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The Anthropology of Belonging

The Need for Social Inclusion

Jul 3, 2006 Gerda Wever-Rabehl

In this article, I will explore the evolutionary roots of our universal desire to belong to a group.

The Evolution of Belonging. The Threat of Social Isolation

The Need for Groups

Social exclusion is a complex and mysterious phenomenon that permeates all of our relationships and many, if not all, aspects of our lives. Social exclusion and rejection have inspired a rich legacy of contemplation from poets, writers, philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists. After all, human beings are deeply social creatures. We desire to live, love and work with others whom we know and who know us. And so did our ancestors, whose membership to small groups helped protect them from the weather and from predators. Belonging to a group gave them- and gives us- a chance to thrive.

The Evolution of Belonging

For our ancestral brothers and sisters, becoming a social outcast would have been disastrous. Rejection from the group and lacking the benefits that the group offered would have meant death. From an evolutionary standpoint, our survival has depended on the ability to prevent rejection, or to reclaim membership to the group once rejected. This is, in a way, still the case. Evolution has instilled in us a powerful desire to be part of a group of people we can know and whom can know us, and while our world has changed, and while our social ties to others have become less personal and more complex, social connection (and our fear of losing it) continues to be crucial to the quality (and in some cases, even quantity) of our lives.

The Pain of Being an Outcast

Social outcasts feel bad, are anxious and depressed, lack a sense of wellbeing, they harm their immune system and threaten to harm their cardio-vascular health. People who are socially isolated think about and do destructive things and die sooner than socially well-connected people. Extreme reactions to social rejection such as depression, suicidal behavior and violence, might be relatively uncommon, but throughout human history social exile has been tantamount to the death sentence. While some people react to their new status as social outcast more radically than others, rejection is pretty much universally experienced as negative and painful, and this experience affects the whole of us: behavior, emotion, perception and cognition. The reason for it, the desire to belong, is equally universal, although the way it is enacted depends differs depending on culture. Let's have a closer look at some of the differences in enacting our need to belong or our fear of social rejection.

More on the Evolution of Belonging

When we meet others, we try to figure out the whole belonging thing right away. We want to know immediately whether the other is friend or foe, and whether he or she is capable enacting their respective friendliness or enmity (Fiske & Yamamoto, 2005). Some suggest that we universally perceive social groups along these two dimensions, warmth (e.g. are they friendly?) and competence (e.g. can they enact their -un-friendliness?). Yet, the ways in which we sort out belonging differs according to culture. We will look at some of the differences between the east and the west.

The East and the West

Our Western emphasis on the self as an independent and autonomous entity has seemingly led to a specific set of expectations in terms of belonging. Westerners seek loose and broad types of belonging. This in contrast with the secure and tight type of belonging one might seek in a society that emphasizes interdependence and social harmony such as Japan or other Eastern collectivists cultures and some Latino cultures (Fiske and Yamamoto, 2005).

This difference between the type of belonging sought by Westerners and Easterners (widely and loosely for North-Americans, securely and tightly for Japanese) also plays out in the ways in which Americans and Japanese respond to strangers. While Americans consider it rude to not address a stranger, Japanese consider caution and minimal contact the most appropriate response when meeting a stranger (Fiske & Yamamoto, 2005).

When it comes to ensuring their membership to a group, Westerners' motives and meta-expectations fit with their philosophy of the autonomous self. They tend to see the interpersonal relationships within the group as a matter of individual choice and control. They are confident, optimistic and trusting, until proven wrong. Japanese on the other hand, prioritize social harmony. Interpersonal relationships are more important to them than truth and they don't mind saying something different under different circumstances. They know and accept that others will do the same. Trust, to them operates in the context of relationships (Fiske & Yamamoto, 2005).

In Closing

Our need to belong to a group is, and always has been, crucial for our survival. We are deeply social creatures and social banishment is still exceedingly threatening to our wellbeing. Our desire to belong to a group, to know and to be known is universal, although the ways in which this desire is enacted might differ according to culture. Based on the work of Fiske and Yamamoto, we have illustrated this point and looked at some of the differences in the ways in which Americans and Japanese enact the desire to belong. These cultural differences however, apply only to the ways in which the desire to belong is enacted. The desire to belong itself, the fear of rejection and the pain of social rejection is universal, shared by us all.

You can find this article also on The Belonging Initiative, a wonderful project that aims to end loneliness and nurture belonging.

The Write Room

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