intersecting identities. Their lack of focus on multiple and intersecting identities may also have been a function of participant comfort level or the way we asked questions. We cannot know for sure. The resulting single identity focus is noted later as a limitation.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. The research team, comprising two full-time faculty members, three graduate students, and one undergraduate student, met every other week to discuss themes that emerged during the interviews. Each member of the research team kept memos about the process and emergent themes. Memos are a “researcher’s record of analysis, thoughts, interpretations, questions, and directions for further data collection” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 110). Memos guided research team discussions and served as a method of triangulation for the codes gleaned from interview transcripts.

Analysis

To analyze the interview transcripts, we used four levels of grounded theory coding: initial, focused, axial, and theoretical (Charmaz, 2006). Researchers first read the transcripts in their entirety, noting key topics in the form of potential initial codes. Only topics that yielded 100% agreement among the research team were retained as focused codes. Then, we used axial coding to connect like categories into eight broad themes under which all focused codes were subsumed (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). This process of data analysis was repeated for the second round of interviews. Once axial coding was complete for both the fall and spring interviews, we engaged in theoretical coding to connect key categories and build a story about the sense of belonging for first-year students. That process involved “selecting the core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships [through discrepant case analysis and confirming examples], and filling in categories that need further refinement and development” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 116). Through this process, we developed an emerging model of the development of a sense of belonging for privileged and minoritized students.

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility (Creswell 2007; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014), a variety of methods were implemented. Data from the initial interviews were triangulated with data from the second interview for the purposes of corroboration. We also made use of analytic triangulation (Patton, 2002), whereby each transcript was coded independently by at least two researchers. Only after consensus among the entire research team were codes selected for use. No code or theme was used in the model unless we had evidence that the theme applied to all or a vast majority of privileged and/or minoritized participants.
Sense of Belonging for Privileged and Minoritized Students

Discrepant/negative case analysis (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used when a participant’s experiences ran counter to our emergent findings, and those two cases are noted in this manuscript.

We utilized member checking at two stages in the process. First, students were invited to review transcripts and provide feedback on emerging themes after interview one. After interview two, students were again invited to offer feedback on both the themes and research process. Peer reviews from diversity scholars, educators, and student attendees at a campus presentation were also used to ensure credibility of our emergent themes.

We addressed issues of relational competence (Jones et al., 2014) in a variety of ways. The research team utilized reflexivity (Glesne, 1999) in regard to our social identities, positionality, power relationships, and preunderstandings (Jones et al., 2014). The research team identified as members of a variety of races, sexual orientations, ages, religions, social classes, and abilities. At biweekly research team meetings, we engaged in reflexive discussions about our assumptions, concerns, and questions related to our processes, analyses, and conclusions. We also attempted to build trust with participants by assigning interviewers to the same students for both interviews. Interviewers were responsible for member checking and communicating with participants for scheduling and follow up (e.g., thank you). We avoided pairing participants with interviewers with whom they may have had a teaching and/or advising relationship.

FINDINGS

We begin the findings section with a discussion of how students defined belonging. Then, we present three key factors students described as contributing to their sense of belonging. All study participants talked about their perceptions of the college environment, social relationships, and campus involvement. However, privileged and minoritized students expressed quite divergent perceptions of, and experiences with, each of these categories. As other scholars studying minoritized populations have found, grounded theory can be a particularly useful method for developing complex theoretical models that honor consistency in group-level patterns while also acknowledging differences among subgroups of participants (Givon & Court, 2010).

Belonging Defined

In line with constructionist grounded theory, we did not begin with a conceptual model of belonging. Instead, our first interview questions invited participants to define and make meaning of belonging in their own words. Although they offered a variety of definitions, two common themes emerged from both privileged and minoritized students: being comfortable and fitting in. Two additional themes of safety and respect were shared by the minoritized students.

The most common word that emerged from all student definitions of belonging was “comfortable.” Belonging was described as a feeling of comfort with others and in one’s surroundings. Jonah explained, “I think belonging is feeling comfortable somewhere.” Similarly Rhonda shared, “I would define it as an inner feeling . . . as being comfortable somewhere. And like not having any inner stress . . . if you don’t belong somewhere it’s always like a burden on yourself mentally.” Another student explained simply that belonging is “to feel comfortable.”

The second theme that emerged from all participant narratives was the notion of “fitting in” and feeling like they were part of the campus community. More than half of the participants used the phrase “fitting in” as part of their definition of belonging. Ben, simply
explained belonging as the ability to “fit” with or “to be a part of a group.” Antonia summed up how comfort, fitting in, and belonging were tied together when she said belonging was “to feel like you fit in, to feel comfortable.”

Although all the students described how feeling comfortable and fitting in were essential to belonging, additional terms emerged from conversations with minoritized students. First, the word “safe” was not used by any privileged students to describe belonging; however, it showed up many times in transcripts from minoritized students. Liza, a student with a disability explained, “To belong on campus, it is to fit in, to feel as though you’re safe where you live.” Jazmin, a woman of color, described belonging as: “you feel safe in your environment and you actually feel welcomed.”

Another term that emerged from the minoritized students’ definitions that did not appear in privileged ones was “respect.” Students from minoritized groups explained how being respected was central to their sense of belonging. Theresa, a student with a disability explained, “To not belong is to feel rejected . . . to feel inadequate and disrespected.” Jaing, a gay student of color, felt belonging in situations when “people around you are respectful of your cultural background.”

Environment

All participants described how their perceptions of the campus environment shaped their sense of belonging. However, minoritized and privileged students described the environment in very different ways. Students from privileged backgrounds focused almost exclusively on positive descriptors (i.e., friendly, fun, comfortable). Students from minoritized groups perceived a lack of diversity on campus and often felt like the “only one.” They viewed the campus as an environment where they regularly felt judged and treated differently and a place where they could not always be “real” or their authentic selves.

Privileged students consistently used the adjectives friendly, fun, and comfortable to describe the campus environment. Jillian said, “This place is extremely friendly.” Ron stated, “I feel like this is just a friendly place.” Lisa also explained how her first few days on campus “made me feel like the campus was fun and very open.” In addition to the environment being fun and friendly, some students referenced the concept of comfortable. The notion of comfort was both a feeling associated with belonging definitions (see previous section) as well as an important environmental descriptor. For instance, Debbie connected her environmental perceptions and feeling of comfort when she said, “I like the campus and it makes me feel comfortable.”

Minoritized students often felt like the “only one” because of a lack of diversity on campus. Jayla, a student of color, explained, “There is only a little bit [of diversity] I see. I can tell that minorities aren’t that predominant [on campus].” Maria, a woman of color, shared, “I feel like no matter what, I feel like I’m a minority [here].” Another woman of color, Louisa, explained how one can “feel out of place.” Students with disabilities also talked at length about not knowing other students who also had a disability. Elliott described his perceptions that “there’s a lot of Christians” on campus and described the ways his outsidersness was engendered by being one of the few Jewish students on campus. He went on to lament that Christianity was ever present at the supposedly nonreligious public campus because, “We have a freakin church [on campus].” The Christian church was a consistent reminder that he did not fit in and he felt like the “only one.”

Students from minoritized social identity
groups also talked about the lack of belonging resulting from being judged or treated differently. Although we could have considered these phenomena as isolated interpersonal incidents, we understood the student narratives as references to an environment where subtle feelings of, and experiences with, exclusion were pervasive. Louisa explained how she sometimes got the subtle feeling that “other people [don’t] want you around” when you are the only person who looks like you on campus. Theresa, a student with a disability, described how feeling comfortable was key to belonging (as noted earlier). However, feeling comfortable could not happen in an environment where she felt judged or like the “only one.” Her sense of belonging decreased when “you feel you’re being judged. . . . That’s not how it should be. You should feel comfortable.” Paul, another student with a disability, shared how the campus was an environment where “everyone looks at me differently.”

It was not merely the experience of being the “only one,” judged, or treated differently that inspired minoritized students to describe the environment negatively. Minoritized students explained how they would feel like they belonged if they could be their authentic selves in the environment. For the purposes of this paper, we use the following definition of authenticity: “the extent to which one’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors reflect one’s true or core self . . . [and] the unobstructed operation of one’s true or core self in one’s daily enterprise” (Kernis & Goldman, 2005, p. 32). Dacia, a lesbian, described how university policy and communications (or lack thereof) created an environment that made her feel like she could not be her authentic self. Dacia shared how belonging could be increased for students from minoritized backgrounds:

If the administration is accepting of who you are and supports everybody’s groups.

. . . There’s also policies to accept those groups [instead of] policies in place that kind of restrict you from being who you are. . . . Just an overall sense of feeling you can be yourself [on campus].

In sum, belonging required an environment where students could be their authentic selves.

**Relationships**

All participants described the importance of relationships to their sense of belonging. For privileged students, being familiar to others, having fun, and gleaning task-related support were essential features of relationships that evoked belonging. Minoritized students, on the other hand, desired deeper, authentic relationships rooted in self-awareness.

Familiar, fun, and task supportive relationships engendered a sense of belonging for privileged students. For instance, Nancy experienced a sense of belonging when she would walk by the residence hall lounge and other residents would say, “Oh, hey, what’s going on?” Faith described how it was nice to have people to “go to the dining hall with.” James’s belonging increased when a professor remembered his name. All of the privileged students focused their narratives of belonging around how friendly people were. Robbin said,

Some of the kids in the hall that I’m not that close with—they are always like friendly, not like closed off people or anything. And some people in my classes, even though I only see them in class, they are friendly . . . even though we don’t always talk out of class.

For privileged students, another aspect of relationships that engendered a sense of belonging was knowing that they had task-related (versus deeply affective) forms of support. Privileged students described how relational support was about accomplishing functional tasks like homework assignments,
navigating campus, or registering for classes. Shaina explained how she gleaned support from relationships with classmates. She said, “If I have any questions that I need for class I have all of their phone numbers, so we talk a lot and study and answer questions.” Brittney also described how supportive relationships with teaching assistants contributed to her belonging: “Some of the TAs that I had last semester, they were really nice and kind. They helped us out and everything.”

For minoritized students, finding connections that enhanced belonging went beyond familiarity, friendliness, and functional task-related support. These students felt a sense of belonging only when they forged relationships in which they could be their authentic selves. As noted earlier, authenticity includes knowing and being true to oneself. As such, authenticity requires a certain level of self-awareness—if you do not know yourself, you cannot develop authentic relationships. Carla, a woman of color, described how being authentic in relationships required self-awareness and reflection. She said that, in authentic relationships,

I don’t feel like I have to pretend. . . . The sense of belonging to me, it’s not doing what other people do when you feel like it’s fake. . . . Then, you realize you are only doing what they are doing and you are like, “What am I doing? I don’t really like this.” . . . If you are happy with yourself, you know you will belong in whatever comes your way.

Similarly, two students with disabilities described how important it was to be self-aware in order to be authentic in relationships and, in turn, belong. Lucinda shared, “To belong to me, means you feel comfortable being yourself.” Theresa affirmed this sentiment when she explained, “To belong is . . . to heighten your own personal being. To be yourself in a great manner . . . sort of celebrating yourself.”

Minoritized students described how they attempted to create and sustain relationships in which they could be authentic. Jaing, a gay student of color explained, “I’m trying to get to know people while being myself.” Phoenix, a queer student, described how everyone should have the freedom to be authentic in relationships. She explained, “That’s you. And it should be cool for you to be that way.” Alix, a student who identified as a member of the LGBT community, explained how authentic relationships provided deep and meaningful bonds. She had some “surface” relationships that were fun. However, they did not enhance her sense of belonging on campus as did deeper, more authentic relationships. She described people who enhanced her sense of belonging as individuals who accept who you are and they are like you too. . . . I can have that sort of deeper level with them. . . . Your “fun” friends, you get to have fun with [but], on a deeper level, you just can’t really relate to them.”

Although all minoritized students discussed the importance of authenticity, a few students admitted that enacting authenticity in relationships could be easier said than done. Louis, a gay student, explained how he was struggling to find friends. However, he was proud to say, “I am very okay with my identity even if other people [aren’t].” His quote suggests that he was unwilling to engage in relationships with anyone who could not accept his authentic self. Paul also agreed with the importance of being authentic, yet as a gay student with a disability, he admitted, “I still haven’t quite figured out how I can be different but be comfortable with people around me.” This may have been the result of trying to navigate the intersections of two invisible minoritized identities.
Involvement

All students talked about how getting involved in campus extracurricular activities was connected to their sense of belonging. However, the way involvement shaped their emerging sense of belonging differed among minoritized and privileged students. Although belonging for privileged students was related to having fun and a sense of accomplishment or mattering via involvement, belonging for minoritized students revolved around whether or not they could be their authentic selves and develop authentic connections in clubs and student centers.

Belonging for privileged students seemed to be tied to activities that allowed them to have fun. Brice summed up the sentiment of his privileged peers when he shared how involvement made him feel like he belonged. He said, “Sailing Club is really fun.” Similarly, other privileged participants consistently used the terms “fun” and “enjoy” when describing clubs and organizations.

Privileged students also experienced a sense of belonging through involvement when they felt their actions mattered to the campus or community. Mattering relates to the notion that one has something important to offer to others (Schlossberg, 1984). Privileged students described how their involvement helped make campus a better place. Because they engaged in activities that mattered to the campus and community, they felt a deeper sense of belonging. In short, they belonged because they had something special to share via extracurricular involvement. James explained, “I play football. . . . I think that is pretty much like belonging to the campus. I mean, like, we’re doing things to help the campus.”

For students from minoritized groups, involvement increased their sense of belonging only if those activities allowed them to be their authentic selves. Involvement fostered a sense of belonging when organization members understood and valued them for their real selves. Liza, a woman of color, explained how locating the right extracurricular activity was about finding an organization in which she could have authentic conversations. Small talk about irrelevant topics was of no interest to her. Her belonging increased “by getting involved with the things that interested me. Because I know I can at least have a few conversations a week about things that I actually want to be talking about.”

Student organizations that minoritized students described as the most welcoming of their authentic selves were sometimes those designed for particular social identity groups. Cathy, a queer student, shared how getting involved with the LGBT center “secured my sense of belonging completely.” All her life she felt like an “outcast.” At the LGBT center, she was accepted for her authentic self. Judith explained how Hillel has “given me a sense of belonging and something kind of like a home . . . where people are practicing and understanding [Judaism].”

Identity-based groups did not foster belonging unless students made authentic connections in those settings. When students could not be authentic and make “real”
connections in extracurricular organizations and campus centers, they often discontinued their involvement. For instance, Tiara was excited to join a Brazilian club at the beginning of the year. By her second interview, she admitted, “I was having a hard time because I wanted to join so I could fit in with [other students of color], but I didn’t totally enjoy it. . . . Sometimes you go into a room and you notice that you feel like you can’t be yourself. You know? You feel like you don’t belong there. . . . The more I try to do something that is not me, it makes me feel worse."

As a result of feeling like she did not fit with the group, Tiara quit and began searching for other opportunities for involvement where she could be herself. Joelle, a Jewish student, also quit a student organization, saying “I didn’t really fit in with the girls that well, so I stopped.” A gay student with a disability, Paul, who did not find authentic connections at the LGBT center, described the Asperger’s support group as a place where he could be himself. Dacia, a lesbian, summed up the sentiments of the minoritized students when asked if she had advice for other students about getting involved on campus. She said, “I would give them advice that . . . you just have to find your niche and don’t worry about trying to be something you’re not. You just have to worry about being yourself.” In sum, minoritized students only felt they belonged if they could be their authentic selves through involvement.
In line with a constructionist grounded theory study, our data coalesced into a conceptual model of belonging that emerged directly from student narratives (see Figure 1). Sense of belonging appears in the center of Figure 1. The overlapping ovals situated in the center show the key terms (e.g., being comfortable, fitting in) that both privileged and minoritized students used in their definitions. The non-overlapping portions of those belonging ovals show minoritized students also considered safety and respect but privileged students used no additional descriptors to define belonging. The arrows in the model point to belonging from three emergent themes that students described as “especially important” or an “influence” on their sense of belonging. The three main influences on belonging (e.g., environment, relationships, involvement) appear on the outside of the model and are exemplified by two circles each. The pairs of circles highlight divergent ways privileged and minoritized students made meaning of the environment, relationships, and involvement as influences on their sense of belonging. A bird’s eye view of our model reveals not only differences but also recurring trends, which appear in bold and italicized text. For instance, being comfortable was a consistent aspect of belonging—emerging in definitions from all students and descriptors of the environment from privileged students. Fun and friendliness were also recurring patterns for privileged participants, whereas authenticity emerged consistently for minoritized students.

Our data converged on a shared definition of belonging that included feeling comfortable and fitting in—which align with previous descriptors of belonging that included: connectedness (Pittman & Redmond, 2008), sense of community (Elkins et al., 2011), and feeling included (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). However, our model shows there were also differences in the ways privileged and minoritized students make meaning of belonging. Minoritized students view safety and respect as key components to belonging. Only Strayhorn’s (2012) description of belonging includes the notion of respect, and none include safety. Our model contributes to the literature by suggesting definitions of belonging can vary by population. In prior quantitative studies, researchers used singular definitions of belonging and found lower levels of belonging among students of color compared to Whites (Johnson et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2008, 2012). We cannot compare levels of belonging from our qualitative data. (In fact, most participants expressed a generally positive sense of belonging.) However, we contend that, because prior studies defined and operationalized belonging as if it were the same for all students, results may have been limited or incomplete. If belonging measures included questions about safety, respect, self-awareness, and authenticity, prior studies may have yielded different (and possibly less deficit-laden) results for minoritized students.

In sum, our model shows the need to develop more complex and inclusive definitions of belonging rooted in diverse student narratives. No prior literature has connected all three factors (environment, relationships, involvement) to belonging, or has noted the kinds of nuances in these three themes that our model does. For instance, a few studies have connected perceptions of campus racial climate to belonging for students of color (Hausmann et al., 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Johnson et al., 2007; Locks et al., 2008; Nuñez, 2009), but most studies have not addressed other environmental nuances. Minoritized participants described covert and pervasive forms of environmental marginalization such as being judged, disrespected, and feeling like the “only one” on the nondiverse campus. By
including the perspectives of students of color, Jewish students, LGBTQ students, and students with disabilities, our findings add depth to prior studies focused solely on campus racial climate.

The importance of social relationships is a bedrock of the belonging literature (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007; Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Strayhorn, 2012). Yet, prior studies measured the presence or frequency of interpersonal interactions, friendships, and other relationships (e.g., transracial; Johnson et al., 2007). What are missing from the literature are deep analyses of the type and quality of these relationships. For instance, in a quantitative study with Latino students, Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that first-year student belonging was influenced by conversations outside the classroom. Our data suggest that social relationships for privileged students may indeed be engendered by casual conversations. Whereas familiarity and friendliness of acquaintances, along with task-related support, inspired belonging in privileged students, minoritized students expected more from relationships. They sought deeper levels of authenticity. Kernis and Goldman (2005) explained how “relational authenticity involves endorsing the importance of close others seeing the ‘real’ you and relating to them in ways that facilitate their being able to do so” (p. 34). We speculate that, for minoritized students, encountering experiences of subtle exclusion and feelings of being the “only one” may produce a complex self-awareness, resulting in a heightened need for authentic social experiences.

In prior studies, researchers have suggested that campus and community involvement is associated with a sense of belonging (Elkins et al., 2011; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012). Our model shows that involvement enhances belonging for privileged and minoritized students in different ways. To develop a sense of belonging, minoritized students had to locate involvement opportunities where they could “be real” (i.e., authentic) whereas having fun and mattering was relevant for privileged students. None of the prior belonging studies acknowledged the need for involvement to be authentic. In fact, Hurtado and Carter (1997) pondered why involvement in multicultural student groups was not significantly related to belonging for students of color in their study. Our findings suggest that attendance and participation in organizations for minoritized populations is not key to belonging—to belong, students have to be involved in organizations where they can be their authentic selves. Authentic people behave in ways that align with their needs, values, and perspectives and do not act “falsely” in order to fit in (Kernis & Goldman, 2005, p. 33). By quantifying involvement based solely on participation, prior researchers may have missed important features of involvement that supported, or detracted from, belonging. Our model adds richness to campus conversations about how disparate forms of involvement can shape the belonging experiences of students from diverse backgrounds.

In sum, our model of belonging for privileged and minoritized students includes many of the same concepts (e.g., environment, relationships, involvement) found in prior literature. However, through this qualitative study we add nuance and depth regarding the ways privileged and minoritized students define and make meaning of belonging as well as the student-described influences on belonging (i.e., environment, relationships, and involvement).

**IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Because belonging has been associated with academic motivation, success, and persistence, it is important for educators to deeply understand the phenomenon and create
conditions to foster it (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002). Our model suggests that privileged and minoritized students make meaning of belonging in unique ways. Overall, privileged students seemed to describe relatively surface-level needs regarding the environment (e.g., fun, friendly), relationships (e.g., peers saying hello or having someone to dine with), and involvement (e.g., having fun). One of the hallmarks of privilege is that identities, perspectives, and experiences of those with privilege are considered normative (Goodman, 2011). Our privileged students may have recognized the campus as part of a larger normative world that they should belong in. As such, feeling comfortable and fitting in (i.e., belonging) required surface-level cues such as friendliness, fun, and task-related support. Minoritized students without the privilege of seeing themselves easily fitting into the normative campus environment had more complex needs in order to belong. Interview data suggested a heightened level of self-awareness, which shaped their need to be real (i.e., authentic) in the environment, relationships, and involvement. Our findings should prompt educators to think more deeply about programs and services designed to foster belonging. The same strategies will not necessarily work for all students.

Minoritized students explained how the lack of a visual presence of similar others made them feel like “the only one” and inhibited their sense of belonging. All educational institutions should strive to increase numbers of underrepresented students, faculty, and staff and convey their commitment to diversity. However, increasing numbers typically requires long-term, sustained efforts. More immediate actions might include intentional communications to inform students about the presence of other students “like them” in the campus environment. This can be done through affirmative print and web messaging about the presence of diverse populations, diverse student organizations, diversity events, and student centers for minoritized populations. Universities should also assess how policies, procedures, and communications convey messages of support, or lack thereof, for minoritized populations (Vaccaro, August, & Kennedy, 2012).

In their quest to develop a sense of belonging, minoritized students sought involvement opportunities where they could be real, whereas privileged students focused on having fun and mattering. Merely encouraging all students to get involved in clubs and activities because they will have fun, meet friends, and do something important may work for privileged students. However, our findings show conversations about finding an authentic fit could be more effective when encouraging minoritized students to get involved. In conversations with students, educators should send the message that finding an authentic fit might not happen immediately. In fact, many of our participants had to try different forms of involvement before they found a place where they could be real.

Although the type of relationships that fostered belonging varied between privileged and minoritized students, literature suggests that authenticity is related to increased psychological functioning and healthy relationships for everyone (Kernis & Goldman, 2005). Therefore, we would be remiss if we did not suggest that educators find opportunities to foster authenticity among all students. Because authenticity begins with self-awareness, educators can facilitate “Who am I” workshops and other self-awareness programs for first-year college students. As new students transition into the first year of college, colleges and universities typically plan “meet and greet” programs where educators facilitate ice breaking activities. Rarely, however, do educators engage students in discussions about how to develop
and cultivate authentic relationships. Given the importance of authenticity, educators should offer workshops where students can be introduced to relational authenticity and learn skills to foster it.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. First, because the recruitment focused on the theme of belonging, students who were feeling extremely alienated or disengaged did not volunteer. Even students who reported challenges were, by and large, able to find a path toward belonging. Second, an emphasis on intersectionality may have allowed for richer and more complex images of belonging to emerge. In some ways, our efforts to diversify our sample by recruiting students who self-identified as “minorities” likely led to a particular self-selected group of students for whom one minoritized identity was most salient. During the semistructured interviews, we attempted to address intersectionality by asking about all the identities students listed on the demographic form. With two exceptions noted in the paper (i.e., Paul and Jaing), minoritized students tended to focus their responses on a single identity about which they felt the most judged or excluded. As Goodman (2011) argued, it is common for individuals to emphasize a subordinated group identity with which they most strongly identify. Nonetheless, we could have asked more direct questions about multiple identities to determine if, or how, their sense of belonging was shaped by intersectionality.

A third limitation is that we did not explicitly ask privileged students to talk about the ways their privileged social identities shaped their sense of belonging. However, as literature suggests, asking students to talk about privilege is like asking fish to talk about the water they are swimming in (Goodman, 2011). Although such questions may not have yielded much relevant data, and grounded theory methodology allows (actually encourages) alterations to protocols as part of the constant comparative process, we recognize that this could be a study shortcoming. We also acknowledge the danger in the dichotomous grouping of students into minoritized or privileged categories, as their histories, backgrounds, and experiences are unique. As Harper (2013) argued, minoritized identities are context dependent. Using a dualistic privileged and minoritized framework could result in overlooking complex senses of belonging and unique contextual experiences of being part of campus community for all students. Nonetheless, we believe emergent similarities and differences among groups are worth noting. A related limitation is the omission of gender in our privileged and minoritized categories and analyses. As scholars who have written extensively on gender inequality, we are attuned to gender, but we honored the constructionist grounded theory process whereby students did not describe gender as salient to belonging. This is not surprising, as many researchers have found most college women do not consider themselves to be minoritized by gender or hold feminist identities (Eisele & Stake, 2008; Zucker, 2004). However, future researchers should delve more deeply into the intersection of gender and other social identities as they relate to belonging. A final limitation is in this study we focused on the development of belonging during the first year of college. In future studies, researchers should explore if and how sophomore, junior, and senior students from diverse backgrounds define and cultivate a sense of belonging.

CONCLUSION

Given that belonging is a “basic human need” (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 87) associated with
academic motivation, success, and persistence (Freeman et al., 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2002), it is imperative that educators have a comprehensive understanding of how students from diverse backgrounds develop a sense of belonging. We hope findings from this study will add to the toolkit of perspectives that educators can draw upon when developing programs and services aimed at increasing the sense of belonging for diverse first-year students.

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