Cultural capital is key to a sense of belonging for college students of color

November 18 2023

Educational psychology professor Nidia Ruedas-Gracia was a co-author of the paper. Credit: Lindsay Hundley

College students' sense of belonging is believed to have important and far-reaching implications, contributing to academic achievement and

persistence at college as well as offering protective effects against anxiety and depression.

While belongingness initiatives are becoming commonplace at college campuses as officials strive to bolster student enrollment and retention, there currently is no consensus on what contributes to a sense of belonging or how best to measure it.

In a recent study, psychologists at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign explored the factors associated with college belongingness and evaluated the validity of one popular tool, the Sense of Social Fit Scale, a 17-item measure that has been used in scores of studies on the topic.

The U. of I. researchers found that college students derive belongingness from four broad factors—their identification with the university overall; feelings of being a social match with others on campus; their sense of being accepted and welcome at their school; and their cultural capital.

The latter element, cultural capital—which encompasses the skills and knowledge gleaned from family, mentors and other cultural brokers—is crucial to racial and ethnic minority students' sense of belonging at school, said first author Amir H. Maghsoodi, a graduate student in counseling psychology at the university.

Published in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* and cowritten by educational psychology professors Nidia Ruedas-Gracia and Ge Jiang, the study is the first to systematically investigate the factor structure and measurement properties of the social fit scale since its publication in 2007.

While researchers have differing definitions of college belongingness, the scale describes it as individuals' feeling of being an academic and

social fit with others on their campus. Students taking the survey rate on a 1- to 5-point scale how strongly they agree or disagree with statements such as "I feel like an outsider at" this school and "I am similar to the kind of people who succeed" here.

"There are so many components of belonging," said Ruedas-Gracia, an affiliate of the university's Interdisciplinary Health Sciences Institute. "Each of those components can feel different or be experienced differently, based on social identities or how the context treats people who have those identities. I think that is the beauty of researching a sense of belonging. There's not a single definition (composed) of simply two or three words. It's really a multifaceted definition that allows us a lot of room to explore it and what it means to different people."

Despite the scale's widespread use, the U. of I. team noted that certain aspects of it warranted closer scrutiny, including whether the small sample size of 69 individuals used in the original study limited the findings' generalizability. They also sought to identify the number and types of factors that contribute to school belongingness.

"We did a pretty classic psychometric study that had two components," Maghsoodi said. "In the first part, we did an exploratory factor analysis to see what factors might be components of belongingness. We looked at different types of models ranging from one to five factors. We were just seeing what made sense in terms of the data and how we could interpret it."

They conducted this first phase of the project using data from a 2017 study that included 243 college students at a predominantly white college.

Although the researchers who developed the social fit scale suggested that belongingness could be assessed using a single factor, the U. of I.

team found that the four factors they identified were the best fit with the data and were more inclusive of racially diverse populations.

To evaluate the validity of the four-factor model, the team then conducted a second analysis using an independent data set from an online survey of more than 400 students at a different university.

However, scholars differ on whether cultural capital is a component of belongingness or a separate but related concept. Thus, the team's finding that cultural capital is an integral factor in belongingness for racial minorities garnered "some pushback" from a few of the scholars who reviewed the paper prior to publication, Maghsoodi said.

"For some students at least—those whose cultural capital isn't valued at their institutions—cultural capital is a very salient part of their definition of belonging," Maghsoodi said. "For students such as first-generation or racial/ethnic minoritized students whose cultural wealth is not always valued and doesn't translate into automatic success the way it does for the dominant, more privileged groups, we need to intervene at the individual student and systems levels and make sure that they are able to integrate into the system or to feel a sense of belonging."

A limitation of the research project was that the sample contained only individuals who identified as gender binary and those who were Asian/Pacific Islander or white, constraining the team's analysis of the scale's relevance to specific gender and racial subgroups.

The four-factor model needs to be tested further with a sample that includes other gender and racial-ethnic groups, first-generation students and those of low-income backgrounds, Maghsoodi said.

"Just because there's a measure out there, we shouldn't just use it and assume that it's going to work for all kinds of students," Ruedas-Gracia

said. "I really love how we came together as a team and rigorously looked at this measure. And probably in 10 years, we will have to do it again, because over time the sense of belonging can change. This measure might not work for a certain group that we did not think about in 2022-23."

More information: Amir H. Maghsoodi et al, Measuring college belongingness: Structure and measurement of the Sense of Social Fit Scale., *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (2023).

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign