

Is Belonging Always Positive? Cultivating Alternative and Oppositional Belonging at University

Órla Meadhbh Murray, Tiffany Chiu, Jo Horsburgh
Imperial College London, London, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This paper discusses positive lack of belonging amongst marginalised undergraduate STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine) students in the UK. We consider how students actively negotiate their sense of belonging in situated, relational and processual ways, particularly alternative or oppositional belonging. We focus on five in-depth interviews with students, drawn from 110 interviews as part of the SIDUS (Supporting the Identity Development of Underrepresented Students) Project at Imperial College London and the University of Reading. These five interviewees discussed a positive lack of belonging, whereby to belong to dominant belonging narratives in their contexts would erase or contradict aspects of their identities and/or values. In response, they actively rejected dominant belonging narratives and cultivated alternative or oppositional belonging with specific friendship groups, family members, student societies, and spaces or groups outside the university.

Full paper

This paper discusses positive lack of belonging amongst marginalised undergraduate STEMM (Science, Technology,

Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine) students in the UK. Using conceptualisations of belonging as a situated practice (Gravett and Ajjawi, 2021) or a dynamic process (Guyotte, Flint and Latopolski, 2019), we consider how students actively negotiate their sense of belonging in situated, relational and processual ways. While belonging often involves dynamics of inclusion and exclusion – who belongs and who does not – it is not necessarily a binary, with much belonging existing along a spectrum, and many students experiencing a multiplicity of belongings and not belongings to different groups and spaces. We consider how students' intersecting identities impact belonging, using Yuval-Davis' (2011: 12-18) three different types of socio-political belonging: social locations, identifications and emotional attachments, and ethical and political values. This acknowledges how students' identity negotiations are complex with background playing a powerful, but not deterministic, role.

We focus on students who do not belong to dominant belonging discourses at their university, acknowledging that belonging is "not inherently positive" (Guyotte, Flint and Latopolski, 2019: 14), particularly for marginalised students. Using five in-depth interviews with students who have a 'positive lack of belonging', we explore their active cultivation of alternative belonging in response to dominant belonging discourses in their universities and disciplines.

Our interviews are drawn from the Supporting the Identity Development of Underrepresented Students (SIDUS) Project, which involved 110 interviews with undergraduate STEM students from marginalised backgrounds at Imperial College London and the University of Reading. While most interviewees considered belonging to be positive (whether they belonged or not), a small number of interviewees discussed not belonging as positive, whereby they disagreed with dominant belonging narratives and experienced them as exclusionary. These students were often hyper-underrepresented at university and therefore did not fit into dominant belonging discourses. They discussed lack of belonging as a positive, whereby to belong to dominant belonging narratives in their context would erase or contradict aspects of their identities and/or values, as discussed by Mann (2005: 46). Thus, they actively rejected dominant belonging narratives, and cultivated alternative or oppositional

belonging with specific friendship groups, family, student societies, and spaces outside the university. These students show that belonging is not always positive and demonstrate resourceful agentic responses to dominant belonging narratives. While we might focus on making studenthood more inclusive and encouraging multiple modes of belonging, These interviewees' accounts also reflect back the boundaries of studenthood, highlighting exclusionary assumptions embedded in the structure of, and narratives about, UK higher education.

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