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# Belonging: The What, Why, and How for Working Mothers

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# Belonging: The What, Why, and How for Working Mothers

## Abstract

For new mothers, feeling like you belong can be the difference between surviving or thriving in the transition back to work. In this paper, I explore belonging as a psychological construct, including how it is measured, experienced and cultivated in different contexts, and apply that to the realities of working motherhood. Mothers who successfully find belonging experience higher well-being as individuals. Organizations who are able to help new mothers find belonging positively impact the diversity of their workforces and can rectify the inequality in women's work experiences. A sense of belonging can foster many elements of well-being. This paper not only reviews the literature on belonging, but also provides a roadmap for working mothers and those who support them at work.

## Keywords

belonging, working mothers, positive psychology

## Disciplines

Psychology

Belonging: The What, Why, and How for Working Mothers

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University of Pennsylvania

A Capstone Project Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Andrew Soren

August 1, 2020

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For new mothers, feeling like you belong can be the difference between surviving or thriving in the transition back to work. In this paper, I explore belonging as a psychological construct, including how it is measured, experienced and cultivated in different contexts, and apply that to the realities of working motherhood. Mothers who successfully find belonging experience higher well-being as individuals. Organizations who are able to help new mothers find belonging positively impact the diversity of their workforces and can rectify the inequality in women's work experiences. A sense of belonging can foster many elements of well-being. This paper not only reviews the literature on belonging, but also provides a roadmap for working mothers and those who support them at work.

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Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

**Introduction**

We are aware of classifications and issues that divide us. There are many – ethnicity, age, gender, social class, sexual preferences, religion, and politics ... With all these differences separating us, what connects us? Do we have a shared humanity? …  The polar themes of marginality and mattering connect all of us – rich and poor, young and old, male and female. Are we part of things; do we belong; are we central or marginal? Do we make a difference; do others care about us and make us feel we matter? (Schlossberg, 1989, p.6)

This quote moved me the first time I read it. As a white, educated, married woman living in 2020 America, my perception is influenced by my privilege and my experience is more often disrupted by what divides us rather than what unites us. I believe at the heart of well-being is respect and acceptance, manifested as a sense of belonging. The concept of belonging captured my attention after experiencing the tension between an intense loneliness after giving birth to my son and the amazing support I received from my husband and colleagues. Add a constant barrage from the media of *us versus them* messages, and I felt driven to better understand how a sense of belonging might impact first time mothers both individually and in the workplace.

As a newly minted working mother, I experienced first-hand the psychological disruption that occurs after having a child and returning to work. For me, there were both positive and negative factors contributing to the disruption; the new relationship with my body, an increase in responsibilities, a decrease in sleep, an unprecedented sense of love, and a desire to be accepted without jeopardizing my ability or reputation of performing at work. One of the most salient experiences for me as a new working mother was a feeling of being at odds with my situation. There were times at work that I ached to be at home with my son while wanting to be seen as more than a mother at the office. At home, I often prayed for the long nights to end so that I

could get to the office while wanting to savor every moment with my son. Even with my strong

connections at home and at work during those times, I felt like I didn't belong. Those

experiences are part of the inspiration for this paper: understanding that lack of belonging so that

I can help other working mothers overcome it.

Why is belonging important? A sense of belonging has been said to be a fundamental

human need. I want to emphasize the word *need* was deliberately chosen; well-being is far more

impacted by our *needs* than our *wants* (Baumeister, 2012). Belonging increases positive

emotions like elation, contentment, and a sense of calm (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and positive

emotions allow us to thrive (Frederickson, 2009). A sense of belonging also predicts the extent to

which a person finds their life meaningful (Lambert et al., 2013). Positive emotions,

relationships, and meaning are all pillars of well-being (Seligman, 2012). A sense of belonging

can foster many elements of well-being, and without it, the path to flourishing is difficult. In this

paper, I address belonging and its necessity for helping new working mothers thrive by exploring

belonging as a construct, how it is measured and experienced, relevant research studies, and how

interventions that cultivate belonging in different contexts can be adopted for application. I will

not be addressing pathology (for example, post-partum depression) or workplace policies (for

example, maternity leave); the focus of this paper is on psychologically healthy working mothers

and the role of positive psychology in cultivating belonging.

Cultivating belonging can take on many forms and isn't one-size-fits-all; the purpose of

this paper is to engage working mothers during a time in their lives that can be an extreme

physical and psychological adjustment by purposefully fostering a sense of belonging. The

structure of this paper will answer the following questions about belonging for working mothers:

what is it, why does it matter, and how do we cultivate it?

**Limitations**

In an effort to positively impact the reader's experience with this paper, I want to highlight a few limitations. First, my experience as working woman has been largely dominated by work within an office setting (sometimes called white collar work) within the United States (US). The research available is also limited in its scope of addressing specifically first-time working mothers. In addition, a majority of the research cited in this paper is WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic) where the subjects of belonging research span many disciplines and ages (for example, middle school students to government employees). There is some racial and socioeconomic diversity in the research cited, however, this is not specific to the domain of working mothers. There is need for academic research to specifically address first time working mothers and belonging in the workplace among a range of industries, job types, racial identities, and socioeconomic statuses. Finally, I want to emphasize that first time motherhood is a vastly different experience depending on socioeconomic status, location, access to healthcare, and more.

The aim of this paper is to address the role of positive psychology and cultivating a sense of belonging in a way that is accessible and applicable across a wide range of new working mothers during the transition from pregnancy to life as a working mother; while keeping in mind everything I mentioned above. Throughout the paper I purposefully use the term *working mother* and she/her/hers not as an act of exclusion to other parental figures, but to align my tone, the gender specific research findings, and personal experience with the scope of this paper. *Working mother* is intended to be inclusive regardless of physically giving birth. At times, I include myself within the audience purposefully using terms we/us/our because I identify as a working mother. I also use the term *authentic self* to describe a congruence between your values and your

behaviors as a new working mother; when you show up as your authentic self, you are not jeopardizing your worth (and your ability to belong) for the situation, social norms, or expectations placed on you.

**Working Mothers**

Before diving in, I want to get more specific about the demographic focus of this paper. In 2018, the average age of first-time mothers in the US was 26 years, an increase from 21 years in 1972 (Bui & Miller, 2018). The age increase of first-time mothers has happened in other countries, like Switzerland, Spain, and South Korea, where the average age is 31. However, in America, there is disparity among the average age of first-time mothers for those educated and uneducated as well as married and unmarried women. There is nearly a 7-year gap between those educated (23.8 years without a college degree compared to 30.3 with one), and more than 5-year gap between those who are married (28.8 years for those who are and 23.1 for those who are not). In addition, Bui and Miller (2018) tell us that location plays a role in this equation. For instance, average age of first-time motherhood in cities is in general higher than those in middle America and the south. You can infer many takeaways from these statistics that highlight the inequality of the American experience. For the purposes of this paper, I want to emphasize that in general women are having their first child later in life with many factors contributing to this: availability of fertility treatments, healthcare, education, a decline in teenage births, and the evolution of women's role in the workplace and at home, just to name a few. With the age of first-time mothers being older, there are psychological impacts on the transition to working motherhood. As women are more established in their careers, there is purposeful effort required to cultivate well-being by overcoming well-formed habits. Put simply: it takes work to make belonging work.

There is research focused on understanding the difference in women's career paths compared to men's and the role of motherhood in the decision to stay or leave the workforce (for example, Belkin 2003; Cabrera, 2007; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). Some think the decision to leave the workforce is due to the inequality in pay and perceived competence of working mothers compared to nonmothers (for example, Blau & Kahn, 2017; Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007; England, Bearak, Budig, & Hodges, 2016); others think help received at work during pregnancy can reduce feelings of work self-efficacy and undermine a woman's desire to stay in the workforce after giving birth (Jones, Clair, King, Humberd, & Arena, 2019). Even though there is data supporting the departure of women from the workforce, as well as a gender wage gap that penalizes working mothers more than nonmothers (Blau & Kahn, 2017), there are still 25.1 million mothers working in the US today (equivalent to roughly two thirds of mothers total). More importantly, the percentage of women working in the US has almost doubled since World War II from 33% in 1948 to 57% in 2016 (DeWolf, 2017). The demographic of working mothers is bound to change as new generations of women enter the workforce; younger women are showing interest in pursuing different careers and are considered flight risks for organizations who don't invest in their experiences (Ovia Health, 2017). According to 2018 US Census data, working mothers make up one third of all employed women in the US (Christnacht & Sullivan, 2020). Moreover, mothers are the primary breadwinners for 40% of families with children under 18 years old in the US (Pew Social & Demographic Trends, 2013).

Working mothers are not the majority of women in the US today, but a majority of mothers in the US are working. This dual role impacts millions of houses in the US and deserves attention. The statistics are important to understand the total population; more important is the reason for the focus of this paper. McKinsey & Company and LeanIn.org have partnered to

release the *Women in the Workplace* report to understand the state of women at work and how to inform the path forward. The 2019 report summarized 329 American companies (more than 13 million people total) sharing pipeline human resources data coupled with more than 68,500 employees surveyed about their workplace experience (Lean In & McKinsey, 2019). Although this is not a peer-reviewed publication, the findings are striking. Among other statistics about promotions, parental leave, and hiring, the report listed 33% of women and 11% of men say they have witnessed biased behavior towards women at work and 73% of women say they experience microaggressions at work. These figures shine light on the magnitude of bias and exclusion women are experiencing in the workplace. If you consider the working mother's experience as additional marginality in the workplace, the situation is ripe with opportunity to address the bias and foster belonging.

In addition to the prejudice some women experience at work, being a new working mother can be a disempowered state; you lack control over your workplace policies, the bias and expectations of your coworkers, the changing physical state of your body, to name a few. For instance, some mothers who took maternity leave felt they had to work harder to prove their worth after taking leave and taking leave negatively impacted their careers (Lean In & McKinsey, 2019). In addition to working harder, women take on more of the responsibilities at home especially after a child is born (South & Spitze, 1994). The global pandemic of 2020 closed schools, daycares, and non-essential businesses, forcing children to stay home with their parents. In heterosexual couples with young children, where both parents were continually employed February through April, researchers found that mothers took on a majority of the caregiving responsibilities; reducing their work hours four to five times more than the fathers (Collins, Landivar, Ruppanner, & Scarborough, 2020). In a study of postpartum employed

women, researchers found that women experience job and home "spillover", where both domains spill into the other, negatively impacting both physical and mental health (Grice, McGovern, Alexander, Ukestad, & Hellerstedt, 2011). Considering the additional workload and emotional burden working mothers are carrying, cultivating a sense of belonging is more relevant than ever.

Working mothers take on additional work both at home and in the office, which at times is at the expense of their well-being. Helping working mothers thrive creates positive outcomes that help individuals, the organizations where they work, and future generations. By helping working mothers thrive at work, we not only support the well-being of those women and their families, we positively impact the diversity of our workforce and fight to rectify the inequality in women's work experiences. To help working mothers thrive, we first need to understand the scientific field that seeks to explore how people thrive more generally: positive psychology.

## Positive Psychology

In his 1998 president's address to the American Psychological Association, Seligman started the movement of positive psychology as we know it today. He introduced positive psychology as "a reoriented science" emphasizing "a vision of the good life that is empirically sound" to "show the world what actions lead to well-being, to positive individuals, to flourishing communities, and to a just society" (Seligman, 1999, p. 2). In his address, Seligman argued that since the end of World War II, psychology had overemphasized remedying mental illness, leaving behind the study of what makes people thrive. The introduction of positive psychology emphasized the need to fulfill the original intention of the field of psychology; to focus on the experience of the whole person and the continuum of functioning from languishing to resilience to thriving (Keyes, 2002; Seligman, 2012).

Naming the field *positive* psychology can be misleading. Positive psychology does not deny or gloss over the negative experiences in our lives. The aim of positive psychology is to give equal emphasis to both the positive and the negative; acknowledging that what is good in life is just as important and genuine as what is bad (Peterson, 2006). The goal of positive psychology is "a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving in individuals, families, and communities" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 13). Consider a line from -10 to +10 that represents psychology as a whole. One half of that line, psychology as we know it, is dedicated to helping people move from -10 to 0 by treating conditions (for example, depression, schizophrenia, and others outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). The other half of the line, positive psychology, is dedicated to helping individuals to move from 0 to +10 by introducing interventions, skills, and perspectives that allow people to thrive. Seligman (1999) emphasized in his address it is necessary for psychology to fulfill its original intentions as field of study, encompassing and focusing on the need for remedying the bad and cultivating the good.

Seligman originally proposed that positive psychology was about happiness, as described in his authentic happiness theory, with the end goal of life satisfaction (Seligman, 2002). In this original theory, positive emotion, engagement, and meaning were the focus of life satisfaction. He later revisited this theory and the underlying goal of positive psychology to address well-being as the ultimate goal, as measured by human flourishing; adding positive relationships and achievement to the theory (Seligman, 2012). This change is an important one, noting that positive psychology isn't only about what makes us feel good, but what makes us thrive. This is a rather apt comparison of working motherhood: although marked by many unpleasant experiences (for example, lack of sleep, irregular emotions), there is much opportunity for

engagement and meaning (for example, genuine exchange of love between mother and baby). Although marked by effort and unpleasantness, motherhood can be full of meaning and purpose, contributing to a sense of well-being. Seligman's theory of well-being, which includes the five pillars of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement is known as PERMA, which stresses that no one element defines your well-being, but that all of the elements contribute to your well-being in different ways (Seligman, 2012).

During the same 1998 American Psychological Association address, Seligman declared "no medication or technique of therapy holds as much promise for serving as a buffer against mental illness as does human strength" (Seligman, 1999, p. 3). This statement catalyzed a foundational theory within positive psychology of character strengths. In 2004, Peterson and Seligman claimed character strengths are "the bedrock of the human condition" and "strength-congruent activity represents an important route to the psychological good life" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 4). This foundational theory exemplifies the concept that each of us embody positive traits from which we can grow, and that from negative events there is possibility for development. This notion plays an important role in the positive psychology interventions outlined within this paper.

Predating the declaration of positive psychology as a field of study in 1998, it is important to recognize the existing research on psychological flourishing, such as work on positive mental health (Jahoda, 1958), the fully functioning person (Rogers, 1963), self-actualization (Maslow, 1968), and happiness defined as balancing positive and negative affect (Bradburn, 1969), just to name a few. Jahoda, Rogers, Maslow, and Bradburn were considered humanistic psychologists. There have been debates about the difference and necessity of two fields dedicated to understanding human well-being, humanistic psychology and positive

psychology. There are three major areas where these two fields differ; the way in which well-being is pursued, the approach to research methodology, and the philosophic underpinnings of the questions being explored (Waterman, 2013). Humanistic psychology focuses on goals and process of reaching those goals, whereas positive psychology focuses on flourishing as an ongoing process; humanistic psychology largely uses qualitative research methods, whereas positive psychology uses mainly quantitative methods (Peterson, 2006); and finally, Aristotle is most often associated with positive psychology, whereas Maslow has been considered the father of humanistic psychology (Waterman, 2013). Although they differ in certain aspects, there are parallels. In critique of his original theory of pursuing self-actualization independently, Maslow wrote that what is good for a person must be understood in the context of other people (Maslow, 1966/1996). This emphasis on other people in pursuit of well-being is mirrored in Peterson's description of positive psychology as "other people matter" (Peterson, 2006, p. 249). Although these two fields are similar in pursuit of understanding sources of well-being, positive psychology's divergence is an important one to focus on the empirical understanding of human flourishing. Positive psychology is the scientific study of the good life; with many avenues and worthy pursuits to flourishing. The focus of this paper is about the construct of belonging and why it plays an important role in the lives of working mothers.

## What is Belonging?

### Psychological Construct

The study of belonging as a construct impacting our psychological processes and well-being pre-dates positive psychology. Belonging has been defined in different ways depending on the context and author. To best illuminate how psychological researchers have defined belonging, the verbatim definitions are listed in Figure 1. Although they differ in taxonomy,

there is a shared theme of the subjective experience within situations as well as connectedness to

other people. This list is not exhaustive, but summarizes the definitions that are most often used

within studies, including those cited in this paper.

| Definitions of Belonging |
|---|
| "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" <br> *Source: Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992, p. 173* |
| "forming and maintaining at least a minimum quantity of interpersonal relationships ... with two main features ... frequent personal contact ... [and a] relationship marked by stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future" <br> *Source: Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 499* |
| "a feeling of being accepted, included, respected in, and contributing to a setting, or anticipating the likelihood of developing this feeling" <br> *Source: Walton & Brady, 2017, p. 272* |

*Figure 1.* Definitions of belonging listed in chronological order of publication from Hagerty et al. (1992), Baumeister and Leary (1995), and Walton and Brady (2017).

In my research, Baumeister and Leary (1995) were the most frequently cited for their

definition of belonging. They claimed the required attributes of belonging are two-fold, our need

for connection and our need for meaningful relationships. Our understanding of belonging

evolved when Walton and Brady (2017) claimed you can experience a sense of belonging even

in settings where strong relationships do not yet exist; and even in settings where close

relationships do exist, you can still experience a lack of belonging (for example, when I was

welcomed back to the office, I felt seen, connected to, and valued by my coworkers, yet I was

experiencing a lack of belonging). This evolution highlights an important duality in the

experience of belonging: both interpersonal relationships and connections to settings impact our

well-being. There are other definitions of belonging, like companionship, affiliation, and

connectedness (Lee & Robbins, 1995); being accepted for showing up as your authentic self

(Brown, 2019); close or intimate relationships, or to be in a proper situation (Meriam-Webster,

2020), to name a few.

Connectedness to others has been studied more than connectedness to situations because creating and sustaining connections with other people is one of the most important processes impacting our social development (Asch, 1952; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Dweck, 2017). The need to belong is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943; Thoits, 1982), experienced universally across cultures. Because belonging is so fundamental to our experience, it acts like a "psychological hub" (Walton & Brady, 2017) impacting both psychological and physical outcomes. Some claim belonging as "one of the very struts of our cognition" that directly influences "our ability to engage with the world" (Seligman & Montgomery, 2019, p. 205). Our desire for connectedness could be the "most far-reaching and integrative constructs currently available to understand human nature" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 522). These definitions are deeply seeded in psychological literature. A concept that might be more familiar is Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs (formally known as *self-actualization theory*), where a sense of belonging is a vital contribution to the journey of self-actualization (Kaufman, 2020); often considered a need to be satisfied once our physiological and safety needs are met (for example, food, water, shelter). The desire to belong is woven into all of our experiences with people and situations, playing an integral role impacting our well-being.

Reflecting on these definitions and the other research cited in this paper, I define belonging as the experience of connection within a relationship or situation where you have both the desire and feeling of being seen, accepted, and valued for your authentic self. The essence of belonging is connection and respect. Belonging can be experienced individually (for example, I value and respect myself), with others (for example, I belong in my family), and with a setting (for example, I belong to my work community). Throughout this paper I reiterate the definition

of belonging for the purposes of clarification as authors use different definitions depending on the context and the year of publication.

**Measurement and Scales**

When learning about psychological constructs, we were taught that if you want to understand something, try to measure it (A. L. Duckworth, personal communication, September 28, 2019). In an effort to best understand belonging, I've included scale items within the manuscript of the paper to depict how psychologists have operationalized belonging. The most practical application of reading scale items is to provide working mothers language around their experience in a way that articulates the feelings, thoughts, and behaviors associated with belonging. Similar to the definitions of belonging, the scales measuring belonging have evolved, highlighted by the underlying theory and the items written to asses it. When you read the items for each of the scales, draw your attention to the:

- thoughts (for example, *I want other people to accept me*),

- feelings (for example, *I feel like I observe life rather than participate in it*), and

- behaviors (for example, *I try hard not to do thing that will make other people avoid or reject me*) associated with belonging.

As you read these items, my hope is that you better understand the multitudes of how belonging is experienced within the context of our lives. The Sense of Belonging Instrument (SOBI) (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995), the General Belongingness Scale (GBS) (Malone, Pillow, & Osman, 2012), and the Need to Belong Scale (NTBS) (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2013) are all valid and reliable measurements of a sense of belonging.

**Sense of Belonging Instrument (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995).** The SOBI has two scales, the SOBI-Psychology (SOBI-P) and the SOBI-Antecedent (SOBI-A). The SOBI-P was

developed to measure the psychological experience of belonging; the experience one feels while

involved in an environment while simultaneously feeling like an integral part of that

environment (Hagerty et al., 1992). The authors of the scale utilized the definition of belonging

they helped write three years earlier, and achieved a measure of belonging by actually assessing

a lack of belonging. The items for the SOBI-P are listed in Figure 2.

| **Sense of Belonging Instrument- Psychology** (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995) |
|---|
| <ul><li>I often wonder if there is any place on earth I really fit in.</li><li>I am just not sure if I fit in with my friends.</li><li>I would describe myself as a misfit in most situations.</li><li>I generally feel that people accept me.</li><li>I feel like a piece of a jig-saw puzzle that doesn't fit into the puzzle.</li><li>I would like to make a difference to people or things around me, but I don't feel that what I have to offer is valued.</li><li>I feel like an outsider in most situations.</li><li>I am troubled by feeling like I have no place in this world.</li><li>I could disappear for days and it wouldn't matter to my family.</li><li>In general, I don't feel a part of the mainstream of society.</li><li>I feel like I observe life rather than participate in it.</li><li>If I died tomorrow, very few people would come to my funeral.</li><li>I feel like a square peg trying to fit into a round hole.</li><li>I don't feel that there is any place where I really fit in this world.</li><li>I am uncomfortable that my background and experiences are so different from those who are usually around me.</li><li>I could not see or call my friends for days and it wouldn't matter to them.</li><li>I feel left out of things.</li><li>I am not valued or important to my friends.</li></ul> |

*Figure 2.* Sense of Belonging Instrument-Psychology items (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995).

**General Belongingness Scale (Malone, Pillow, & Osman, 2012).** The GBS was

developed to provide a succinct measure of a general sense of belongingness. The authors set out

to achieve this by developing items that were positively worded, in contrast with negative-

worded items in the SOBI-P. The goal was to find a balance of measuring both achieved

belonging and a lack of not belonging. An important outcome of this scale creation is that it

confirmed that *achieved belongingness* (the actual experience of belonging) is different and

distinct from the *need to belong* (the innate desire to belong). The final scale included 12 items, 6

positive-worded items (acceptance/inclusion) and 6 negative-worded items (rejection/exclusion),

found in Figure 3.

| **General Belongingness Scale** (Malone, Pillow, & Osman, 2012) |
| --- |
| *Acceptance/Inclusion* <br> • When I am with other people, I feel included. <br> • I have close bond with family and friends. <br> • I feel accepted by others. <br> • I have a sense of belonging. <br> • I have a place at the table with others. <br> • I feel connected with others. <br> *Rejection/Exclusion* <br> • I feel like an outsider. <br> • I feel as if people do not care about me. <br> • Because I do not belong, I feel distant during the holiday season. <br> • I feel isolated from the rest of the world. <br> • When I am with other people, I feel like a stranger. <br> • Friends and family do not involve me in their plans. |

*Figure 3*. General Belongingness Scale items (Malone, Pillow, & Osman, 2012).

**Need to Belong Scale (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2013).** The NTBS was

developed in an attempt to better understand how people differ on their desire to belong, defined

as the ability to form and maintain interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Starting with the 23 item self-report measure originally developed by Schreindorfer and Leary

(1996), the co-authors of this scale reduced the number of items to 10 (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, &

Schreindorfer, 2013), listed in Figure 4.

| **Need to Belong Scale** (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2013) |
|---|
| • If other people don't seem to accept me, I don't let it bother me. <br> • I try hard not to do thing that will make other people avoid or reject me. <br> • I seldom worry about whether other people care about me. <br> • I need to feel that there are people I can turn to in times of need. <br> • I want other people to accept me. <br> • I do not like being alone. <br> • Being apart from my friends for long periods of time does not bother me. <br> • I have a strong "need to belong". <br> • It bothers me a great deal when I am not included in other people's plans. <br> • My feelings are easily hurt when I feel that others do not accept me. |

*Figure 4*. Need to Belong Scale items (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2013).

**Workplace Belongingness Scale (Jena & Pradham, 2012).** Using the findings from the previously mentioned scales, researchers developed the *Workplace Belongingness Scale* to understand belongingness at work (Jena & Pradham, 2012). Although this is not a widely cited scale, it is a validated measure and applicable to the context of this paper. The scale items are listed in Figure 5.

| **Workplace Belongingness Scale** (Jena & Pradham, 2012) |
|---|
| • I am able to work in this organization without sacrificing my principles. <br> • I use to refer as "we/us" rather than "they/them" when I refer my organization to outsiders. <br> • I feel that there is a semblance between my organization and my own values and beliefs. <br> • I generally carry more positive emotions than the negative ones during my job. <br> • Being a part of this organization inspires me to do more than what is expected. <br> • In my work unit I have many common themes with my co-workers. <br> • Fairness is maintained while executing rules and policies in my organization. <br> • My personal needs are well met by my organization. <br> • Whenever I have any personal or professional issues my organization extends necessary help and support. <br> • My career goals are well considered by my organization. <br> • My organization tries to make my job as exciting and promising as possible. <br> • Accomplishments at work are adequately rewarded in my organization. |

*Figure 5*. Workplace Belongingness Scale items (Jena & Pradham, 2012).

**Six Questions of Belonging**

It can be hard to understand constructs through written definitions or descriptions. I think the best way to understand constructs that have subjective elements, like belonging, is through how we experience it. When I approach new relationships or situations, I often have an internal dialog by asking and answering questions that reflect my own interpretations or expectations about that connection. Questions help frame our understanding and capture the great variability of our experiences. Walton and Brady (2017) summarized the experience of belonging by exploring these questions:

(1) Does anyone see me?

(2) Can I connect with anyone?

(3) Are people like me valued here?

(4) Do I want to belong here?

(5) Can I be more than a token person in this setting?

(6) Are people like me incompatible with this setting?

As we navigate working motherhood, thinking about a sense of belonging through these questions will both address the different ways to satisfy working mothers' need to belong and provide a framework for those trying to understand how to cultivate that sense of belonging. These questions focus on both the relational and the situational aspects of belonging; the first four focus on our *experience* as an individual and the final two on how we *feel* about our current or future self. The first question addresses overcoming invisibility, which some say is a precondition for belonging. The second is focused on what psychologists call *mere belonging,* or small cues of social connection (Walton, Cohen, Cwir, & Spencer, 2012). The third question speaks to whether the setting values people similar to our social identity. The fourth is evaluating

our desire for the setting to provide a sense of belonging; this is an important one, highlighting

that even if the setting meets the criteria for the first three question, there may be an internal

blocker to a sense of belonging. The fifth question is getting at whether stereotypes are possible

inhibitors to ourselves (or people we think are similar to us) to experience a sense of belonging.

And finally, the sixth question is focusing on *belonging uncertainty*, or worrying about whether

people similar to our current or future social identity belong in the setting (Walton & Brady,

2017). These six questions of belonging place emphasis on different aspects of experiencing

belonging, providing one framework to understand interventions and how they may be adopted

to help working mothers flourish. To gain perspective of how researchers think about and study

belonging, in this section I summarize interventions that provide examples of each question of

belonging and offer suggestions of applicability to helping working mothers thrive.

**Question of belonging: Does anyone see me?** Wanting to be noticed and being noticed

is arguably the first step to forming a connection with a person or a setting. Motto and Bostrom

(2001) conducted a study of depressed or suicidal patients checked into a hospital; 30 days after

the patients were released from the hospital, they were contacted about follow up care. There

were 843 patients that refused follow up care and were randomly divided into two groups. The

first group received at least four letters per year for the next five years, with the contact being

more often in the beginning (every month) and tapering out towards the end (every three

months). The second group was not contacted again. The letters sent to the first group were

simple, addressed the person by name, and included a self-addressed unstamped envelope in case

the person wanted to respond. In the first two years following, there were significantly lower

rates of suicide for the group that was receiving letters. This effect tapered off after two years.

Understanding suicide prevention is important work; this study highlights the importance of a

sense of belonging can play in that work. Understanding why the letters worked is to appreciate the feeling that one is "joined to something meaningful outside oneself as a stabilizing force in emotional life" (Motto & Bostrom, 2001, p. 831); this stabilizing force is a meaningful connection to another person. In this study, that feeling of connection was creating by a concerned person acknowledging their existence through a simple letter (Walton & Brady, 2017).

To understand the applicability of this intervention with working mothers is not to draw the comparison of psychologically healthy working mothers to people in a suicidal state. The emphasis is the effectiveness of a simple intervention, its profound impacts, and the value in mere acknowledgement of a person as the foundation of belonging. It's as if the person started the process of connectedness by saying "I see you" without explicitly stating it in those letters. The concept of letter writing and the effort to reach out to someone may look and feel different than a study conducted in 2001. This type of intervention could have the most impact on working mothers if adapted by those attempting to support them (for example, friends, family members, co-workers, mentors) in the form of unexpecting, supportive, and consistent communication. For instance, in the form of a text message to a close working mother friend saying: *Hi Meg, I know you're headed back to work on Monday and I'm here if you want to talk. Don't worry about responding, wanted you to know I'm thinking about you.* where the messaging is about acknowledging the other person without a burden for a response.

**Question of belonging: Can I connect with anyone?** Connecting with others is fundamental to our development and well-being (Asch, 1952; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Dweck, 2017). In a study looking to understand the relationship between planning intentions and weight loss, local government employees were

assigned to one of four treatment conditions: collaborative implementation intentions (working together to form a plan), partner-only (having a partner without guidance), implementation intentions (individual plan), and the control group. The study used self-reported measures for physical activity, weight, and waist size. The group that worked together to form a plan (collaborative implementation intentions group) were told that it is helpful to make "specific plans with a partner" and follow those plans with reflection, then a discussion with their partners about what would be an enjoyable physical activity. The people in that group were more active and outperformed on the physical measurements (weight and waist size) at one, three, and six months after the intervention (Prestwich et al., 2012). These findings align with research about social support buffering physical and mental health (Bolger, Zuckerman, & Kessler, 2000). This could be adopted for new mothers in regards to post-partum desired fitness (for example, losing "baby weight") that could be done with a partner either at work or a social setting. Creating the team or partnership helps support personal goal pursuits and lead to better outcomes than tackling the goal alone. Better outcomes of personal goals can lead to feelings of self-efficacy, or the belief that you can do something (Maddux, 2009); starting the self-perpetuating cycle of confidence and capability for personal development.

In the weight loss study, the participants were focused on a group goal of weight loss. Group goals are shared collectively among a group (for example, a "mommy and me" workout group working towards 10 total miles walked per week). A shared goal is pursued individually, but the experience is shared with other people (for example, Annie and Jillian are both new mothers and are independently working towards a daily mindful meditation practice). In a relevant study of two groups of undergraduate students, researchers found that the participants were more intense with their goal pursuit when they knew other people similar to them were

pursuing the same individual goal (Shteynberg & Galinsky, 2011). This could be adopted by new

working mothers with shared goals. For example, in a new working mothers' group, individuals

could self-identify goals in different domains of life and share among the group. Those women

that share similar goals (for example, two mothers who wish to continue breastfeeding until their

child is 6 months old) could reflect and talk about tactics, experiencing a more intense goal

pursuit increasing the chances of success, which could lead to a self-perpetuating cycle with

positive outcomes. Both of these interventions address finding a connection with others in

pursuit of a group or shared goal. These examples also address the roles of self-efficacy and

positive relationships contributing to a sense of belonging.

  **Question of belonging: Are people like me valued here?** Part of understanding our

self-identity is understanding ourselves in relation to other people and situations. Walton and

Cohen (2007) conducted two experiments of first-year undergraduate students focused on

*belonging uncertainty* (worrying about whether people similar to you belong in a setting) and its

impact on motivation and achievement for traditionally stigmatized groups. In the first

experiment, students were split into two groups. Both groups were asked to identify friends who

fit well in their chosen academic field; the first group was asked to name two friends; the second

group was asked to name eight friends. In this university setting, black students experienced a

drop in a sense of belonging in both groups. For those who were in the group that were asked to

list eight friends, both white (majority) and black (minority) students had difficulty name eight

friends. However, only the black students experienced a decline in their feelings of fit and

potential with that group. This outcome supports the claim that minority groups can experience a

lack of uncertainty about their relationships in achievement settings (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

And most importantly and relevant to this paper, subtle events (like in this example,

contemplating a question without real consequences) can have disproportionally large impact on a sense of belonging, especially for marginalized groups. This is an important take away for those interacting with working mothers; language choice for seemingly insignificant questions or phrases can have disproportionate impacts on a sense of belonging.

In the second experiment, a group of first year college students were told by older students that doubts about not fitting in at school were common and the feelings eventually lessened over time (Walton & Cohen, 2007). This was phrased in a way to attribute the doubts about belonging as unrelated to their social identity. In this intervention, only black students experienced an increase in their academic achievement, which suggests that a narrative about common challenges positively impacts those in socially stigmatized groups. Even more importantly, at the end of college, those black students reported being happier, healthier, and confident about their belonging at college (Walton & Cohen, 2007). The findings from these interventions could be adopted with new working mothers in the form of a narrative shared between new working mothers to understand common hardship so that those hardships do not negatively impact our sense of belonging. These findings could be put into practice by those attempting to support working mothers (for example, older working mothers in their workplace or communities) by creating a space (for example, in the form of a group, online community, or support network of working mothers) to hear stories about challenges other working mothers have overcome or are currently overcoming. For instance, in a group of working mothers with similarly aged children, sharing milestones and experiences normalizes the hardships, positively impacting a sense of belonging. Narrative sharing with my working mother friends has been one of the biggest boosts to my well-being; it normalizes my experience, removes the feeling of

being alone, and at times catalyzes a positive lens on unpleasant experiences (for example, laughing about the horrific clothing stains infants manage to produce).

**Question of belonging: Do I want to belong here?** Having the opportunity to belong (as people seeing you, wanting to connect with you, and valuing you) is different than addressing your desire to belong. Walton and Brady (2017) pose this question as important to belonging because it addresses the setting as an opportunity to pursue a valued goal. Understanding your desire to belong can be complicated as many factors influence the decision. In an effort to understand how a desire to belong may transpire, researchers conducted a study aimed to better explain what does (or does not) attract women to science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) careers. The researchers thought the reason was linked to both motivation and cognitive processes related to the goals women value, and whether or not women believe a career in STEM will enable those goals (Diekman, Clark, Johnston, Brown, & Steinberg, 2011). The research found that women value communal goals (for example, careers focused on helping others like teaching or nursing). In addition, both men and women hold stereotypes that STEM careers hinder communal goals, making women disinterested in STEM careers. The combination of these two findings provided insight on one avenue to explore how to overcome the shortage of women in STEM related fields. More importantly, it highlights a component of belonging that is subjectively understood by each individual, which is influenced by our own perceptions and biases. Walton and Brady (2017) suggest that one method to understand whether or not you can belong within a setting is instead of focusing on stereotypes or perceived fit, evaluate whether the setting is an opportunity to pursue a valued goal. Making these findings applicable to working mothers in a general sense is difficult because settings that new working mothers evaluate for belonging differ greatly across circumstance. However, this could be helpful when

evaluating a new setting (for example, a new job, fitness group, social group), that instead of turning towards biases and stereotypes of who we think should belong, to instead ask ourselves: is this setting, opportunity, or circumstance a chance for me to pursue a new goal as a working mother?

**Question of belonging: Can I be more than a token person in this setting?** New working mothers can have a feeling of being a token person in different aspects of their new reality. Consider a new working mother who is the only person in her family to not stay home full time; or the only women in her office; or the only person of color in her department; these are simple examples of how working motherhood can create the sense of being a token person and impact a sense of belonging. Self-affirmation interventions, which focus on expressing personal values, have been studied in different contexts contributing to understanding the positive effects on performance, like academic settings (for example, Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, & Brzustoski, 2009; Layous, Davis, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Cook, & Cohen, 2017; Suhlmann, Sassenberg, Nagengast, & Trautwein, 2018; Taylor & Walton, 2011) and in the workplace (for example, Walton, Logel, Peach, Spencer, & Zanna, 2015). The relationship between self-affirmation and belonging is supported by *self-affirmation theory*, which claims people want to preserve a general sense about themselves as decent and capable (Steele, 1988). The desire to maintain this good sense of self cultivates a sense of belonging because self-affirmation activities allow people to express themselves and encourages them to be their authentic selves (mitigating the feelings of being only a stereotype), helping create connections with others (Walton & Brady, 2017). This relates back to Seligman's (2012) well-being theory as these connections can develop into positive relationships (the R in PERMA), and enable well-being. Simple affirmation interventions can have remarkable impacts, given the small effort

required. For example, students writing a 15-minute essay of what is important to them prior to

an exam improved performance on that exam (Cohen, Garcia, Apfel, & Master, 2006).

Psychologists propose that both the environment and support of self-reinforcing

processes, called *recursive processes* (Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski,

2009), sustain lasting effects for light touch self-affirmation interventions. In a study aimed to

replicate previous findings of successful self-affirmation, there were two experiment groups of

middle school students. The first group completed a self-affirmation intervention with the

prompt: "Think about a value, belief, talent, or skill you have that you are proud of. Write for 15

minutes about this positive part of yourself and why it is important to you" (Bowen, Wegmann,

& Webber, 2012, p. 430). The second group included the same self-affirmation prompt coupled

with a teacher reading the essay. The researchers thought that if a teacher read the self-

affirmation essays, the teachers would become aware of the students' values, be less likely to see

students as stereotypes, have increased positive expectations (reinforcing the recursive process),

ultimately increasing the effects of the written self-affirmation. The group whose self-affirmation

essays were read by a teacher had higher grades two weeks after the intervention than those in

the essay-only group (Bower, Wegmann, & Webber, 2012). The takeaway to focus on is that

self-affirmations, which focus on the value we individually bring, were more effective when they

had the support of recursive processes. These findings could be utilized in an intervention to

build confidence and positively influence outcomes (at work and at home) for working mothers

by writing or thinking about values prior to stressful or important performances (for example,

giving your first presentation at work as a working mother). Self-affirmations encourage being

your authentic self; sharing your values with a supportive partner may amplify the positive

effects of the affirmation, creating a supportive recursive process that lends itself to self-perpetuate a sense of belonging.

      **Question of belonging: Are people like me incompatible with this setting?** Role models, sometimes called superstars or exemplars, play an interesting role in our psychology by providing information about who or what we want to become. Finding role models within a setting where you desire to cultivate a sense of belonging (for example, seeing a first-time mother at your gym having successful fitness outcomes), allows you to overcome the sense that "people like me" can belong. To better understand the role of role models, Lockwood and Kunda (1997) conducted a study of undergraduate women studying accounting or teaching. The women were put into one of two groups. One of the groups were given a fabricated news article describing a woman in their domain who was successful and overcame challenges in her career. For instance, undergraduates studying teaching read about teachers and reflected on their self-perception of success in the field of teaching. The other group was given fabricated articles about a successful woman in a field of study not relevant to the student. For instance, an undergraduate studying accounting read about a successful teacher. After reading the articles, the groups were asked about their self-perception in that field. The group with relevant role models had more positive self-ratings of their success in their chosen field. Based on these outcomes, Lockwood and Kunda (1997) proposed that when role models are relevant to the domains of life we are pursuing (for example, a certain type of career) and their success seems attainable (for example, a working mother in a higher position at the same company), it provokes a sense of "self-enhancement" and encouragement. However, this seems to only be true if you believe in your own ability to improve or have the time to achieve the same level of success as your role model, as was shown in the study. These findings could be adopted to help new working mothers with

belonging by finding relevant role models within their work or social communities. Key to this intervention is taking purposeful time to notice the role model (for example, an effort similar to reading an article), reflecting on that role model's success and the steps to achieve that success. There is possibility this could be detrimental if the role model is not relevant or if the success is not reasonably achievable (for example, a woman working as a professor at a small university uses a global music star as a role model for academic achievement); instead of self-enhancement, it could result in unhelpful social comparison or discouragement.

**Summary of the six questions of belonging.** Walton and Brady (2017) examined belonging through questions. In Figure 6, I summarize the belonging questions, the focus of the interventions, and an example of an intervention that addressed this specific question of belonging.

| Belonging Question | Focus of Intervention | Intervention Example |
|---|---|---|
| Does anyone see me? | Acknowledging people by name | (Motto & Bostrom, 2001) |
| Can I connect with anyone? | Finding connection in pursuit of a shared goal | (Prestwich et al., 2012) |
| Are people like me valued here? | Creating a narrative to understand shared hardship | (Walton & Cohen, 2007) |
| Do I want to belong here? | Framing new situations as a chance to pursue a new goal | (Diekman et al., 2012) |
| Can I be more than a token person in this setting? | Expressing self-affirmation to highlight unique values | (Bowen, Wegmann, & Webber, 2012) |
| Are people like me incompatible with this setting? | Identifying and emulating accessible role models | (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997) |

*Figure 6.* Belonging questions, focus of intervention to address that question of belonging, and intervention examples for each.

**Shame Resilience Theory**

I want to take a quick divergence from the six questions of belonging to address something I personally experienced as a new working mother, have listened to other working

mothers mention, and think provides useful context to understand how certain feelings or behaviors may prohibit a sense of belonging. In 2006, a study was conducted to understand how women experience, are impacted by, and deal with shame, defined as "an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging" (Brown, 2006, p. 45). This study laid the groundwork for *shame resilience theory*. Shame resilience theory is considered a "psycho-social-cultural" construct where the social component emphasizes the shame women experience in connections to other people and how that relates to feelings of being trapped, powerless, and isolated. This theory provides an additional layer in understanding why some working mothers may think they are unworthy of belonging. Brown proposed that shame is experienced as a "web of layered, conflicting, and competing expectations" (Brown, 2006, p. 46). At their roots, these expectations are based on how women perceive they should be based on markers of their identity (for example, race, age, religion) and the role they play (for example, working mother, wife) as learned through cultural experiences.

Shame is considered person and context specific (Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992), which is worth emphasizing when considering the effectiveness and applicability of trying to cultivate belonging for working mothers. Working mothers could experience shame, or a sense that they are unworthy of belonging, because they are not fulfilling their own (or others') expectations of how women should act in certain context (for example, an older working mother in a career field dominated by young males without children), which could be reinforced by that group or society at large (for example, in popular media). To become resilient to shame, overcoming feelings of isolation can be accomplished with connection, power, and freedom (Brown, 2006). I highlight this in addition to the six questions of belonging, as there is another

question to consider: do I feel shame about being in this situation? I think this is a useful question for working mothers to take a step back, think about your thinking, and consider if your internal dialog or personal expectations are preventing you from experiencing belonging.

## Why Does Belonging Matter?

### Positive Impacts of Belonging

After laying the foundation of what belonging is and how we experience it, I want to emphasize its importance. Summarizing and adding to the positive outcomes listed in the previous sections, a sense of belonging positively impacts academic success (Cohen, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, Apfel, & Brzustoski, 2009; Walton & Cohen, 2007), health (Walton & Cohen, 2011), and well-being (Suhlmann, Sassenberg, Nagengast, & Ytautwein, 2018); social belonging, experienced through relationships, has shown positive impacts on physical health (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2009); and a sense of belonging within racial minority groups helps buffer racism (Forsyth & Carter, 2012; Iwamoto & Liu, 2010; Treichler & Luckstead, 2018). There is also a physical component to belonging; pain from social rejection feels like physical pain because of a shared physiological alarm system (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004; MacDonald & Leary, 2005). This connection was shown in research utilizing acetaminophen, a common physical pain reliever, to reduce the neural response of social rejection (DeWall et al., 2010). Belonging plays a pivotal role in our ability to achieve well-being outcomes; equally important is how a lack of belonging can be harmful to our well-being.

### Negative Impacts of Not Belonging

My personal experience is that the opposite of belonging is a physical lack of connectedness to others (isolation) coupled with a subjective affective component (loneliness). In psychology literature, loneliness often appears as a contrast to belonging, with some caveats.

Loneliness is considered a subjective affective state stemming from two separate causes: *social loneliness*, the lack connectedness to others, or *emotional loneliness*, lack of meaningful connection with others (Weiss, 1973). Loneliness stems from isolation, or the lack of social connections or infrequent social contact (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, Baker, Harris, & Stephenson, 2015) and is often considered a momentary emotion whereas belonging is considered a process and construct. Loneliness has also been conceived as the opposite of social support (Newcomb, 1990), which only gets at one aspect of belonging.

Loneliness is harmful to many aspects of our lives. Loneliness and social isolation negatively impact well-being (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Murthy, 2020); it specifically impacts our physical health by altering levels of stress hormones, immune system functioning, and cardiovascular functioning (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Williams & Braun, 2019); and people who lack social bonds have higher mortality rates among major causes of death (Lynch, 1979; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Vivek Murthy, former Surgeon General of the United States, went so far as to claim that loneliness is as detrimental to physical health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Grant, 2020). In addition to the individual psychological and physical impacts of belonging and a lack thereof, there is a lot of attention on belonging impacting work performance.

## Impacts of Belonging on Business

Companies and organizations are investing effort into understanding the question of belonging. This interest indicates belonging at work is an important concept outside of the psychological literature. Although not peer-reviewed, some of the most interesting and progressive work is coming from organizations trying to address this by bringing data to inform conversations and decisions. At the top of the list alongside well-being, belonging was one of the

most important human capital issues in the *2020 Deloitte Human Capital Trends* report with

8,949 global participants. Work can be a place to find meaning and camaraderie when it may be

difficult to find elsewhere and more than 90% of the respondents agreed that belonging impacts

performance (Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends, 2020). To better understand the business

impact of belonging, BetterUp conducted a *Value of Belonging at Work* study. They defined

belonging as "the experience of being accepted and included by those around you" (BetterUp,

2020, p. 8). The survey findings of 1,789 participants are compelling: when employees feel a

strong sense of belonging, there are benefits to retention, performance, attendance, and

recruitment. Specifically, turnover rates reduce by 50%, overall job performance increases by

56%, employee sick days decrease by 75%, and employees are 167% more likely to recommend

the organization to others. These findings support what Cigna (2020) found in their *Loneliness in*

*the Workplace* report; where lonely workers have lower retention rates, lower quality work, and

more likely to miss work. These findings are in line with academic research supporting social

exclusion at work as some of the most harmful way to jeopardize a sense of belonging (O'Reilly,

Robinson, Berdahl, & Banki, 2015).

**Psychological Safety, High Quality Connections, and Mattering**

One of the most remarkable findings from the organizational data speaks to three

mutually reinforcing attributes that foster belonging; comfort, connection, and contribution

(Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends, 2020). These speak to a few psychological constructs

worth mentioning that support an experienced sense of belonging: *psychological safety*

(comfort), *high quality connections* (connection), and *mattering* (contribution).

To further bolster these findings, Google (2016) did an internal study about what makes

an effective team, listing psychological safety as the most important characteristic; it was critical

in helping teams perform. Psychological safety was originally defined as the personal perception that allows you to engage by expressing yourself physically, cognitively, and emotionally while performing (Kahn, 1990). This definition aligns with how I described being your authentic self at work; psychological safety is a perception that permits congruence between your values and your behaviors. As we've seen with belonging, the definition of psychological safety has evolved. It was later defined as a shared belief about the climate where one feels safe to speak up about ideas, pursue feedback, provide feedback, have positive intentions, and take risks (Edmondson, 1999) and then as a group norm of "the consequences of taking interpersonal risks" (Edmondson & Lei, 2014, p. 23). Norm is the personal perception of typical or desirable behavior (Tankard & Paluck, 2016). The evolution is important: safety to express oneself moving from a personal perception (individual experience) to a group norm (group experience). Working mothers are not always able to show up authentically in the work place (this can be especially true if you are part of another marginalized group); understanding the role psychological safety can play is an important piece in the puzzle of intentionally cultivating a sense of belonging.

Finding a sense of connection is at the heart of belonging. High quality connections are short, subjectively positive experiences between two people that generate beneficial outcomes. High quality connections are marked my three subjective experiences: feeling alive, positive regard, and mutuality; all of which have benefits to your well-being (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). High quality connections can happen between two total strangers (for example, exchanging a sincere smile with someone you see also buying diapers in the check-out line) and also within established relationships (for example, having a genuine good morning conversation with a coworker). The mechanisms that influence high quality connections are cognitive (such as other-awareness, perspective taking), emotional (such as positive emotions, empathy), and behavioral

(such as respectful engagement; Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton, 2011). The mental processes of perspective taking, feelings of empathy, and respectful engagement as ways to build high quality connections (Dutton, 2003).

One way to interpret contribution in the workplace is through the psychological construct of mattering. Mattering has been defined in many ways; a feeling that others depend on us (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981); that we matter to someone else (Schlossberg, 1989); our perception of making a difference in the world (Elliot, Kao, & Grant, 2004); and feeling valued and adding value (Prilleltensky, 2019). Put simply, the essence of mattering is a fundamental need that we experience other people seeing us, counting on us, and valuing our contributions. This is strikingly similar to belonging, but without addressing a connection to others. Mattering is both a fundamental need and vital for psychosocial well-being (Marshall, 2001; Rosenberg, 1985). Some think mattering and belonging are interwoven; where belonging is required "to foster feelings of mattering" and "greater feelings of mattering may increase a sense of belonging" (France & Finney, 2009, p. 104).

Fostering the group norm of psychological safety (for example, speaking up about a work conflict that inhibits you picking up your child from daycare on time), purposefully engaging in high quality connections (for example, turning away from all devices when speaking to a new working mother), and conveying to working mothers that they matter (for example, explicitly stating that their contributions are valued) contribute to cultivating a sense of belonging for working mothers in the workplace.

## How do we Cultivate Belonging?

In the *Six Questions of Belonging* section, I provided examples of how successful interventions can be adopted or applied for working mothers. This section provides additional

research about cultivating belonging and explicit positive psychology interventions designed for

working mothers. I previously outlined that our relationships with other people impact our well-

being; researchers think the way we define ourselves also depends on other people. We define

ourselves by our individual characteristics, by our relationships with others, and with the groups

we identify. Within psychology literature, this is referred to self-concept based on the *individual*

self, the *relational* self, and the *collective* self (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Cultivating belonging

through positive psychology interventions can be complex as it influences psychological

processes that impact the very way we define ourselves. In addition, cultivating belonging is not

one-size-fits-all; it varies across time, culture, and the individual. To ensure our positive

psychology intervention recommendations are appropriate, ethical, and empirically based, we

must bring an awareness of our ethnocentrism and presentism (J. O. Pawelski, personal

communication, March 6, 2020). Striking that balance can be difficult. For the purposes of this

paper, I draw on previous research and positive psychology interventions that have successfully

cultivated well-being for populations different from working mothers. As targeting the exact

right psychological process to increase a sense of belonging is person- and situation-specific, I

encourage those embarking on this effort to consider it an ongoing effort that may require

adjustments or regular boosters to continue the expected positive effects.

     Bao and Lyubomirsky (2014) describe positive interventions as intentional activities

completed deliberately and volitionally in order to become happier. Put simply, positive

interventions are intentional actions performed to increase well-being by promoting the good or

eliminating the bad. The interventions I suggest in this section are largely influenced by what

Walton and Wilson (2018) called "wise interventions", which focus on changing meaning to help

people flourish. The approach organizes interventions by three basic motivations that guide how

we make meaning about ourselves, others, and situations: the need to understand, the need for self-integrity, and the need to belong. Wise interventions disrupt the self-perpetuating cycle of negative situations, negative meaning, and mal-adaptive behaviors with new meaning (about ourselves or situations), leading to a self-enhancing cycle of improved situations, more positive meaning, and more adaptive behavior (Walton & Wilson, 2018).

In one of the wise interventions, a sense of belonging was cultivated with a light touch intervention through "nonthreatening interpretations of adversity" (Walton & Cohen, 2011, p. 1148), also referred to *attributional retraining* (Hall, 2014), where students attributed the lack of belonging to qualities not specific to their social identity. Even though the intervention was light touch, it produced lasting impacts through recursive cycles; an example how changing meaning can impact our sense of belonging by creating a self-enhancing cycle. For example, consider a working mother who experiences a sense of belonging with her coworkers when she first returns to work. This sense of belonging can positively influence her work performance, giving her confidence she does belong, leading to improved performance, starting the self-enhancing cycle. Walton and Cohen (2011) hypothesized the recursive cycle in their intervention started with early performance in college leading to assured belonging, facilitating more social interactions, forming relationships, cultivating a feeling of social integration, and ultimately a sense of belonging that fostered well-being. It is because of this study's outcomes the authors conclude belonging may be a psychological lever that could have broad benefits (Walton & Cohen, 2011). It is my intention that the interventions proposed will create opportunities for positive self-reinforcing cycles to have lasting impacts on helping working mothers thrive.

**Positive Psychology Interventions for Working Mothers**

Others have written about the struggles of mothers returning to work; including experiencing stress, guilt, and conflicting emotions, the need for preparation, as well as the importance of communication and supportive partners, co-workers, and managers (for example, Nguyen, 2019; Spiteri & Xuereb, 2012; Yahraes, 2004). I believe the best way to approach cultivating a sense of belonging is through understanding your thoughts and behaviors, building skills to foster your well-being, and creating opportunities for connection. My suggestion for working mothers is rather than tackle the positive psychology work individually, come together in small groups to connect, support, and encourage each other to create a sense of belonging. In addition to the research, my personal experience connecting with other working mothers in a breast-feeding support group and brown-bag lunch group had an immensely positive impact on my transition to working motherhood. As a group of working mothers, physically coming together can be challenging with schedules at a time when I suspect this could be most beneficial. I suggest three approaches to the positive psychology interventions in this section, with different reasons for each, listed below.

- *Creating a small group of working mothers*; increase number of connections, opportunities for support, as well as potential playmates for your children

- *Working in a dyad with another working mother*; a more intimate experience that allows a deeper connection, easier to navigate logistics of connecting

- *Covering the sections individually by writing about your experiences*; although this is logistically simplest, the approach without connection to others is missing an opportunity to create a sustained sense of belonging with other working mothers

**Intervention 1: High quality connections.** As a reminder, high quality connections are marked by three subjective experiences: feeling alive, positive regard, and mutuality, all of which have benefits to your well-being (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). One way to kick start a high quality connection is through questions. Inspired by an intervention created by Dutton, Ceccanese, & Ryan (n.d.), when forming the group, dyad, or starting a personal journey, go through the following questions with the intention of fostering mutual respect and aim at cultivating a sense of trust. These can be done at the beginning of sessions, all at once, or in some combination that fits your context. The framework for the High Quality Connections intervention is in Figure 7.

| |
|---|
| Questions that show you're genuinely interested:<br>• What's the most meaningful part of your work week?<br>• What do you love about being a working mother? |
| Questions that infuse positivity:<br>• What gives you joy about being a working mother?<br>• What makes you feel valued at work? |
| Questions that offer help:<br>• What are your biggest needs right now?<br>• What are people doing at work that you find helpful? |
| Questions working mothers can relate to:<br>• What is your favorite time of day with your child?<br>• What are you most looking forward to in the coming months? |

*Figure 7*. High Quality Connection intervention for working mothers.

**Intervention 2: Character strengths.** Character is what other people tend to admire within you; your strengths are easy to use. When you combine the two, character strengths allow you to both be authentic and do good to others (R. Niemiec, personal communication, February 7, 2020). Signature strengths are your top character strengths that are essential, effortless, and energizing to use (Niemiec & McGrath, 2019). Using character strengths can increase our well-being, improve our relationships with others, and are positively related to elements of PERMA

(Niemiec, 2018; Wagner, Ganer, Proyer, & Ruch, 2019). In addition, using character strengths at work can help us thrive by making work more engaging (Bretherton & Niemiec, 2018) and meaningful (Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010). And most importantly, using interpersonal character strengths, also called the "strengths of the heart" (Park & Peterson, 2006), can help satisfy belonging needs (Brdar & Kashdan, 2010). Identifying, using, and celebrating character strengths has potential positive impacts in many places. It gives us self-awareness of our strengths, emphasizes the positive traits within each of us, provides an opportunity for congruence between our self-perception and how others perceive us, and finally, it provides a common language to talk about the unique value each of us brings.

Drawing on inspiration from an intervention created by Niemiec (2018), to develop character strengths use and foster belonging and well-being, this intervention is focused on awareness, exploring our usage (past, present, and future), and applying character strengths to new situations. A version of the Aware-Explore-Apply model (Niemiec, 2018) is in Figure 8.

| Aware |
| --- |
| • Figure out your character strengths by taking the VIA Character Strengths survey at https://www.viacharacter.org/<br>• Describe a peak experience as a working mother and how you used your top character strengths<br>• In your own words, describe your top five character strengths in one minute each and how they show up in your life as a working mother |
| Explore |
| • Describe your best possible self as a working mother and what strengths you used<br>• Strengths spot: notice when someone (in your working mothers' group, your dyad, or at work) uses a character strength, explain the strength, and verbalize your appreciation |
| Apply |
| • Look that top of your character strengths list: pick one and plan to use it in a new way; try this at work, at home, or both<br>• Look that bottom of your character strengths list: pick one and plan to use it in a new way; try this at work, at home, or both |
| Maintain |
| • Reflect what has positively impacted your experience as a new working mother; how can you integrate that in an ongoing basis? |

*Figure 8*. Character strengths intervention for working mothers.

**Intervention 3: Optimism.** Optimism is understood in many ways and often associated with a sense of hope. In the context of this paper, and positive psychology, I want to focus on three definitions of optimism: *dispositional optimism* as having positive expectations for the future (Carver, Scheier, Miller, & Fulford, 2009); an *optimistic explanatory style* where you explaining events as external, fleeting, and specific (Peterson & Steen, 2009); and *optimism* as the "tendency to notice and expect the positive, focus on what you can control, and take purposeful action" (Reivich, K., personal communication, January 12, 2020). Optimism has been well studied and shown in different settings to influence many positive outcomes including: increased resilience, decreased depression, increased quality of life, decreased hopelessness, and

benefits in coping with difficult situations (Carver, Scheier, Miller, & Fulford, 2009); in addition, optimism and belonging have shown to positively influence each other (Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002; Oberle, Guhn, Gadrermann, Thomson, & Schonert-Reichl, 2018); and increases in hope and belonging can positive impact self-efficacy (Wurster, Kivlighan, & Foley-Nicpon, 2020), which is a vital resource for working mothers both at home and at work. In a study of working mothers, those with an optimistic disposition, or positive expectations about the future, showed lower levels of stress and higher resiliency than the less optimistic working mothers in the study (Baldwin, Kennedy, & Armata, 2008).

Drawing on inspiration from two optimism interventions (Fosnaugh, Geers, & Wellman, 2009; Malouffe & Schutte, 2017) as well as the role of our inner dialog in cultivating optimism (Reivich & Shatté, 2002; Peterson & Steen, 2009), to cultivate an optimistic mindset, I suggest the optimism intervention in Figure 9 that can be used in many situations with any combination of questions.

Think about a future situation as a working mother that is stressful, difficult, or damaging to your well-being. Consider your thoughts; are they helping or harming? If they are harming, consider the following questions:

- What if everything turned out alright?
- What is a reasonable and feasible solution or outcome?
- What is giving you hope about this situation?
- In this situation, what is within your control?
- What is one step you can take today?
- What options are available to you for support?

*Figure 9*. Optimism intervention for working mothers.

**Intervention 4: Real time resilience.** Pulling from personal experience, there was a shift in my internal dialog as I transformed into a working mother. The shift took on a few forms, like increased anxiety about unrealistic events outside of my control coupled with a default pessimistic explanatory style (for example, my son being harmed while at daycare and it is my

fault for choosing that daycare). This internal dialog was influenced by my perception and

understanding of the world. My internal dialog example is a *thinking trap* (Beck, 1979; Beck &

Alford, 2009), a pattern that represent my view of the world and may cause me to miss

information and are harmful to my well-being (for example, I can't pump enough breast milk at

work, my son will not get enough to eat, and I'm a failure as a mother). Even when we encounter

information that does not support our thinking traps (for example, my son loves drinking formula

and his pediatrician recommends it), we tend to only notice, remember, and place value on the

information that supports our belief, known as *confirmation bias* (Reivich & Shatté, 2002).

To counteract our thinking traps, we must be purposeful in noticing, remembering, and

valuing information that contradicts our harmful thought pattern. Working mothers' days can be

inundated with constant feedback that supports possibly inaccurate or skewed beliefs (for

example, my inability to sooth my crying son last night means I'm a bad mother). Overcoming

thinking traps requires us to think about our thinking, which can be very difficult especially in a

population that that feels tired or rushed. In a study of more than 2,500 adults, nearly 40% of the

working mothers felt rushed all of the time (Parker & Wang, 2013). Given the notion of feeling

rushed, I think the best opportunity to create sustained positive change by coupling this

intervention to activities with minimal cognitive load that happen often (for example, while

doing the dishes or folding laundry).

Drawing on inspiration from a resilience intervention to overcome our personal thinking

traps (K. Reivich, personal communication, March 7, 2020), this intervention focuses on fighting

thinking traps to build optimism and confidence. Similar to Fredrickson's (2009) upward spiral

of positivity, boosting optimism can act as a self-reinforcing cycle allowing working mothers to

experience positive emotions, continuing the cycle of boosting well-being, and ultimately

contribute to our sense of belonging. This is a skill that can be strengthened with each use. To

start, I recommend writing down your answers the first time you explore the real time resilience

intervention in Figure 10. Once you are comfortable, you can do this exercise while doing other

activities (for example, vacuuming, changing diapers).

When you notice a harmful thinking pattern about your life as a new working mother, try these tactics and see what works best for you in that situation:

- I know that is not true because ... (evidence to counteract your thoughts)
- If that happens again, I'm going to ... (plan a helpful response)
- A better or more productive way to see that is ... (consider a different perspective)
- One thing I can influence in this situation is ... (notice what is within your control)
- I can use my top character strength to ... (strengths-based approach)

*Figure 10.* Real time resilience intervention for working mothers.

**Intervention 5: Gratitude.** Gratitude is foundational to well-being and feelings of

gratitude come from recognizing the good (things, people, situations) in your life that are

external to you (Lomas, Froh, Emmons, Mishra, & Bono, 2014). *Dispositional gratitude*

encourages positive social interactions (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001),

*expressed gratitude* increases prosocial behavior (Grant & Gino, 2010), both of which positively

influence a sense of belonging through connection with others. Drawing on inspiration from a

study by Emmons and McCullough (2003), this intervention focuses on cultivating gratitude to

spark feelings optimism, prosocial behavior, and ultimately a sense of belonging. The invention

in Figure 11 can be done in a group, dyad, or individual setting. If you are doing this with the

working women's group or with a partner, utilize the time during the session to talk in detail

about your answers to these questions. If you are pursuing this invention on your own, I

recommend writing your answers and doing this during a consistent time (each day or each

week) to complete the intervention (for example, before going to bed at night or when you first

get to the office in the morning).

| Reflect on the past day and ask yourself these questions: |
|---|
| • As a working mother, what are you grateful or thankful for right now? <br> • How does that make your feel? <br> • If your gratitude is towards a person, what would you say to convey your gratitude? |

*Figure 11*. Gratitude intervention for working mothers.

**Intervention 6: Self-affirmation.** Self-affirmation exercises most often approached as a values-affirmation, where you take a "psychological time-out" to identify, prioritize, and reflect on values important to you. At the heart of self-affirmation is to maintain a sense of self-integrity; when our self-integrity is threatened (for example, when we sense that we do not belong), we react with stress and defense mechanisms that can hurt our growth and performance (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). In contrast to interventions aimed at changing the meaning or appraisal of a situation to positively impact a sense of belonging, self-affirmation interventions aim at changing our appraisal of ourselves positively impacting our sense of belonging among other well-being outcomes (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Drawing on inspiration from interventions used in Cohen et al. (2009), Taylor and Walton (2011), and Walton et al. (2015), the intervention in Figure 12 focuses on cultivating a sense of belonging by identifying and reflecting on personal values.

| Take a moment to think about your personal values as a working mother and why they matter to you. It may be helpful to write down your list of values. |
|---|
| Of the values you listed, select the ones that are most important to you as a working mother. |
| Spend 10-15 minutes writing about why these matter to you and how they show up in your life as a working mother. |

*Figure 12*. Self-affirmation intervention for working mothers.

**Intervention 7: WOOP.** WOOP is an acronym for wish, outcome, obstacle, plan; a more accessible way of saying mental contrasting with implementation intentions (Oettingen, 2020). WOOP has shown to positively impact physical health (Stadler, Oettinger, & Gollwitzer, 2010),

goal attainment (Oettingen, Mayer, Thorpe, Janetzke, & Lorenz, 2005), and time management

(Oettingen, Kappes, Guttenberg, & Gollwitzer, 2015). At the heart of WOOP is self-regulation

strategy to help with goal pursuit. You might be wondering, how is this relevant to belonging? I

mentioned in my introduction that it takes a continuous effort to cultivate a sense of belonging

for working mothers; self-regulation and mental contrasting skills can help us overcome the

obstacles to stay committed to that goal. As working motherhood is an ongoing pursuit with

ever-changing obstacles (both mental and physical), this skill is worth mentioning if only for the

practicality of application. Using the interventions from Duckworth, Grant, Loew, Oettingen, &

Gollwitzer (2011) and Oettingen (2020) as inspiration, the WOOP intervention is outlined in

Figure 13.

| |
|---|
| Think about one part of your life as a working mother where you want to make a change and the timeframe you want to make this change.<br><br>• Wish: write down the realistic change you want to accomplish<br>• Outcome: write down the best possible outcome for your wish and how it will make you feel when you accomplish it |
| Think about your internal barriers that may prevent you from accomplishing your goal and imagine them happening.<br><br>• Obstacles: write down the specific obstacles within you<br>• Plan: create a simple if-then plan for the obstacle you imagined, being as specific as possible |
| Write down or repeat your plan back to yourself. |

*Figure 13*. WOOP intervention for working mothers.

In this case, I think an example is helpful to provide emphasis on how specific to be with

language and scope. An example of the WOOP intervention is listed below.

- <u>Wish:</u> flexibility with work meeting times to accommodate my pumping schedule.

- <u>Outcome:</u> declining or rescheduling meetings that interfere with my pumping schedule, which would make my day more physically comfortable, decrease my stress, and increase my ability to focus in the meetings I do attend.

- <u>Obstacles:</u> lacking the confidence to decline or ask for different time when the meeting is scheduled by my coworkers or superiors.

- <u>Plan:</u> I will place holds on my calendars for pumping and if someone schedules a conflict, I will remind myself that I need to balance my needs as a working mother and ask to reschedule.

In summary, I proposed seven interventions for working mothers to tackle as a group, a dyad, or individually. In Figure 14, I summarize the intervention, its focus, and the question of belonging that relates to the intervention.

| Intervention | Focus of the intervention | Question of Belonging |
|---|---|---|
| High Quality Connections | Fostering mutual respect to cultivate a sense of trust | Does anyone see me? Can I connect with anyone? |
| Character Strengths | Creating self-awareness of your character strengths, providing an opportunity for congruence between your self-perception and how others perceive you, and a common language to talk about the unique value each person brings | Are people like me valued here? |
| Optimism | Cultivating an optimistic mindset | Do I want to belong here? |
| Real Time Resilience | Fighting thinking traps to build optimism and confidence | Are people like me valued here? |
| Gratitude | Cultivating gratitude to spark feelings optimism and activate prosocial behavior | Are people like me incompatible with this setting? |
| Self-affirmation | Changing our appraisal of ourselves and expressing our values | Can I be more than a token person in this setting? |
| WOOP | Utilizing self-regulation and mental contrasting skills can help overcome obstacles to stay committed to cultivating a sense of belonging | |

*Figure 14*. Summary of interventions in the *Positive Psychology Interventions for Working Mothers* section to cultivate a sense of belonging for working mothers.

**Positive Psychology Interventions for Managers or Mentors**

Providing working mothers knowledge and interventions to help bolster their sense of belonging is the main focus of my paper. However, in this final section I shift my focus to those supporting working mothers. I first talk about the research, followed by interventions managers or mentors can use to help navigate the transition to working motherhood. I mentioned earlier that companies and organizations are investing effort into understanding the question of belonging; there are three studies mentioned in this section (notably, BetterUp, 2020; Creary et al., 2020; Gallup, 2020) that are not peer reviewed journal publications, but are mentioned given

their topic relevance, sample sizes, and importance in understanding belonging in a work

environment.

The term *inclusion* in management literature is explained as the satisfaction of the needs

of uniqueness and belongingness (Shore et al., 2011); where belongingness is defined as

maintaining strong and stable relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In this context,

inclusion is about connections and individuality. Randel et al. (2018) argued that the experiences

of inclusion at work dependent in part on *inclusive leadership*, leadership behaviors that facilitate

team members experiencing belonging and individuality while valuing the contributions of those

team members, which results in higher performance. Practically speaking, Randel et al. (2018)

put forth three suggestions for inclusive leadership to foster belongingness: supporting group

members by keeping group members best interests in mind (for example, a leader of team

checking in with the team before a meeting starts by asking appropriate personal questions like

*how is your baby doing?*), ensuring equity and justice for all group members through fair

treatment (for example, considering how alcohol-based team building activities may exclude

breastfeeding mother from social events), and shared decision-making by asking for unique

perspectives and promoting diverse contributions (for example, including members of the team

to weigh in on how to best accommodate a new working mothers schedule in a respectful way).

In an experiment that mimicked exclusion and inclusion behaviors in the workplace, the

findings showed excluded participants were 25% less productive on future tasks (BetterUp,

2020). Interventions were carried out to change excluded members' behavior to act more like the

included team members, having prosocial benefits for all of the participants. The first

intervention was around *gaining perspective* where participants were given stories from previous

participants about exclusion coping strategies; the second was about *encouraging mentorship*

where participants imagined how they would coach others in the same situation; and the third

was *finding empowerment* where participants mapped out how they would change the experience

to make it more enjoyable. All three were successful in enabling excluded team members to act

like included team members (BetterUp, 2020). The findings suggest ways to mitigate exclusion

in the workplace include getting perspective from others (for example, hearing perspectives from

other working mothers), be a mentor for those in a similar situation (for example, if you are also

a parent, offering your working parent experience to a new working mother), and finally coming

up with strategies to change the situation (for example, if a meeting is scheduled during your

scheduled pumping time to ask if the meeting be rescheduled rather than be left out of the

meeting).

Another study focused on cultivating workplace inclusion through middle managers.

Creary et al. (2020) wrote their report to provide evidence-based solutions to cultivate inclusion

at work. In this study, belonging was defined as "the extent to which employees feel they belong,

are accepted, and are comfortable in their workplace" (Creary et al., 2020, p. 2). They did this in

two phases: first conducting interviews and then validating a survey, termed the Inclusion and

Belonging Assessment. After surveying more than 1,000 people across industries and job

functions, Creary et al. (2020) found middle managers can foster inclusion through mentoring

and formal and informal mentor-mentee relationships (for example, an older working parent

mentoring a new working mother), managerial involvement by sharing personal stories and

checking in with employees (for example, a manager sharing family experiences in a way that

provides appreciation for roles outside of work), and workplace policies by communicating

initiatives and encouraging involvement (for example, communicating to the entire staff the

human resource policies that support working mothers leading up to, during, and after maternity leave).

To better understand diversity and inclusion in the workplace, Gallup (2018) conducted a survey of 200 organizations. The end goal was to address toxic work cultures, how to get and keep top talent, and understanding the reality of a diverse workforce. Creating an inclusive environment at work includes treating employees with respect, valuing employees' strengths, and leadership (Gallup, 2018). The findings suggest recognizing employees' unique perspectives and taking a strengths-based approach foster a sense of belonging. Recognizing perspectives can take the form of asking for, leveraging, and respecting that every person's perspective is developed through unique experiences (for example, being specific in asking working mothers to contribute to a conversation as their life experiences are different than a man without children). Taking a strengths-based approach for developing employees can take the form of knowing, sharing, celebrating, and recognizing individual strengths (for example, specifically calling out working mother's talents as they balance the demands of work and parenting). In summary, below are the suggestions on how to cultivate a sense of belonging from the above-mentioned sources:

- create inclusive leadership through supporting group members, ensuring equity and justice, and shared decision-making (Randel et al., 2018);

- reverse exclusion through gaining perspective, encouraging mentorship, and finding empowerment (BetterUp, 2020);

- middle managers foster inclusion through mentoring and sponsorship, managerial involvement, and workplace policies (Creary et al., 2020); and

- foster inclusion at work by recognizing employees for unique perspective and taking a

  strengths-based approach to development (Gallup, 2018).

Interactions are fundamental to our workplace experience. For those that want to cultivate

a sense of belonging for a new working mothers in their workplace, I suggest combining the

importance of inclusive leadership and mentorship in cultivating a sense of belonging (BetterUp,

2020; Creary et al., 2020; Gallup, 2018; Randel et al., 2018) with studies that have shown that

mentoring positively influences a sense of belonging (Holt, Bry, & Johnson, 2008; Raymond &

Sheppard, 2017). Mentorship looks different across industries, organizations, and relationships. I

believe, and have personally experienced, that at the heart of successful mentorship is fostering a

sense of self-determination, respectful engagement, and task enabling. *Self-determination theory*

explains that our motivations are driven by our psychological need for autonomy, competence,

and connection (Brown & Ryan, 2015). Respectful engagement is interacting with someone in a

way that conveys you understand the other person's worth and value (Dutton, 2003). Task

enabling is about aiding the performance of a boss, peer, or subordinate that is mutually

beneficial to the enabler and the one being enabled, while simultaneously building high quality

connections (Dutton, 2003). Utilizing this research, in the following section I suggest mentorship

as an intervention to cultivate a sense of belonging for working mothers.

**Mentorship for belonging.** To narrow my focus for the purpose of this section, I'm

speaking about the population of women who are working in an organization leading up to their

maternity leave (whatever amount of time taken for the birth of a new child) and returning to that

same organization as a new working mother. The continuity of employment at the same

organization is important in this context as the mentorship relationship starts prior to maternity

leave. This suggestion is inspired by a study that found positive post-maternity leave outcomes

were related to the plans made while still pregnant (Houston & Marks, 2003). Starting prior to

maternity leave is also supported by the importance of recursion (behaving in ways that make

our expectations come true) and that starting early in a setting can contribute to a self-fulfilling

experience (Walton & Brady, 2017). A normal pregnancy is marked by three trimesters. In

American parenting books, the fourth trimester is a term used to describe navigating early

infancy when the baby is reliant on parents; the fifth trimester is when the "working mom is

born" (Brody, 2017), acknowledging that there is an important transition happening as women

re-enter the workplace akin to the rapid changes that are happening during pregnancy. Although

the word "trimester" implies three months, my point is to highlight the transition back to work

regardless of the time period in which it happens. For example, mothers in Canada, Denmark,

and Portugal, to name a few, have more than 20 weeks of government mandated maternity leave

(Livingston & Thomas, 2019). I suggest starting the mentor relationship prior to maternity leave;

if not possible, the minimum focus of the mentorship be the first months back at work.

The role of the mentor is to provide skills, knowledge, and support for the working

mother during the time of transition, with the end goal to make her feel seen, accepted, and

valued. The mentor should be mutually invested in cultivating a sense of belonging for the new

working mother. This mutual investment is important to enable genuine engagement between

mentor and mentee, have the potential to positively impact both well-being and work outcomes,

and ultimately signal the importance of new working mothers. I suggest two approaches for

different reasons, listed below.

- *Manager is the mentor*; to more easily navigate the conversations around task enabling,

  the ability to directly impact the experience with other members of the team, and to

  provide support and celebration for work contributions

- *Experienced working mother is the mentor*; to provide a narrative around the same experience, to act as a role model managing the demands of working motherhood, and the potential to be psychologically safer environment to speak freely about working mother hardships

**Intervention 1: Prepare for the transition.** To emphasize the underlying importance of cultivating belonging, the two questions of belonging being addressed here are *Does anyone see me?* and *Are people like me valued here?* The development of the mentorship relationship is signaling two major points: the mentor sees the soon-to-be working mother is about to experience a different phase in life and working mothers are valued.

Drawing on inspiration from the Prestwich et al. (2012) and Oettingen (2020) previously mentioned interventions, these conversations should include a purposeful statement to normalize the transition can be difficult and that a working mother has the ability and opportunity to positively impact the outcome. An example of a statement addressing this is: *Returning to work as a new working mother can be a turbulent time, but research suggests this transition can be smoother if you make very specific plans with a partner (like a coworker) about your return to work. You can be specific about your plans by making statements like "If...then...we...".* This allows the new working mother to link social connections to goal pursuit, ultimately impacting a sense of belonging (Walton & Wilson, 2020a). Taking guidance from the Turetsky and Sanderson (2018) intervention, these conversations should also include information about the transition to working mother is full of many unexpected changes ranging from the new logistics of your day to feeling physically different. Providing easily digestible information can help link belonging by normalizing expectations about the transition and motivate positive behavior (Walton & Wilson, 2020b). For example, popular press articles like "How to return to work after

taking parental leave" (Knight, 2012); or personal stories from a working mother at that company.

The *Prepare for the Transition* conversation can happen over multiple sessions, with the end goal to provide the soon-to-be working mother with a plan to draw on when returning to work, expectations that the transition can have many different challenges, and highlight the social support to help navigate it. All of these outcomes have the ability to contribute helping the soon-to-be mother belong at work.

**Intervention 2: Navigate the transition.** To emphasize the underlying importance of cultivating belonging, the two questions of belonging being addressed here are *Can I connect with anyone?* and *Are people like me incompatible with this setting?* The intentionally scheduled mentorship discussions catalyze the opportunity to form a meaningful connection in the workplace. Because the mentorship discussions are specifically about navigating life as a working mother, there is opportunity to cultivate belonging by signaling working mothers are not only compatible, but are also valued in this setting.

Every transition back to work as unique markers depending on the person, situation, and level of support. In addition to meeting regularly, to bolster the conversations, Figure 15 lists the components of respectful engagement and task enabling strategies, which should be adopted to meet the context of the situation as the conversations unfold. These were originally developed to help create and sustain high quality connections (Dutton, 2003), which may be an added bonus that positively impacts well-being.

**Components of respectful engagement** (Dutton, 2003):

- Conveying presence (acknowledgement and recognition)
- Being genuine (use authentic language and stories)
- Communicating affirmation (express what you value in others)
- Effective listening (acknowledge feelings, try to fully understand context)
- Supportive communication (communicate to minimize defensiveness, maximize clarity)

**Task enabling strategies** (Dutton, 2003):

- Teaching (sharing information)
- Designing (arranging job features to be more interesting and appealing)
- Advocating (help navigate the political context of the organization)
- Accommodating (alter the process, timing, or substance of tasks)
- Nurturing (focus on the individual development needs)

*Figure 15*. Components of respectful engagement and task enabling strategies to support the navigate the transition intervention.

Drawing on inspiration from gratitude interventions (Boehm, Lyubomirsky, & Sheldon, 2011; Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson, 2005) the mentor should include moments during these conversations prompting the working mother to convey appreciation for something specific. The prompt for this can be something like: *take a moment to think about something positive in your life that you appreciate; be specific about who enables the sense of gratitude and why you feel grateful.* The purpose of this exercise is to bolster beliefs about social connectedness and cultivate optimism to increase as sense of belonging (Walton & Wilson, 2020c).

During these conversations, there is likely to be discussions about difficult or overwhelming moments for the new working mother. Because women are more likely to ruminate (Johnson & Whisman, 2013), disrupting the negative rumination cycle is important. Drawing on inspiration from the Kross and Ayduk (2008) intervention, the mentor can help the working mother by encouraging a self-distant perspective. This can be prompted with a

statement like: *think about a difficult experience, take a few steps back, and watch the experience unfold like it were happening to a distant version of you.* This can happen during or after the mentorship conversation, so long as it provides an opportunity to disrupt the undermining nature of the negative thoughts (Walton & Wilson, 2020d).

In summary, this section outlined the two-part intervention of *Mentorship for Belonging* and the *Positive Psychology Interventions for Working Mothers*, which included seven interventions to be adopted for different settings to help create, enhance, and perpetuate a sense of belonging. These interventions are not prescriptive nor guaranteed. Based on the supporting empirical evidence and my personal experience, I believe these interventions can positively impact new working mothers.

## Conclusion

During the first few months of my child's life, I felt more connected to one human and simultaneously more alone than ever before. The isolation I experienced as a new mother was a new frontier. The postpartum months are an individual, yet unifying experience for women. First time motherhood is challenging for many reasons. As women are having children later in life, they are more likely to have cemented their working lives prior to starting a family. The transition from *working woman* to *working mother* is turbulent and can lead to a psychological disruption at home and at work. I consider the sense of loneliness and isolation some women experience during the transition to working motherhood as a lack of belonging. This fundamental need to be accepted needs to be purposefully cultivated to allow working mothers to thrive.

"You belong here" is a phrase James Pawelski used many times throughout the Master of Applied Positive Psychology program. Hearing those words were pivotal in my ability to fully

engage and feel like I mattered in the MAPP classroom. My hope is that this capstone allows

working mothers to know that they matter, they belong, and they have the ability to thrive.

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