Q&A for "A brief social-belonging intervention in college improves adult outcomes for black Americans"

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What kind of study is this?
- It is a longitudinal intervention field experiment, in which Black and White students at a selective university in the United States were randomized to treatment or control exercises as part of a research study in their first year of college. Because this is a randomized experiment, we can draw causal claims from it.
- The treatment comprised a 1-hour *social-belonging intervention* exercise, designed to provide students with an adaptive narrative for making sense of worries about belonging in the transition to college. The treatment was theorized to be especially effective for minoritized students—in this case, for Black students—who face negative stereotypes and numeric underrepresentation and thus reasonably face greater belonging concerns in college. The treatment was compared to a placebo control exercise.
- Previously, an article in *Science* reported that Black students in the intervention condition had significantly higher grades, greater belonging, and better physical health at the end of college.
- The present study examined if benefits would extend to post-college life. The primary outcomes for this study were assessed via a survey about 8.5 years after the original intervention treatment or control exercise. On average, participants who responded to the survey (*N*=80) were 27 years old.

What are the key findings?
- The intervention improved major adult outcomes for Black participants. Specifically, Black participants who completed the intervention reported ***greater career satisfaction and success***, ***greater psychological well-being***, and ***greater engagement in their communities*** than their control counterparts. There were no consistent effects for White participants, nor were there effects on physical health for Black participants, another outcome examined.
- The career and well-being gains were concentrated among Black participants who reported developing ***significant mentor relationships in college,*** another outcome that the intervention increased. For instance, the percentage of Black students who reported having developed an academic mentor in college was 84% in the intervention condition but just 44% in the control condition.

What are some of the key takeaways of the study?
- Worries about belonging can have lasting consequences, undermining well-being and life success. These worries arise from socio-cultural contexts, including the history of exclusion of people from minoritized groups from postsecondary education in the United States.
- Worries about belonging can prevent students from developing important relationships and fully integrating into the campus community. Yet this process can be interrupted in part through targeted intervention to support students' sense of belonging in critical academic transitions.
- Colleges play a key role in shaping students' feelings of belonging. One aspect of this role involves providing adequate resources and a welcoming environment free from racial hostility and discrimination. Another involves helping people understand common challenges as common and improving with time. Doing so may specifically support the thriving of people from minoritized groups in college and after.

What is a social belonging intervention?
- Originally developed by Greg Walton and Geoff Cohen (2007), the *social-belonging intervention* is a reading and reflection exercise designed mitigate worries about belonging during an academic transition. It offers students a nonthreatening lens with which to make sense of common social and academic adversities in such transitions.
- It does this by sharing stories from diverse upper-year students who describe experiencing a range of everyday challenges to belonging in the transition to college and how their experiences improved with time. The stories thus represent these kinds of challenges to belonging as normal in the transition to college, as temporary, and as due to the transition itself—not as evidence of a permanent lack of belonging on the part of the self or one's group. After reading the stories, participants reflect in writing on their own experiences at college.
- In this study, the social-belonging intervention was a relatively intensive in-person experience that lasted about an hour. Since the original study, it has been adapted to be delivered online and in classes.

Who deserves credit for participants' success?
- Credit belongs fully to participants themselves, as they worked hard and took advantage of the opportunities they had, and to the university they attended, which offered these opportunities.
- All the intervention did was clear a psychological obstacle to allow students and the school context to better realize their potential.

Why don't White students benefit? Don't they worry about belonging? Are belonging concerns just "in the head"?
- Certainly, many students from all kinds of backgrounds worry about belonging in college. This is what the belonging intervention shares with students, and it is true.
- But worries about belonging can be more pernicious for students from minoritized groups. These students enter college aware of the underrepresentation of their group in higher education. They know that negative stereotypes denigrate the intellectual ability of their group. They know that bias and discrimination could affect how people treat them. Thus, these students can reasonably worry not just whether they belong in college personally but whether "people like me" can belong. These concerns are not just "in the head" but reflect our contemporary society and the history of racial and social class exclusion in education.
- From this perspective, common everyday challenges in college, such as earning a low grade or being left out of a social gathering, can reasonably appear to suggest to a student that they do not belong.
- Unfortunately, this perception can become self-fulfilling. As prior research shows, if students infer that they do not belong, they may be less likely to join student groups or to reach out to prospective mentors, undermining supports and achievement during college. Through this process, worries about belonging, rooted in a history of social disadvantage, can perpetuate racial inequality in higher education and in life.

Will this intervention work everywhere?
- No. Psychological interventions depend on the context in which they are implemented.
- We expect greater benefits of the intervention where there are resources to succeed and real opportunities to belong yet negative stereotypes and a history of group-based minoritization allow worries about belonging to fester. We expect limited benefits where genuine opportunities to belong or needed resources are lacking—or where subsantial work has already been done to lessen worries about belonging.
- Further, we expect lasting benefits when the intervention helps people acquire relationships, academic credentials, and/or perspectives that foster success in the next stage of life.

What are some of the limitations of the study?
- The study was conducted at a well-resourced private university that is not representative of colleges in general. However, other studies have shown benefits of social-belonging interventions in varied contexts, including in diverse post-secondary contexts, in high schools, and middle schools. (For a review, see here.)
- Although we were able to re-recruit 87% of participants from the original study, the total number of participants in the follow-up study is modest (N= 80).

Can you give specific examples of the benefits Black participants showed?
At age ~27, compared to their control counterparts, Black participants who completed the intervention exercise:
- Rated their potential to succeed in the future 16 percentile points higher, 69th percentile instead of 53rd percentile, as compared to college classmates.
- Rated their life satisfaction almost a full point higher (on a 7-point scale).
- Were almost twice as likely to report holding a leadership position in their community (68% vs. 35%).

Can colleges and universities access the belonging intervention?
- Through a partnership between PERTS and the College Transition Collaborative (CTC), an online version of the belonging intervention is available, for free, to four-year colleges and universities. Since 2016, more than 130 institutions have offered it to incoming students.
- In addition, many administrators have worked to understand theory about student belonging, examined how worries about belonging manifest on their campuses, and implemented targeted programming to improve students' experiences and outcomes; for instance through the Student Experience Project, a collaboration between CTC, the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU), the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities, EducationCounsel, PERTS, the Raikes Foundation, and Shift Results.