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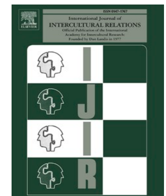

Editorial

The exigent case for belonging: Conceptualization, operationalization, and actualization

Our work as interculturalists has never been more important. We face a world in social, political, and existential crisis as we grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic, environmental degradation and global warming, struggles for social justice in the face of persistent racial and ethnocultural inequalities, and national economies rendered unstable by poverty and staggering gaps in wealth. Such conditions stimulate perceptions of uncertainty, ambiguity, and threat, and in similarly unstable environments, humans may experience reductions in cognitive complexity and escalating negative affect including pronounced anxiety, leading them to trust smaller circles of people (Coleman & Bass, 2019). We have witnessed such developments in recent years with the ascent of numerous autocratic, populist leaders who both foment and echo increasingly strident, nativist views of their supporters. Vilifying immigrants[1] and others who do not fit neatly into prototypical categories of who “belongs” (such as ethnocultural and religious minorities) offers a seductive, yet ultimately myopic “solution” to the ambiguity, complexity, and rapid changes brought about by globalization.

Thus, vulnerable populations, including immigrants, have never been more so. But as world-class researchers and practitioners in the field of intercultural studies, we were built for this. This is our moment to share with the world the knowhow that we (and those scholars who have preceded us in our field) have amassed in order to empower human beings to navigate the manifold challenges of living in multicultural societies and better approximating the ideal of all parties coexisting peacefully while enjoying the social, economic, and psychological rewards of societal belonging and participation. We can—and we must—build a more compassionate, equitable world. As a first step, it will take each of us using our expertise to build healthier communities for the future.

Though this may seem daunting, it is critical to remember that in times of threat, people can also come together in the spirit of unity and solidarity, acting in cooperative, altruistic ways (Coleman & Bass, 2019). In other words, crises, as so eloquently rendered in Japanese (危機), are fraught with both danger and opportunity. As a leader in our field, I keenly feel the urgency to renew our commitment to develop for the public the tools (in terms of social scientific theory, educational methods, and public policy) to promote peaceful, positive, and sustainable manifestations of human behavior at the interpersonal, intergroup, organizational, societal, and global levels, precisely *because* we are in the midst of a health, political, and social crisis.

Thus, the goal of this article is to explicate a critical concept in our field: *belonging*, as it has an important role to play in conceiving and creating a kinder world. I contend that belonging deserves recognition as a central outcome of acculturation and intercultural communication research, yet it often begs to be more precisely defined and operationalized. Accordingly, I first define belonging while delineating its benefits to individuals and society, after which I differentiate it from similar, yet distinct concepts with which it is often conflated. Next, I explain how I have conceived and operationalized belonging in my own research. Finally, as a university educator as well as a corporate and governmental intercultural trainer and consultant, I conclude with recommendations for bridging such theory into practice in work organizations and society.

Belonging: meaning, importance, and impact on behavior and cognitive processes

The world’s migrant population exceeded 271 million in 2019—a figure almost double that of the 153 million reported in 1990 (International Organization for Migration, 2021). Corresponding influxes of ethnocultural diversity have challenged boundaries of

[1] “Immigrant” denotes people who are originally citizens of other countries but have adopted a new nationality, while “migrant” is inclusive of both naturalized immigrants and non-naturalized foreign residents of a country.

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national ingroups, precipitating demands for greater inclusivity for those migrants in their receiving societies. As Kunst, Thomsen, Sam, and Berry (2015) contended, “The inclusiveness or permeability of. . . national identity—a factor central to, but seldom investigated in, the context of acculturation—should play a crucial role in motivating. . . integration efforts” (p. 1439). Accordingly, the goal of my research for the past 25 years has been to conceptualize belonging in societies and work organizations and to measure its attainment, with the goal of assessing intergroup boundary permeability and providing essential data as to the extent of the success of broader integration efforts. Measurement of ethnocultural group permeability, for example, lends insight into migrant progress in gaining acceptance and grasping whether intergroup boundaries are calcifying or growing more pliant during the acculturation process.

Belonging is a critical outcome of acculturation and plays an important role in intercultural psychology and intercultural communication. Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, and Collier (1992) defined sense of belonging from a social psychological perspective 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” (p. 173). Baumeister and Leary (1995) concluded that belonging is a basic human need, while Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, and Scabini (2006) found that belongingness motives directly influence the behavioral domain of identity enactment and indirectly contribute to identity definition—suggesting that people are in part motivated to adopt an identity to the extent that it can provide feelings of belonging. Baumeister (2011) has characterized belonging as “one of the most powerful, universal, and influential human drives” (p. 121).

People seek belonging within groups to form positive, lasting, and stable relationships (Abrams, Hogg, & Marques, 2005; Chung et al., 2020), which is concomitant with an affective attachment to the group, a sense of embeddedness, and a social identity as a group member (Berry & Hou, 2019). Perceptions of belonging to a group are constructed not only from an individual’s desire to achieve such belonging, but also their assessment of the group’s degree of receptiveness to including them. These perceptions often change over time through a recursive, bidirectional, and dynamic process during which a group’s seeming willingness (or reluctance) to admit the individual as a member affects the individual’s willingness (or reluctance) to be included in the group, and the individual’s apparent eagerness to join the group influences the group’s desire to accept the individual (Jansen, Meeussen, Jetten, & Ellemers, 2019). It is then the convergence or gap perceived by the individual between their own desire to belong and the degree of receptiveness of the other group to their belonging that forms the individual’s subjective reality and informs assessments of their own belonging, their satisfaction with this perceived degree of belonging, and their subsequent behaviors toward the group.

Belonging has cognitive, affective, and behavioral components. Group identity is primarily a *cognitive* phenomenon: individuals define themselves in terms of a specific group, adopting a social identity as one of its members; they think of group members in terms of “we” rather than “they” and consider group membership an important part of their self-concept (Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, Halevy, & Eidelson, 2008). Belonging is also associated with positive *affect* (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), or an emotional bond arising from mutual feelings of acceptance that encompass feeling valued, respected, and supported—even needed. In fact, people who both cognitively identify with and are emotionally involved with groups tend to define themselves as group members more consistently across situations and contexts than those who identify cognitively but lack emotional involvement with groups (Ellemers & Haslam, 2011). Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe (2004) noted that *behavioral* involvement enables one “to gain entrance to and acceptance within the group [and] show solidarity with [them]” (p. 93)—thus constituting a performance of trustworthiness, and then of group membership, once admitted. Komisarof (2018) observed that belonging is instantiated and deepened through behavioral involvement in a group’s daily rituals and routines, whereas Liu-Farrer (2020) noted that perceptions of belonging often hinge on people perceiving that they play a role in and contribute to the group. One form of behavioral involvement occurs through migrants’ foreign language use, which constitutes a means for them to feel attachment and belonging to their host culture (Panicacci, 2019) and acts as a form of social currency with which to access another cultural sphere and pursue personal and social goals within it (Kim, 2001).

When included in research designs, belonging may be positioned either as a predictor or an outcome variable. For instance, students’ sense of belonging at school has been found in various studies to have a bi-directional relationship with an array of social and psychological factors such as rates of delinquency, social rejection from peers, and depression—i.e., belonging contributes to these factors while the factors also influence sense of belonging (Chiu, Wing-Yin Chow, McBride, & Mol, 2016). Similarly, it is conceivable that in societal and work contexts, belonging may either stimulate social and psychological outcomes (e.g., prosocial behavior, one’s sense of well-being, or perceptions of job performance) or those variables may be seen as antecedents of belonging.

Because belonging constitutes a fundamental human need, its satisfaction can be considered a key outcome of acculturation and intercultural communication processes. Belonging has many benefits that are broadly considered to be relevant across cultures (Deci & Ryan, 2011): it promotes individuals’ mental health, adjustment, and well-being (Jansen et al., 2019; Pickett & Brewer, 2005) while serving material interests (e.g., remuneration as an organizational employee), enhancing self-esteem, and validating beliefs (Jansen, Otten, van der Zee, & Jans, 2014). It also inspires positive emotions including happiness, contentment, and calm, but when belonging needs go unfulfilled, negative outcomes encompass affective (e.g., anxiety, depression, anger, and loneliness), behavioral (e.g., aggression), and performance-related domains (e.g., self-perceptions of incompetence) (Abrams et al., 2005; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Baumeister, 2011).

Group membership and relatedness affect cognitive processing in ways that critically impact interpersonal relations both with one’s ingroup and toward outgroup members. Individuals are prone to make positive attributions about their ingroups; moreover, information about outgroup members tends to be processed in extreme, simplistic, and polarized manners, whereas similar information regarding one’s ingroup is processed in a more complex fashion (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). People expect ingroup members to act more favorably compared to outgroup members, and these expectations bias information processing and memory, leading individuals to forget more easily negatively perceived acts committed by ingroup members, but to remember the good more readily compared with

recollections of experiences with outgroup members. When people engage in recategorization—or as detailed in the Common Ingroup Identity Model, transform their cognitive representation of two formerly distinct groups into one inclusive group to which they also belong—reductions in intergroup prejudice and conflict, stereotyping, and discrimination occur through the extension of pro-ingroup bias to former outgroup members (Dovidio, Gaertner, Hodson, Houlette, & Johnson, 2005). Additionally, a strong common group identity among ethnocultural majority members toward immigrants can predict their efforts to support them in obtaining higher socioeconomic positions in society, encompassing altruistic actions such as resource sharing and taking social action to favor minority groups (Kunst et al., 2015). The aforementioned differences in how humans process information related to ingroup vs. outgroup members, as well as the impact of those cognitive processes upon interpersonal behavior, strikingly support belonging's importance in creating more equitable societies.

The need for belonging exists not only in society, but clearly extends to workplaces, where collegial acceptance has served as an important relational outcome in studies of U.S. employees in domestic contexts (Gaertner et al., 2000; Levine & Moreland, 1991) and expatriates abroad (Aycan, 1997; Palthe, 2004). Acceptance in a work group may positively impact job performance (Deci & Ryan, 2011): with it, assistance from others is more readily obtained (Aycan, 1997); moreover, job performance is higher when people are recipients of emotional investment, concern, and favorable treatment, which represent correlates of belonging (Chung et al., 2020; Shore et al., 2011). Feelings of acceptance have also been shown to positively influence coworker cooperation, organizational commitment, and productivity at both individual and group levels (Gaertner et al., 2000; Levine & Moreland, 1991; Shore et al., 2011), thus demonstrating the benefits of belonging not only for individuals but also for their work organizations.

There are exceptions when exclusion can be positive, including rejection by undesirable groups (Abrams et al., 2005). Jansen et al. (2019) observed that both groups and individuals maintain inclusion goals toward each other, ranging from low to high, such that individuals do not necessarily seek full inclusion in all groups to which they technically belong, particularly when they are deeply involved with other groups that they prioritize. However, as Major and Eccleston (2005) noted, people experiencing social exclusion from a group may withdraw physically and/or psychologically as a coping strategy to maintain self-esteem and well-being, so withdrawal and low inclusion goals can also be a *response* to rejection, rather than an aversion to belonging from the start. In fact, most humans need to belong *somewhere*, and exclusion's effects are categorically negative when those seeking acceptance encounter rejection (Abrams et al., 2005).

Distinguishing belonging from similar concepts

Despite the importance of belonging as a human need and as a pivotal acculturation outcome, the acculturation literature has utilized multiple competing definitions of belonging that in some instances lack operational precision. It is not uncommon to find studies using interchangeably seemingly similar concepts such as *belonging* to a group, *identification* with that group, and *level of acculturation* to that group (e.g., Panicacci, 2019; van de Vijver et al., 2015). Although these constructs may covary, they are distinct. For instance, one can be highly acculturated to or feel deep identification with a group, yet experience little belonging in it (Jansen et al., 2014). Many Westerners who are long-term residents of Japan have adapted to mainstream Japanese cultural norms and values yet feel rejected as insiders in Japanese society (Komisarof, 2011)—a case of high acculturation but low belonging. Immigrants who are ethnic minorities in their receiving societies may claim a national identity while experiencing widespread rejection due to their racial appearance, as in first generation Chinese-Australians (Liu, 2015), thus indicating a disjunction between identity and belonging.

Research utilizing Berry's acculturation strategy framework (2017) is sometimes characterized by similar imprecision. Berry's framework treats "preferences for intergroup contact" as one of its two dimensions; this broad conception has led to multiple operationalizations that are sometimes conflated in the literature, and that potentially include (but are not necessarily isomorphic with) belonging, such as identification with an outgroup, preferences for outgroup contact, or adoption of outgroup norms or other aspects of its culture (Berry, 2017; Sam & Ward, 2021). This is not a criticism of Berry's work, which has played a central role in my own research on acculturation strategies (Komisarof, 2004, 2006, 2009). Rather, my point is to underscore the need for precision in how we conceptualize and operationalize preferences for outgroup contact in Berry's framework, and not to confuse belonging with similar yet distinct concepts; indeed, when these operationalizations of preferences for intergroup contact are properly differentiated and contextualized, Berry's framework can be used to great effect.

Another concept often conflated with belonging is inclusion, yet a growing body of research clearly distinguishes the two (Vignoles et al., 2006). Shore et al. (2011) posited humans have opposing fundamental needs for *belonging* (the motivation to form and maintain stable relationships with others) and *uniqueness* (to have a distinctive self-concept), introducing a framework of workplace *inclusion* as a two-dimensional concept consisting of perceptions of belonging and uniqueness. Chung et al. (2020) validated measures for this framework, further demonstrating belonging and uniqueness as related but distinct components of workplace inclusion. Jansen et al. (2014) addressed inclusion not only in work groups, but in social groups more generally. Similar to Chung et al. and Shore et al., they posited belonging as one dimension of inclusion within a two-dimensional framework; however, rather than uniqueness, they proposed a broader concept—authenticity—measuring the extent to which group members are allowed to differ from one another. Thus, those members wishing to be unique can be, yet prototypical group members (e.g., cultural majority group members) who do not necessarily want to differ from others in the group are given the freedom to be similar as an expression of their authenticity.

Acceptance and tolerance may be treated as similar to belonging—yet once again, alternative conceptualizations are employed in the literature. According to Cvetkovska, Verkuyten, and Adelman (2020), *acceptance* encompasses "approving of and valuing the target group's identity as well as the beliefs and practices that undergird it," thus allowing for members of that group the "opportunity and freedom to express themselves" (p. 162). This meaning aligns well with Shore et al.'s (2011) definition of inclusion. Additionally, Cvetkovska et al. characterized *tolerance* as respect for the freedom of expression of other groups and refraining from interfering in such

expression, yet it can also be marked by disapproval of such differing beliefs and practices. Tolerance in this sense promulgates nonviolent coexistence but, unlike belonging, does not connote positive affect between individuals or decidedly amicable intercultural group relations. Research suggests that relational outcomes differ between tolerance and acceptance: Cvetkovska et al. found that, among ethnic minorities in the Netherlands, feeling accepted by the majority is related to higher affective well-being than that for perceptions of mere tolerance.

National identity

Boundary negotiation is a process with various conceptions in the literature, depending upon the level upon which it is analyzed. My own research has focused upon two distinct levels: boundary negotiation over national identity between migrant groups and their destination societies, and negotiation between individuals and their cultural outgroups in organizational contexts over boundaries delineating national cultural ingroups (for example, who is considered to be culturally Japanese or American) and organizational membership. By explaining these approaches in this and subsequent sections, I hope to illustrate two means by which belonging can be conceived and assessed, thus reflecting some of the types of belonging that are negotiated at manifold levels of society.

In political science, concepts of national identity and assessments of who "belongs" as an ingroup member have been traditionally investigated through legal definitions of citizenship and immigration laws (Komisarof & Leong, 2020). Alternatively, social psychologists examine individual-level citizenship representations, i.e., subjective definitions of national ingroup prototypes that include norms, values, and other characteristics that are utilized as membership criteria for deciding which migrants are admitted to the national ingroup (Reijerse, Van Acker, Vanbeselaere, Phalet, & Duriez, 2013). These surmised common attributes comprise the content of national identity, and they are used as benchmarks for established ingroup members to maintain their ingroup status and for prospective members to potentially gain such status.

A migrant's likelihood of gaining entry into the destination society's national group is intimately related to the inclusiveness of that group's national identity; concepts of national identity impact that ingroup's membership criteria and boundary permeability. Specifically, national ingroup status may be ascribed or achieved (reviewed in Komisarof & Leong, 2020). Ascribed identity is based upon markers that are evident at birth and mostly immutable—e.g., one's genealogy, ethnicity, and birthplace. For example, some French people might believe that being French requires having been born in France and that one's parents and grandparents were also born in France. Achieved identity is attainable—for instance, by endorsing mainstream values or beliefs, loyalty to political institutions, acquiring citizenship, respect for a host country's cultural traditions, or subjective feelings of being a national ingroup member. For example, some Australians might believe that anyone who moves to Australia can become Australian so long as they adopt Australian customs, beliefs, and identifications.

Admittedly, such national identity concepts are not applied uniformly within nation-states, as they can vary according to factors such as geographic regions, political ideologies, generations, socioeconomic classes, and ethnic groups, among others. Nor do individual host nationals apply their own national identity concepts uniformly toward all migrants: they may extend different treatment to various migrant groups by applying the same markers as ingroup membership criteria with diverging degrees of stringency, or even introduce new markers that they apply only to members of specific migrant groups and not to others. Such variations may occur based, for example, on perceived migrant status, migrants' racial and/or ethnic appearance, or country of origin (Komisarof & Leong, 2020).

Such caveats notwithstanding, achieved identity is generally more broadly inclusive than ascribed identity, as it can be gained, at least in theory, by anyone willing to follow the social contracts implicit in the membership criteria. In groups where ascribed identities prevail, the utilization of immutable characteristics as membership criteria results in the categorical exclusion of anyone not in possession of these unobtainable markers. For example, in Japan's case, various scholars argue that people who do not simultaneously meet all the criteria of being a native Japanese speaker, having Japanese parents and ancestors, and holding Japanese nationality are often presumed to be outsiders who are unable to comprehend Japanese culture or acculturate to it, much less take on a Japanese identity (for a review see Komisarof, 2014).

However, many nations where ascribed identity is prevalent, such as Japan, China, and South Korea, are experiencing unprecedented change through global flows of human capital. As their local populations diversify, notions of cultural homogeneity and traditional forms of group belonging are challenged via demands for migrants' societal inclusion (Komisarof & Leong, 2016; Komisarof & Zhu, 2016). For instance, Komisarof (2012) observed that Westerners who are not of East Asian ancestry and hence do not "appear" to be Japanese may be naturalized Japanese citizens and feel accepted as Japanese within certain relationships and social contexts—especially when their legal status as Japanese nationals is known by their communicative partner(s) and their Japanese cultural and linguistic competence is high (and recognized as such). These migrants challenge longstanding Japanese ethnic concepts of national identity with a more inclusive, achievement-based definition of national ingroup membership. Conversely, traditional immigrant-receiving societies with purportedly achievable national identity may discriminate and employ exclusive, ascriptive concepts of national identity. For instance, ascribed national identity concepts favoring Caucasians over other native-born ethnic minorities and migrants have been documented in the United States (Devos & Mohamed, 2014), the United Kingdom (Pehrson, 2019), and Australia (Liu, 2015). Therefore, ascribed and achieved forms of national identity provide some indication of national group boundary permeability, but it is critical to apply these concepts flexibly and with attention to exceptions, contradictions, and local complexities.

Social markers of acceptance and belonging

Leong's (2014) *social markers of acceptance* ("SMA") comprise one approach to understanding how national ingroup boundaries are negotiated between members of recipient societies and migrants, as well as clarifying conceptions of national identity. Komisarof,

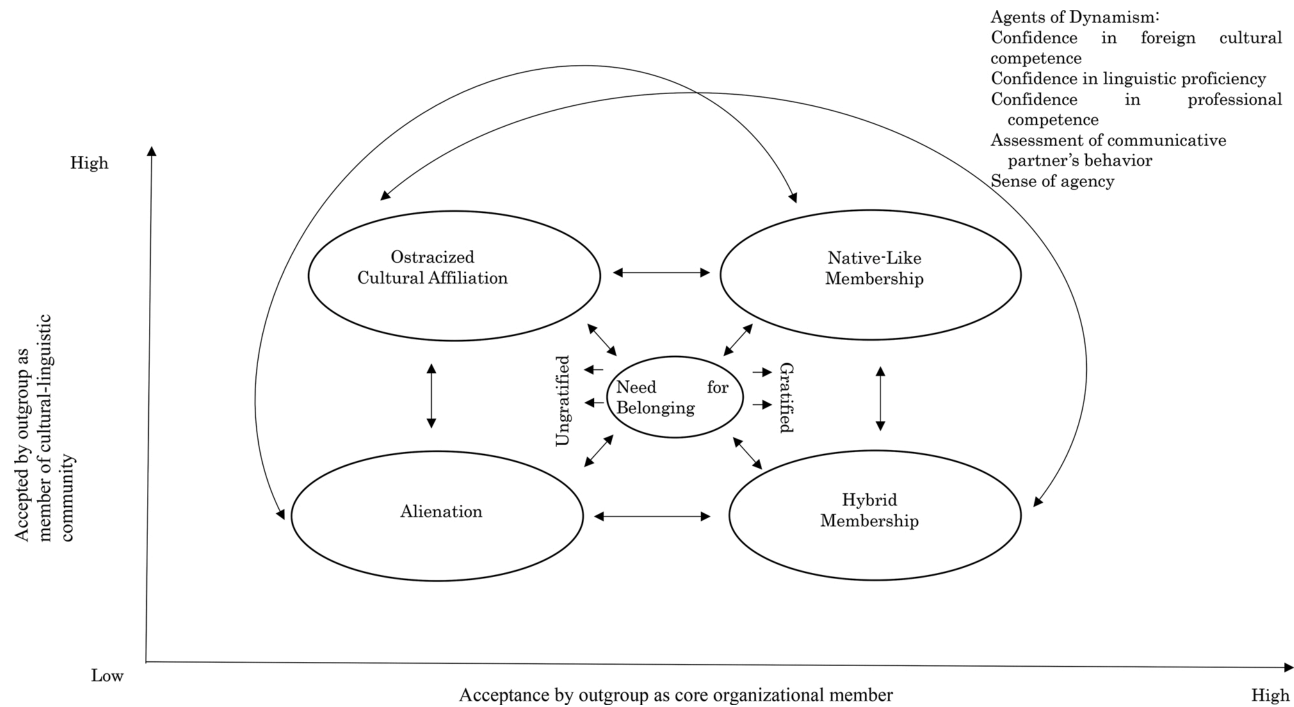

Fig. 1. Framework of workplace acculturation.
Reproduced from Komisarof (2018) with permission from *Journal of Intercultural Communication*.

Leong, and Teng (2020) defined SMA as "socially constructed indicators (e.g., adherence to social norms; expression of mainstream beliefs, attitudes, or values; and competencies such as language skills), or the perceptual signposts that recipient nationals use in deciding whether a migrant is a part of the host community" (p. 238). By identifying the SMA valued most by members of specific host societies, the membership criteria within those societies can be understood, as recipient nationals' marker choices reflect what they consider as the essential attributes for migrants to possess if they are to be accepted in the host society to the same degree as a native-born citizen. The more markers endorsed (and the greater importance placed upon them), the narrower the definition of acceptance, as migrants are expected to meet a more demanding, exacting set of criteria to gain belonging in the recipient society. Moreover, by measuring among host nationals the perceived attainability of each marker (i.e., difficult or easy), it is possible to further assess the flexibility of group boundaries. If markers are considered not only important but also difficult to acquire, then they present a higher boundary for group entry compared with those markers deemed important but easier to attain.

The SMA framework allows us to pinpoint the cultural features that are most pivotal in terms of gaining acceptance in a destination society—hence uncovering locally-constructed meanings of national identity and which of its domains form the crux of group boundary maintenance and negotiation. In Komisarof et al. (2020), for example, factor analysis yielded three distinct components of national identity among Japanese, or types of SMA used in maintaining Japanese ingroup boundaries: ethnic, social-economic, and sociolinguistic markers. Moreover, the SMA framework can be utilized to create a dynamic, contextually dependent conception of group boundary permeability, as the driving forces of such variation can be isolated and examined. Namely, several studies found that the perceived importance of markers, and along with it, the flexibility of the national ingroup boundary, changes according to an array of variables such as receiving society members' perceptions of immigrant threats, contributions, and social status, as well as different degrees of economic optimism, strength of family ties, and national pride (Komisarof et al., 2020; Leong, 2014; Leong et al., 2020).

Finally, as in Leong's (2014) Singapore-based study, it is possible to compare the markers thought to be important in achieving national ingroup status among receiving society members and migrants. By doing so, potential areas of conflict may be recognized and proactively mollified through education and policy initiatives. For instance, if literacy in the host society's language is deemed essential by locals, but migrants believe that only oral fluency is necessary, then such discordance may be identified by comparing the markers thought to be important by both groups. As a next step, education and policy measures may be taken to close this gap and ameliorate future conflict. For example, language proficiency initiatives, including government-funded classes for lower income groups, could improve migrants' literacy; additionally, public service announcements by the government could be provided in the migrants' native language—based on the assumption that they might be verbally fluent in the host language(s) but not necessarily literate in it/them. This would ensure that such information is understood broadly and accurately throughout the community, thus providing essential information to improve public safety and quality of life.

A framework of workplace belonging in intercultural contexts: the roles of cultural-linguistic community and work organization membership

The negotiation of group boundaries to fulfill belonging needs can be conceived as part of the acculturation process, and one's sense of belonging as an acculturation outcome. My framework of workplace belonging (Komisarof, 2016, 2018, in press) may be used to conceptualize and assess group boundary permeability, as well as the impact of group belonging on work-based acculturation for migrants toward their receiving society members and vice versa. Specifically, this framework examines how belonging at multiple levels—particularly the degrees to which people see themselves accepted as members of another group's cultural-linguistic community and as core members of their shared work organization—influences their broader acculturation dynamics and outcomes in organizations with intercultural workforces (see Fig. 1). One's sense of belonging on each dimension is located on a continuum from low to high.

The dimension of cultural-linguistic outgroup belonging, represented on the vertical axis in Fig. 1, captures an individual's perceptions of their degree of acceptance as a member of the cultural-linguistic community to which they are acculturating (the individual being either a migrant or a member of the receiving society). High belonging on this dimension is characterized by *feeling* and *behaving* like a group member and encouragement by the other cultural-linguistic community to do so. In Komisarof (2018), informants felt trusted by the outgroup to participate competently in their daily routines and rituals and to enact important social roles, while also performing cultural features broadly seen to define that group by its members—such as communicating in their language and interacting in accordance with their predominant norms and values. Such behavioral engagement serves as an entrée to the group, which in turn can act as a springboard for forging a sense of belonging, solidarity, and an emotional bond infused with feelings of acceptance and affection.

Some informants in Komisarof (2018) assumed that their strong cultural and linguistic competencies empowered them to accomplish such belonging, whereas others described being provisionally accepted as "novices" while they learned these competencies through welcomed observation of and consistent participation in group activities. In either case, however, individuals believed that their outgroup perceived a small psychological distance between the individual and that outgroup, and those individuals also thought that membership in the outgroup's cultural-linguistic community was *attainable* precisely because their boundary was *permeable*. Those who reported low belonging on this dimension perceived outgroup members as conceiving a large, unbridgeable psychological distance between them, resulting in those people feeling "othered" and stigmatized as inherently incapable of understanding the outgroup's culture, learning their language, or competently practicing their social norms.

This dimension draws a distinction between group belonging and assuming group identity, which are not isomorphic—though they may covary (as explained previously). Assessing such belonging is particularly important in this age of globalization, since societies with a national identity rooted predominantly in membership in a specific ethnic group are experiencing unprecedented domestic

ethnocultural diversity as they increase the size of their migrant workforces. In such transnational spaces, migrants who do not at first glance physically "pass" as members of the ethnic majority are likely to face numerous barriers to being accepted. In this framework of workplace belonging, by focusing on belonging as a manifestation of affective ties coupled with behavioral adaptation—rather than identity—the conception of cultural-linguistic belonging sidesteps the near impossibility of achieving ascribed ethnic membership and focuses instead upon group boundary negotiation through achievable forms of emotional connection and behavioral participation in another cultural-linguistic community. In other words, as long as outsiders are permitted to participate actively in the life of the community and there is a mutual sense of affective bonding, then entrance into a different cultural-linguistic community is realizable. By conceiving belonging in this manner, a benchmark is created that is suited to forms of belonging as performed in liminal, trans-cultural spaces (Komisarof, 2016, 2018; Komisarof & Zhu, 2016)—particularly ones that are physically located in cultures with largely ascribed national identities—thus offering migrants who are marked as outsiders by their external appearance an achievable form of belonging that is more fluid than traditional forms of ethnicity-based membership.

For instance, on a personal note, even as a resident of Japan for 24 years who is fluent in the language, if you ask Japanese people who do not know me whether I am Japanese, based on my Caucasian appearance, they are likely to say no. However, I have felt deep belonging in many Japanese groups based upon my adaptation to their cultural norms and an affective bond between us. I have been admitted into these Japanese cultural spaces (where Japanese is the lingua franca and their cultural norms predominate) and enjoyed the status of a full group member, rendering the question largely irrelevant of whether I identify as Japanese, am a citizen of the country, or whether people consider me to be Japanese. Such experiences are quite commonly reported by long-term foreign residents of Japan (Komisarof, 2011, 2012).

The horizontal dimension in Fig. 1 reflects the extent to which individuals perceive themselves to be core *organizational* members, particularly in reference to the people from the cultural outgroup with whom they work regularly. Those reporting such belonging enjoy supportive coworker relationships, ample leadership opportunities, productive collegial collaboration, access to insider knowledge, group decision-making influence, and regular opportunities to employ their professional skills. This dimension refers to the *relational aspects* of an individual's *subjective sense* of organizational membership—i.e., how socio-professional relations and communication dynamics with colleagues affect one's perceptions of acceptance as a core organizational member.

Ontological interpretive spaces: their conceptualization and effects on relational and performance outcomes

In my framework, the two aforementioned dimensions of belonging are juxtaposed, forming four ontological interpretive spaces from which individuals construct meaning for their intercultural interactions, gauge the quality of their intercultural work relationships, and choose behavioral orientations within those relationships. Such interpretations in turn affect future perceptions of belonging—a symbiotic, cyclical process of meaning-making affecting intercultural communication dynamics and acculturation outcomes. Thus, the ontological interpretive spaces constitute *perspectives constructed by individuals* that in turn frame intercultural interactions during the acculturation process and position people to construe central acculturation outcomes such as the quality of their intercultural interactions and job effectiveness with their cultural outgroup. The basic human need for belonging fuels the process of constructing the ontological interpretive spaces: when gratified, individuals move toward Native-Like or Hybrid Membership, and when frustrated, toward Ostracized Cultural Affiliation or Alienation (a process depicted in Fig. 1).

Komisarof (2016, 2018, in press) provides more detailed explanations, but the ontological interpretive spaces can be summarized as follows. *Aliens* (low cultural-linguistic community and organizational belonging) describe themselves as outsiders who can never belong no matter how much they acculturate to their cultural-linguistic outgroup, while also occupying restricted, unsatisfying professional roles at work, hence experiencing rejection as organizational members. *Ostracized Cultural Affiliates* (high cultural-linguistic community/low organizational belonging) believe that coworkers in their cultural outgroup expect them to adhere to the outgroup's cultural practices and communicate in their language, but they feel ostracized from organizational core membership for having fallen short of the outgroup's highly assimilative expectations for their organizational socialization. *Native-Like Members* (high in both dimensions of belonging) see themselves as core organizational members and as accepted in the other cultural-linguistic community, communicating in that community's language and more broadly engaging in daily work rituals and tasks in ways closely aligned with practices, roles, norms, and values that they identify with that group's culture. Finally, *Hybrid Members* (high organizational/low cultural-linguistic community belonging) experience belonging in their work organizations but do not feel part of the other cultural-linguistic group. Unlike Native-Like Members, they are not expected to function within contexts requiring substantial foreign linguistic or cultural competence but instead have unique yet valued organizational roles and duties that diverge from those in the other cultural-linguistic community. In Komisarof (2016, 2018), American Hybrid Members used English with Japanese coworkers while interacting according to norms they associated with American culture, whereas Japanese Hybrid Members utilized Japanese social norms and language with Americans who had developed high levels of Japanese linguistic and cultural competence. Both Japanese and American Hybrid Members tended to work in positions requiring their native cultural and linguistic expertise, such as translators, experts in marketing to their native cultural group, or in-house language teachers.

Individuals tend to rely predominantly on one (in some cases two) ontological interpretive spaces to frame their experiences but can momentarily shift between any of the four as their sense of belonging fluctuates in their cultural-linguistic outgroup and organization (Komisarof, 2016, 2018). People move between ontological interpretive spaces via contextual features termed *agents of dynamism* (depicted in the upper right of Fig. 1), which include the meaning they attribute to their communicative partner's behavior, their own sense of agency, and their confidence in their cultural, linguistic, and professional competencies. Thus, individuals construct their senses of belonging differently depending upon their communicative partner and other situational variables, rendering group belonging an interactional, dynamic *process* with ever-present possibilities for change and transformation.

Komisarof (in press) developed and validated survey instruments measuring cultural-linguistic group and organizational belonging while also testing the associations between ontological interpretive spaces and various outcome variables concerning the extent to which individuals can actualize their professional skills, develop a sense of loyalty to their work organization, and enjoy positive psychological well-being within intercultural work environments. Native-Like and Hybrid Membership were associated with significantly more positive outcomes than were Alienation or Ostracized Cultural Affiliation in terms of job effectiveness, flourishing, and organizational commitment—even after controlling for ten covariates such as length of time abroad, gender, and ethnicity—supporting the validity of the framework. The findings applied to migrants and recipient society members, thus advancing understanding of the acculturation of each. Because research designs in our field tend to focus upon migrant acculturation, likeminded examinations of both groups are essential to better grasp acculturation as a broader phenomenon (Sam & Ward, 2021), particularly given that acculturation is a bidirectional process (Berry, 2017) and needs to be conceptualized and assessed as such.

Conclusion: practical recommendations for improving belonging

If we are to create deeper belonging for migrants, then bridging research and practice is an exigent task. First, by using the findings from SMA research to create intercultural communication workshops and classes in corporate and community settings as well as in higher education, we can heighten awareness of provincial, ascribed concepts of national identity and broaden notions of who is "one of us." In fact, SMA research can be utilized to promote inclusion of not only migrants in their host societies, but other marginalized groups as well, such as native minorities that fall outside of narrow national ingroup prototypes. We need to combat the discriminatory applications of markers towards groups that differ from the "mainstream" in terms of ethnicity, race, gender, socioeconomic class, sexual identity, and other characteristics that are used to exclude migrants and other marginalized groups in their recipient societies.

Specifically for migrants, markers of national identity can be made more inclusive in the following ways. First, markers deemed important to belonging can be made less so, either by decreasing emphasis upon those expectations or abandoning them entirely. Second, markers can be reconceived as easier to acquire: if markers are viewed by host society members as ascriptive, they become more inclusive if they are reconceptualized in a manner that is achievable. In the case of the marker of linguistic proficiency, if hosts expect migrants to speak, read, and write the local language with near-native proficiency, it can be a tall task for non-native speakers of that language to do so (speaking from the perspective of a US American who has lived in Japan for 24 years). That same marker of language competency can be recast in a more accessible way—i.e., for migrants to become proficient enough in the language so that they have sufficient oral and literacy skills to complete functional tasks required of them to live and work in that society. In other words, even if language comprehension and production are not at the level of a native speaker, such skills are adequate to live a satisfying life in the country and to meet the daily demands of being a long-term resident or naturalized citizen.

Finally, markers deemed indispensably important can be applied more compassionately. My analysis (Komisarof, 2020) of Japanese university students' conceptions of immigrants and use of markers to maintain Japanese ingroup boundaries indicated three ways in which the same marker could be employed by participants to construct intergroup boundaries in either exclusive or inclusive terms. First, some Japanese utilized markers *punitively*—i.e., immigrant adaptation to markers was not only essential, but if they failed to do so, then they should be punished, for instance, by repatriation to their home countries. In the United States, my home country, the same mentality echoes in the refrain, "*If you don't like the way we do things here, then go back to where you came from!*" Other markers were used by Japanese in a *normative* manner—namely, migrants were unequivocally expected to follow the assimilative dictum, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." As for *compassionate* utilizations of markers, Japanese who felt invested in immigrants' psychological and material well-being thought certain markers important because they were believed to help immigrants improve the quality of their lives in Japan, as when immigrants were encouraged to learn to speak Japanese so they could make friends, find a life partner, and improve their employment prospects. Skilled intercultural trainers can help host society members to identify the markers they consider important, to relax or jettison some of those expectations, and by building empathy toward migrants, move host society members along this continuum toward more compassionate conceptions of markers to create more flexible intergroup boundaries.

As for the framework of workplace belonging, various applications exist. For example, my findings (Komisarof, in press) suggest that high organizational belonging, both on its own and when coupled with cultural-linguistic belonging, enables organizations with intercultural environments to employ migrant and host culture workers more effectively. Organizational belonging can be realized through regular opportunities for project collaboration and shared decision-making with culturally diverse team members, providing individual leadership opportunities, offering chances to actualize valued professional skills, and through building a work environment characterized by mutual support, respect, and trust. As Chung et al. (2020) recommended, organizational systems such as employee recruitment, selection, promotion, and compensation need to be aligned with the promotion of inclusion. Organizational policies fostering the development of competencies among both leaders and subordinates that facilitate belonging for themselves and others, as well as rewarding behaviors that embody such competencies, are also effective.

Although a sense of belonging is a critical outcome of acculturation, it is not a panacea. Rather, it represents an important step toward engendering more positive intercultural communication and relationships. For migrants it is also essential to couple belonging with socioeconomic mobility—which is only possible with advances in their income, labor market participation, and the education of migrants and their families. Considering our acute global struggles to integrate people from other cultures into work organizations and the social fabric of communities, time is of the essence. Research designed to better understand, promote, and enable belonging, as well as promulgate these socioeconomic outcomes, can help to create more equitable, inclusive societies. I hope that research about belonging, particularly that which identifies its antecedents in a variety of social contexts (e.g., school, work, sodalities, and family), will continue to proliferate so we can empower both individuals and groups to achieve deeper belonging on a broader scale in their work organizations, local communities, and societies.

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