Sense of Not Belonging at Work

Dr Lee Waller
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The aim of this research was to develop an understanding of the workplace experience of not belonging, and the emotional, cognitive and behavioural processes involved in a sense of not belonging in the workplace. In-depth interviews with 12 participants revealed the factors that contribute to a sense of not belonging, the impact on an individual’s sense of self, the emotional experiences involved, and the cognitive and behavioural strategies employed to enhance a sense of belonging. The research identified a process through which the experience occurs, core to which is self-concept, the meaning participants attributed of having the experience to their sense of self. A sense of not belonging was found to undermine self-efficacy and self-esteem, as well as undermine a consistent and coherent self-concept through the conflict that emerged between who individuals knew themselves to be and who they became during the experience.

Executive Summary

- Sense of not belonging (SoNB) arises through one or a combination of factors which involve an absence of close, quality relationships, an absence of shared characteristics, and a sense of not adding value
- Organisational cultures which are hierarchical and political or are absent of psychological safety might provide the context in which a SoNB can manifest
- SoNB undermines a sense of self, in terms of self-efficacy and self-esteem, as well as undermining a consistent and coherent self-concept
- The impact of SoNB on self-concept has a significant impact on an individual’s emotional response, leaving him/her feeling low, anxious, depressed, and battling with a turmoil of emotions
- In attempting to resolve the experience individuals engage in a variety of strategies, some of which serve to resolve the experience by enhancing a sense of belonging. Others serve to compound or perpetuate the experience, by diminishing self-worth or presenting a conflict between what they know of themselves and who they become through attempting to cope
- Factors specific to the individual or their context may also enhance sensitivity to SoNB or enhance the impact of SoNB on self-concept

Key Findings
Implications for practice

• Encourage the development of relationships and social networks, and recruit for and develop relational skills to support the development of genuine, quality relationships

• Provide clarity and training in the skills required of roles to ensure employees are able to perform effectively and make a valuable contribution

• Offer autonomy to signal to employees they are trusted and competent, and to ensure they are able to proactively enhance their sense of belonging

• Foster an inclusive and psychologically safe climate so employees feel included and valuable and able to voice their concerns and vulnerabilities

• Offer workplace counselling and coaching practices to help employees to engage in constructive coping strategies

• Be aware of the attributes and associated behaviours of sense of not belonging so leaders can support employees in developing a sense of belonging

Introduction

The need to belong has long been established as a fundamental human need and one that when thwarted has a significant, detrimental impact on how we think, feel and behave. Being the place where we spend a great deal of our time, work has become increasingly important in modern life, and now provides much of the social support that used to be gained from extended families and community. A sense of not belonging in the workplace is therefore likely to have significant implications for our well-being.

The objective of this research was to understand a sense of not belonging – the experience of feeling that one does not belong at work – the situations that engender it, and the emotions, cognitions and behaviours involved, with the ultimate purpose of helping those enduring a sense of not belonging to resolve it, prevent others from experiencing it, and help leaders and organisations understand how better to support those going through it.
According to the Belonging Hypothesis, the need to belong is an innate human motivation — we are born with a fundamental need to form interpersonal relationships which involve frequent, positive interactions, and an emotional concern that is stable and enduring. This hypothesis is well supported, with a drive to establish and maintain a sense of belonging through affiliation with individuals and groups being a fundamental element of all of the major need theories, including Maslow’s Theory of Human Motivation; Alderfer’s Existence, Relatedness and Growth Model; McClelland’s 3-Needs Theory; and Deci and Ryan’s Self-Determination Theory.

Anthropological studies have also consistently found that individuals in all societies will naturally and spontaneously form into groups, develop social bonds and show favouritism towards their group even when allocation to a group is entirely arbitrary. Moreover, neuroscientific studies have also found that the pain experienced through interpersonal loss and rejection triggers the same neurobiological system as physical pain. It would seem that our social attachment system has evolved to alert us to a threat to our social exclusion by stimulating the same neural pathways as physical pain — suggesting that social exclusion is as critical to our survival as a species as physical pain.

Quality relationships
Research has found that the development of relationships and support from colleagues are also vital to our sense of belonging in the workplace. Meaningful relationships—relationships which offer opportunities for quality interaction, characterised by empathy, trust, and understanding. These relationships help us to feel valued and validated, cared for and respected, heard and understood, and are vital to our ability to develop a sense of belonging at work.

Perceived value
However, in the context of the workplace in particular, belonging may not only constitute the need to develop social relationships, but may be a broader construct incorporating the needs for growth, achievement, or competence as defined by the various need theories. Research supports this proposition finding that a sense of belonging at work also involves a sense of being valued and being appreciated for one’s contribution to an organisation, as well as a sense of being credible and capable of functioning effectively. According to McClure and Brown’s conceptualisation of organisational belonging, belonging is not just about developing relationships, but is also about “what it is like to be valued at work.”

Shared characteristics
A sense of belonging at work has also been found to involve an experience of congruence through a sense of shared characteristics. According to status characteristics theory, characteristics such as age, education, ethnicity, gender, professional or social background provide signals to an individual of their status in relation to others, and impact self-perceptions and other’s perceptions about performance abilities and competence. This in turn may impact their sense of value and thus their sense of belonging. This is not to say however, that being similar to those around us is best for our well-being, and social identity theorists have found that a lack of uniqueness is in fact related to poor psychological well-being. These studies, however, intimate that uniqueness must be at the expense of belonging and view personal and social identities at opposite ends of a continuum. Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT) however, suggests that a sense of belonging actually constitutes a balance between a sense of similarity and a sense of distinctiveness. The type of distinctiveness involved in this balance is one that supports an individual’s sense of valued contribution rather than one that separates the individual from the group. As such, belonging at work may involve a balance of similar characteristics and distinctive value.

Theoretical Background

Belonging as an innate human motivation

Characteristics of belonging in the context of the workplace

Shared characteristics

Quality relationships

Perceived value

Shared characteristics
Organisational culture

Whilst there exist a number of definitions of organisational culture, it is generally accepted that it consists of the shared assumptions, beliefs and values of an organisation which are communicated through norms and artefacts and observed in behaviour. These values and underlying assumptions are considered to be deeply rooted and ingrained, and as such misalignment with these core values might result in cognitive dissonance and a perception of not belonging. Indeed, research has found belonging to be related to a conflict between personal and institutional values.

What also appears to be particularly critical to belonging in the workplace is psychological safety – an individual’s perception that the team environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking.

Of particular pertinence to the experience of belonging at work is the role that psychological safety plays in one’s ability to be open, and studies have found psychological safety to be positively related to our ability to speak up. This ability to speak up and contribute is vital to our ability to feel included. It is also an important characteristic of quality relationships which are critical to belonging in the workplace. An absence of psychological safety, therefore, may diminish employees’ perception of being included as well as inhibit them from being open about and getting support for a sense of not belonging, as such exacerbating the experience.

Belonging and self-concept

Whilst there exist various conceptualisations of self-concept, common across all is the perception that it is one’s view of oneself – the knowledge that an individual holds about themselves, incorporating traits, values, memories, and self-relevant information. In addition to this personal knowledge, self-concept is also argued to incorporate a relational, or collective sense of self in terms of who one is in relation to other people or groups, and as such is thought to be socially and contextually determined, developed through interaction with others and society, through social roles and membership of groups, and comparison with others.

A sense of not belonging to groups therefore, may have important implications for the development of one’s self-concept. Indeed, belonging has been defined as a “sense of ease with oneself and one’s surroundings”, as “something…fundamental to who and what we are…part of what constitutes our identity”. Whilst the importance of belonging to self-concept has had little exploration in the context of the workplace, findings of a study of teleworkers concluded that belonging involved “experiencing an acknowledgement of one’s talents, interests, and experiences, and finding whole acceptance of one’s self expression of these”.

An element of the self-concept that has consistently been found to be related to belonging is self-esteem. Self-esteem refers to how one evaluates dimensions of the self-concept involving both cognitive and emotional components. The Sociometer Hypothesis considers belonging to be intimately entwined with self-esteem, and proposes that self-esteem is in fact an internal gauge that alerts us to a threat to our acceptance, inclusion or relational value, and motivates us to behave in ways which will address this threat and enhance our likelihood of being included. This is widely supported, with research demonstrating that self-esteem is not only related to rejection, exclusion and belonging, but also that fear of exclusion causes a decrease in self-esteem.

In the context of the workplace, not belonging has also been found to be related to self-esteem and associated with diminished self-worth, self-blame and inadequacy. Self-efficacy, defined as one’s belief that one can be successful in future tasks, has also been found to be related to belonging. Studies have found belonging to be contingent in part on the development of confidence and competence in one’s work, and the process of belonging in the workplace seen as culminating in an achievement of competence, and a sense of being an “efficacious and capable professional.”
Belonging and emotion
Not belonging is also associated with mood and emotion including anxiety and depression, and emotional distress, a relationship which has also been found in field studies in the workplace. Indeed, workplace belonging was found in one study to be the strongest predictor of psychological distress, and as such, a sense of belonging in the workplace is likely to have significant implications for an employee’s psychological well-being and experience at work.

Impact on behaviour and performance
Thwarting the need to belong may also have important implications for how employees behave in the workplace, ultimately affecting contribution and performance. However, whilst some studies have found exclusion and not belonging to be related to prosocial behaviours such as engaging in group work, being willing to help and working extra hard; others have found the experience to be related to more interpersonally harmful and unhelpful behaviours such as swearing at someone at work. The conflict in these findings is argued to be related to an individual’s ability to control their situation and actually enhance their likelihood of belonging and feeling included. Indeed, rejected individuals in one study who were able to enhance their inclusionary status by interacting with their excluder, were more likely to rate their excluder as attractive and sociable, and treat them favourably than those without that opportunity. This suggests that an individual’s level of control of their situation and their ability to enhance their sense of inclusion may influence their choice of behaviour in response to not belonging at work.

Taken together research suggests that a sense of not belonging at work may have important implications for self-concept, psychological well-being, and for behaviour and performance, all of which have significant implications for individuals, leaders and for organisations.

Research Approach

Aims and Objectives
The objective of the research was to understand what is involved in the workplace experience of feeling that one does not belong, from the subjective perspective of the individual. The study aimed to develop a substantive theory, relevant to the context of the workplace, to understand what situations and factors contribute to the experience, what cognitions, emotions and behaviours are involved, how the experience is managed by individuals, and what impact the experience might be having on psychological wellbeing.

The methodology used was Grounded Theory (GT) – a method of data collection and analysis which, rather than simply attempting to describe a given phenomenon, aims to develop a substantive theory about the phenomenon which is based on, and grounded in the data gathered.

Participants
The participant group constituted 12 participants (6 men and 6 women), ranging in age from 28-61, with an average age of 46. All participants resided in the United Kingdom, but nine were White-British, one was Indian-American, one India-British, and one White-Russian. The average number of years worked in current role was 5.79, ranging from 5 months to 15 years, and the average number of years in employment was 22.9 ranging from 5-45. With the exception of three participants who were self-employed, all participants, based on job title, held middle to senior level roles, including four ‘Heads of’, two ‘Directors’, two ‘Managers’ and one ‘Senior’ professional.

Data collection and analysis
Semi-structured interviews were conducted which were recorded and transcribed and the transcripts analysed using the constant comparative method. This involved generating codes – applying conceptual labels to the data – which were then compared with other codes, and where uniformity identified the codes were integrated into categories and sub-categories. Categories were then compared to other categories to explore potential fit, and where identified, categories clustered together to form a ‘conceptual category’. This coding process continued until a core category emerged – the category which appears central to the theory, is related meaningfully to the other categories, and accounts for most of the variation found in behaviour.

Finally, theoretical codes were developed which articulate potential relationships and connections between the core category and the emerging categories, ultimately leading to the development of a theoretical framework.
The analysis revealed a variety of concepts that clustered into themes, sub-categories, and overarching categories. Exploration of the relationships between the categories revealed a potential process through which the phenomenon of a sense of not belonging (SoNB) in the workplace may be experienced, which is presented in the discussion section of this report. The names associated with the quotations below are fictional to protect the anonymity of the participants.

The experience within the workplace of feeling like one does not belong was attributed to a variety of factors, which cluster into the sub-categories detailed in Table 1. What emerged as universal to all these factors was that they all put individuals on the ‘outside’ of the group or organisation to which they aspired to belong, and it was this perception that either, when compounded by the presence of more than one factor, or when moderated by other external factors, resulted in a SoNB.

| Attributes to sense of not belonging in the workplace |

Table 1: Attributes of SoNB: Sub-categories and themes

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<tr>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-category Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absence of quality relationships</td>
<td>Not part of a team</td>
<td>Lack of open, honest, and meaningful, quality relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No genuine relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not trusting or being trusted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not being able to be open</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No understanding or empathy</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not mattering to someone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not adding value</td>
<td>Not making a contribution</td>
<td>Inability to add value, make a contribution, or connect to a sense of purpose in the workplace</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Needing a sense of purpose</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lacking capability</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>Professional background</td>
<td>Perception of being different from the rest of the team or organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Qualifications</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social background</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual characteristics</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Organisational culture</td>
<td>Psychologically unsafe</td>
<td>Unsafe, unsupportive and uncompassionate organisational cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hierarchical and political culture</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commercial values</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Absence of quality relationships

What was missing for many was a lack of relationships with others in the workplace, relationships that had developed over time, and through which individuals were able to learn about and understand each other and develop mutual trust. Being in a work environment in which there were no opportunities to develop quality relationships prevented participants from feeling part of an ‘in group’ and developing a sense of being part of a collective with a shared understanding and purpose. Critical was the lack of connections on a personal level—genuine, supportive, empathetic relationships with those with whom they worked:

“When you’re at work for eight hours a day and you feel not only that no one cares about you but that there’s no one to talk to about it. There was no one else...there was no one to bond with.” (Lydia)

An absence of such relationships left individuals feeling isolated, unsupported, misunderstood and unable to talk about how they were feeling, likely compounding their negative self-concept in the interpretation that they must be the only one with SoNB, as articulated by Sarah:

“And then I think the final thing was not having anyone close to me, and not being able to confide and not having someone just to say what you’re feeling. validate what I was feeling. It’s normal, okay. I kept thinking it’s me, it’s me.”

As is evident from this quote, an absence of quality relationships also moderated the relationship of other factors. Without quality relationships individuals were not able to discuss concerns about feeling different, less competent, or not belonging, which had they done so, may have negated their SoNB or have obviated the impact on their self-concept, in both cases ultimately avoiding the experience of not belonging in the workplace.

Not adding value

For some individuals believing that they were not adding value or making a contribution in the workplace left them with SoNB because they did not consider themselves to be a valuable part of the organisation. Working in a company where they had no influence, where what they did lacked impact and where their work was not valued, left individuals feeling isolated and lacking connection to the organisation:

“But again, it comes back to the key of all of this. I think it’s feeling, it’s feeling valued, but at the same time feeling you’ve got a place in the organisation, whether it’s a purpose or, it’s an acceptance isn’t it I suppose.” (Stuart)

Not adding value was also expressed as a lack of a sense of purpose. For some who did have a sense of purpose, it arose from having a clearly defined role, for others it came from having a role that fulfilled a particular personal value, such as needing to develop others. What was important was that individuals were able to feel like what they were doing was worthwhile and valuable. If they did not, they felt disconnected from the organisation which resulted both in the feeling of not belonging, as well as impacted their self-concept and their personal sense of value and worth:

“So he was just prepared to leave you sitting there, ridding your thumbs on forty grand a year or whatever it was at the time, producing nothing of any value. Which just made you feel pretty useless.” (Clive).

Some individuals discussed lacking the necessary capability, skills, experience or competence for the role in which they found themselves, which led to a perception of not being good enough. What appeared to make an important difference to whether such a perceived lack of capability resulted in SoNB was the individual’s locus of control and their ability to attribute these experiences to the situation, to a lack of role and person fit, rather than internalising and self-blaming, as articulated by Joanne:

“I basically felt that I was failing as a teacher. Um, failing um, just not, not competent. Had the, completely the wrong skill set.”

Difference

Feeling different, whether due to age, background, or individual characteristics, created the perception for some, that they were ‘outside’ the group, and as such, they felt that they didn’t belong, as captured by Neil:

“So maybe that’s it. Maybe it’s being pushed out of the broader picture is the time when I sort of, have this complete sort of… almost desolate sense of not belonging to something. That I’m being pushed out in my difference somehow.”

Some differences, as well as strengthening the ‘otherness’ of the group, also served to undermine a sense of value and credibility which fuelled the negative self-concept. Different social or academic backgrounds for example, were related to concerns about competence and credibility, themes which emerged as part of self-concept. Key is that a factual difference appears to impact SoNB or fuel a negative self-concept because of the perception of what being different says about the individual—they are not credible, not good enough, do not fit in:

“…ten of the others had been to Oxford or Cambridge, and a couple had been to Oxford and Cambridge, and there was only one other person and me that hadn’t been to Oxbridge. And I suddenly realised that I was out of my depth. Or I certainly felt that I was out of my depth.” (Jason)

Organisational culture

The final sub-category that emerged as an attribute to SoNB was organisational culture—pervasive, stable elements of the organisation that often inhibited the ability to speak up and be themselves, or with which participants struggled to find a fit:

“I think to a large extent it was the organisation the context, the culture… If you’re not happy with the role you’re doing, there’s potential of changing it...
or, modifying it. But it’s issues with culture which I think have been the dominant ones.” (Neil).

These cultures were often psychologically unsafe, ruthless, misogynistic, or operated on a basis of distrust and politics, and many were maintained by strong hierarchy or uncompassionate leadership. Delia describes the pervasiveness of these environments and the impact on sense of not belonging:

“Banter was the currency of that company. And it became an excuse for just behaving badly eventually. It started off quite funny and quite enjoyable and, you have to give back as good as you get, otherwise, a) you don’t fit in the gang, b) you don’t get respected, c) you don’t get liked.”

Participants described these environments as lacking in support and left some with a sense of not being valued as an individual, impacting their sense of self-worth and self-respect as they failed to speak up. The often-competitive nature of some of these environments was also intrinsically individualistic and exclusive, leaving individuals feeling left out of the influential group.

“I realised how unsuited I was to the environment. And how my, my internal struggles I suppose you could call it, were affected by the lack of management and the lack of care and lack of support and the lack of empathy. Oh, I could go on. Lack of consideration for you as a human being.” (Lydia)

For some, there also existed a lack of fit with the values of the organisation, creating a dissonance between their personal values and the commercial values of the company. As well as contributing to SoNB there is likely an impact on one’s sense of value, purpose and therefore sense of self, as described by Clive:

“Isolated, and in a state of despair really because … I took a deliberate decision to go into public housing… I could see the purpose of it and why it was needed … I chose that line of work because, and if you like, I had some belief in its purpose.”

The core concern of SoNB within the workplace emerged as an individual’s self-concept – the self-knowledge and perceptions they hold about themselves. The construct of self-concept is related to all other constructs and categories within the model. It impacts and is impacted by having SoNB (I don’t feel I add value, that I matter, I am different, therefore there must be something wrong with me); by how individuals feel about that experience (I feel depressed and anxious, I must be weak and irrational); by how they attempt to resolve the experience (I tried to fit in therefore I am inauthentic); and by factors that moderate the experience (I must do well at work, but I feel I don’t belong, so I’m a failure). What emerges as critical to these processes and to the experience of feeling like one does not belong, is the subjective meaning that individuals attribute to SoNB, to their feelings, thoughts and actions. It is these attributions, these often-erroneous interpretations and perceptions that are at the heart of the cyclical and perpetuating nature of the experience.

### Table 2: Self-Concept: Sub-categories and themes

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<tr>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-category Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>Lack of confidence</td>
<td>Beliefs regarding own abilities and competence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Feeling like a fraud</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Less competent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>Self-blame</td>
<td>Judgmental evaluation of self-knowledge, and beliefs about oneself and others’ perceptions of self</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceptions of others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict with self-concept</td>
<td>Inability to be oneself</td>
<td>Perceived incongruence between self-knowledge and who they perceive that they become through dealing with the experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Self-concept paradox</td>
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Core concern of self-concept

Self-efficacy
Self-efficacy represents the individual's salient cognitions and self-perceptions about their abilities and competence. The relationship with not belonging is complexly intertwined, with a lack of self-efficacy at times resulting in the perception of not belonging, and at other times resulting from the experience of not belonging. Self-efficacy emerged as a lack of confidence or conviction in abilities, leaving individuals feeling like they didn’t belong because they essentially weren’t good enough:

“So whereas before I’d been able to do my job absolutely fine, I remember getting to this law firm and then thinking, oh my god I can’t even do my job now... But I questioned, I remember questioning myself a lot about what I was doing, and whether I was good enough.” (Lydia)

Self-efficacy also emerged as a perception of being less competent than others, a conceptualisation which placed the individual on the outside of the group, therefore fuelling SoNB.

Self-esteem
The concept of self-esteem reflects how the individuals feel about who they are, either in terms of their abilities or their personalities. It is this evaluation of their self-concept that is responsible for much of the consequential behaviours and emotional responses to the experience.

The sub-category of self-esteem constituted the constructs of self-blame and perceptions of others. Self-blame emerged as both influencing and being influenced by SoNB. Individuals blamed themselves for their inability to fit in, believing that it was the result of something that they had done:

“I blame myself… you know that’s the other aspect of it for not belonging, it’s because of something I’ve said or something I’ve done, or the way I’ve behaved or something. And you end up having a real downer on yourself.” (Neil).

They also blamed themselves for how they behaved in response to not belonging, condemning themselves for a lack of courage or inauthenticity, or interpreting their emotional response as a weakness, as Neil articulates:

“I was trying to question what’s happening...my initial reaction was that there is something that is wrong with me. And that needs to be corrected. But why is it happening? Everything is OK. Everything is fine. And yet I’m having this feeling. So, there must be something that needs to be fixed.”

This poor self-perception was reflected in a drive to keep how they were feeling hidden, and also illuminated a concern that others would perceive them as vulnerable or weak.

This undermined self-esteem was further galvanised through the perception that they must be the only person going through the experience, and that everyone else was accepted and resilient. This fuelled the interpretation of the experience as being something wrong with them, which both impacted their negative self-concept and their SoNB, because it again put them ‘outside’ of, and different to everyone else.

“I started to worry that it was me … why was I not fitting in?” (Sarah).

These negative self-perceptions often mirrored concerns about the perceptions of others, and the assumption that they were being judged as lacking competence, showing weakness, or were not respected or liked. These assumptions both influenced and were influenced by the experience of not belonging. This occurred through the interpretation on the one hand, that if individuals are perceived negatively they will not be accepted, as shared by Jason:

“So I’d be in meetings...and just sort of feel that these people didn’t actually rate me in any shape or form because I wasn’t one of them, and I didn’t know enough really to buy my place at the table.”

On the other hand, there was the interpretation that they will be perceived negatively because of how they respond to not belonging, for example:

“Because you are trying to fit in with their conversation …and you’re really weak because they really don’t listen or you don’t say anything, or they know more anyway and they are just trying to humour you anyway.” (Elaine).

Conflict with self-concept
Critical to the fundamental and pervasive nature of self-concept as the core concern was a conflict between what individuals believed they knew about themselves and who they became during the experience, or as a result of trying to resolve the experience.

There was for many a sense of inauthenticity, of “having to behave in a way that is so alien to you at work” (Lydia), to hide your true self or find an identity that fits. Intertwined with this was a perception for some of “feeling like a fraud” (Joanne). This perceived inauthenticity undermined a sense of a coherent self, creating a cognitive dissonance between their identity and who they became during the experience. This conflict indicates a potentially self-perpetuating and self-fulfilling process: Having SoNB may result in people not being themselves because they feel that who they are does not fit in, resulting in inauthenticity or conforming behaviours which both compound the negative self-concept as they feel weak for not being resolute or inauthentic for trying to be someone else, as well as leading others to perceive them as inauthentic or disinterested, which may result in disengagement and actual exclusion by others.
For many there was also a clear conflict between the person they considered themselves to be and the person they became during the experience, including: extravert vs. introvert; resilient vs. vulnerable; vulnerable vs. insensitive; and credible vs. incompetent.

“So, another coping mechanism was that I just withdrew. I withdrew, and I’m the opposite of that, I am absolutely the opposite of that, but I became somebody else I absolutely wasn’t in order to cope.” (Delia).

These paradoxes presented a powerful cognitive dissonance, an internal battle, undermining and leaving individuals questioning their self-concept, their sense of who they believed themselves to be.

Resolution

Resolution refers to the strategies participants employed to deal with or extricate themselves from SoNB. These strategies were both cognitive and behavioural, and whilst sometimes fruitful, helping individuals to move on from the experience and re-establish a positive self-concept, more frequently their attempts at resolution served to perpetuate either their negative self-concept, their perceived acceptance and belonging, or undermine their psychological well-being through a developing internal struggle – a conflict between who participants knew themselves to be, and who they became during the experience.

Table 3: Resolution: Sub-categories and themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-category Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeking value</td>
<td>Active engagement</td>
<td>A constructive resolution strategy, taking control of the experience through adding value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Establishing a purpose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying to fit in</td>
<td>Finding an identity</td>
<td>Conscious attempts to fit in through presentation of a perceived acceptable identity or acceptable behaviours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Seeking acceptance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-protection</td>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Cognitions and behaviours designed to protect from the experience of SoNB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detachment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconciling the experience</td>
<td>Reflection Acceptance</td>
<td>An active process of sense-making designed to help them to understand and move on from the experience of SoNB</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Resolution

**Seeking value**

The strategy of seeking value was likely to result in a more positive self-concept. It involved an attempt to push back against their SoNB – a determination to add value, make a contribution and take some control, as articulated by Joanne:

> “The issue has been more about how do I resolve this, how do I find the next thing that either will make this work for me, or find an alternative that fits me better, rather than me feeling that I’m just not competent?”

Many chose to actively engage in the workplace, throwing themselves into work, finding solutions to their experience, preparing themselves for situations that they knew triggered SoNB, or focusing on strengths, drawing on positive feedback, successes, and rebuilding self-belief:

> “Trying not to focus so much on the down and feeling like I am confident in myself, I can do this. If you like me you do, or if you don’t. But I am not going to force anything anymore, I’m not going to make these – and I’m just going to be very good at what I do.”

(Elaine).

Others sought to establish a sense of purpose, finding ways to contribute, crafting roles or identifying projects through which they could have a tangible impact.

Through seeking value or proactively establishing relationships individuals were better able to lift themselves out of the experience, thereby demonstrating to themselves that they did in fact, belong, enhancing their self-esteem, as articulated by Joanne:

> “I became who I think, I thought people wanted or need, you know, to fit in.”

(Sarah).

Resolving

Many of these strategies and behaviours impacted the self-concept, at times resulting in a cognitive dissonance and conflict with their sense of self, as articulated by Delta:

> “So I figured one way of gaining acceptance, gaining some visibility – because I was losing visibility, I was just shrinking away – was to meet them with that sort of bantery type of thing. But I don’t do it very well, and it sort of fell flat on its face. And, because I’d tried to do it and it’s not part of me, that’s what felt inauthentic.”

At other times, these behaviours impacted self-esteem, as individuals felt weak or lacking in courage through conforming or acquiescing:

> “So, I just put my head down, got on with my job, didn’t really you know, do anything else. And actually, the result of that for the company was that they missed out on a whole load of things that I’m really good at, that I just didn’t have the confidence to um, to show.”

(Delta).

**Trying to fit in**

Trying to fit in was a less constructive strategy and often resulted in perpetuating and further compounding the experience. Participants would seek out an identity, a role to play that would fit with the group or present them as the person that they thought was expected:

> “I become who I think, I thought people wanted or need, you know, to fit in.”

Others sought acceptance through behaving in what they thought were acceptable ways, such as conforming or acquiescing; whilst others made strategic attempts to become accepted by managing how they presented themselves or seeking common ground:

> “You’re kind of managing your exterior presentation of yourself, but it’s not the entire, it’s perhaps not as much as you’d want to give or want to say.”

(Joanne).

Resolution

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(Delta).

**Resolution**

> “probably made me reign back a lot on what I was saying so it didn’t upset or offend people, or make myself too unlikeable to them.”

(Jason).

This resolution strategy therefore often resulted in further compounding the experience through further undermining self-concept.

**Self-protection**

Self-protection involved cognitions and behaviours that individuals engaged in in order to protect themselves from SoNB, strategies which were often maladaptive, further compounding the individual’s negative self-concept. A prominent strategy involved avoidance – of people, situations, or responsibility that might exacerbate or maintain the experience. Participants withdrew, became introverted, or left the organisation:

> “Yeah I think you almost revert to an introvert state don’t you…Yeah, I think it’s a mixture of speech but I think it’s also body presence and everything else.”

(Smart).

Others avoided responsibilities, promotions, or projects that might take them out of their comfort zone, therefore failing to fulfil their potential:

> “So, I just put my head down, got on with my job, didn’t really you know, do anything else. And actually, the result of that for the company was that they missed out on a whole load of things that I’m really good at, that I just didn’t have the confidence to um, to show.”

(Delta).

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(Delta).

Here, the core concern of these individuals again perpetuates the experience, as the negative impact that SoNB has on one’s self-belief results in a lack of ambition, assertiveness and engagement in the organisation, confirming for some what they already believe about themselves – they don’t add value.

An alternative form of self-protection was detachment – from emotional responses or concern about others’ opinions, distancing oneself from others, or disengaging from the organisation through withdrawal of effort or disinterest in work or colleagues, or destructive behaviours such as being disruptive in the workplace or drinking excessively at home:

> “I’d better learn to zip it up and don’t say a word and sit with my coffee, which is what I’ve decided to do. Because they can’t read anything into that, apart from the fact that she just doesn’t want to talk to anyone, or she is unfriendly. But not to try, because once you try, I think you put yourself on a weak foot.”

(Elaine).

Such behaviours again often served to perpetuate the experience, through detachment and therefore exclusion from the group, and through the diminished value individuals added to the organisation which compounded their SoNB and further undermined their sense of self-worth, as articulated by Jason:

> “I could limit the scope of my ambitions, or limit the scope of what I felt I should be doing… and that kind of just fed into a sort of growing negative feeling about my abilities anyway.”

(Stuart).
**Resolution**

Reconciling the experience

Reconciling the experience involved a proactive, conscious effort to understand and process SoNB – a rational, distanced, objectification of what they went through. Individuals reflected on their experience, talked to friends, exploring what had happened and why they felt how they did, in attempt to make sense of it. Frequently this reflection involved a close examination of the potential causes of their SoNB and consideration of the role they played, the organisation played, or the circumstances played:

> “To play back a scenario when it happens to, to really very slowly be able to pinpoint what it is that leads to it, and how, how you get through it. And that’s actually really hard to do.” (Neil).

Often as a result of this process of reflection an acceptance of the experience developed, with individuals either able to attribute the cause to the situation externally rather than to themselves; accepting that it is okay not to feel part of every group; or recognising the importance of taking control of their responses to feeling like an outsider, as described by Elaine:

> “I think it is nearly a self-education. I honestly do. I think you can feel like an outsider and you can, for all intents and purposes, be it. But you don’t have to react, because at the end of the day, the outside circumstances are what they are, it is how you react to it is what you can control.”

These strategies therefore helped some individuals to lift themselves out of the experience – to break the self-perpetuating nature of the cycle through the meaning they attributed to SoNB and what it meant for their sense of self, helping individuals to develop a more positive self-concept.

**Emotional Experience**

Individual’s described a variety of emotions that they felt during the experience, all of which can be considered powerful and negative and illustrate the strength of the experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-category Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotions expressed</strong></td>
<td>Depressive</td>
<td>Emotions felt in response to experience of SoNB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anxious</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Angry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intensity of experience</strong></td>
<td>Frequency</td>
<td>The duration, occurrence, and intensity of the experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Over time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Depth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inner turmoil of emotion</strong></td>
<td>Irrational</td>
<td>An internal struggle with the powerful and uncontrollable nature of SoNB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Distorted perceptions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling emotional</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Out of control</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being lost</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Emotions expressed
Many individuals articulated feeling depressed, or feelings that are closely associated with depression such as being exhausted, desolate, or desperate:

“I was feeling quite desperate about the impact that that was having, but not feeling that I had a way out of it or the strength to escape from it.” (Clive).

Others felt anxious, scared or vulnerable about the experience they were having, the vulnerable state they were in, or the situation they’d found themselves in. For some the experience left them feeling angry and resentful towards the organisation that they felt had not supported them.

Intensity of experience
The intensity of feeling illustrates both the depth and power of the experience, as well as its often enduring and pervasive nature. For all individuals the emotional and psychological impact was not fleeting or insignificant, but deep, powerful and encompassing, as evidenced by the articulations of depression, desolation, and despair, and expressed by Lydia:

“I remember being off sick a lot … I remember being ill I think probably psychologically, you know my immune system was pretty awful. I remember drinking a lot in the evenings. I remember waking up in the mornings and being on the tube and wanting to cry because I didn’t want to go to work. So, I guess it was almost, I was probably on the verge of a break down.”

However, there was variation in frequency of occurrence. Whilst for some participants the experience was encountered on one or two occasions, for others it was more ubiquitous, occurring repeatedly throughout their lives, including, for one participant, outside of work. For some, the experience lessened over time, often through the development of self-awareness and more appropriate attributions for the experience. But for others, SoNB was enduring or life-long, as in the case of Neil:

“Oh, I think probably every month I swing backwards and forwards with it… I think I remember it happening all of my career.”

Inner turmoil of emotion
The emotions associated with the experience were not critical to the psychological impact – these were simply the expression of how the experience felt. What appears to be fundamental to the depth and significance of the experience was an internal struggle – a battle with the strength and irrationality of the experience and with the conflict this presented with their sense of self, as articulated by Lydia:

“Whereas actually it just felt messy. Messy and depressing and what the hell is going on? I don’t like this, and I don’t understand it. And, why does no one else feel like this, why is it just me?”

There was also an awareness of the often-distorted nature of their thoughts and concerns about what others may be thinking, and an acknowledgement of an emotional struggle and of being lost and out of control, both of the situation and how they were feeling:

“So it had all become … you know, I’m getting close to the plughole. I was really getting sucked into, ah, this negative position.” (Clive).

This inner turmoil compounded a SoNB, undermining the negative self-concept, fuelling a sense of weakness, and a perception that there was something somehow wrong with them, and different about them, because they were having or could not deal with this experience:

“I suppose I almost felt like there was something wrong. And when I say something wrong, I mean, that there was something wrong with me. Why was I struggling with this so much? Why was I feeling so miserable and down? And, why was everyone, why me, why, what’s wrong with me?” (Lydia).
These themes, whilst not actually initiating the experience, moderated the experience for some, and help explain why the SoNB at work undermined the self-concept, as well as elucidate some of the theoretical relationships proposed.

### Table 5: Moderators: Sub-categories and themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-category Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centrality of work to identity and value</td>
<td>Drive to achieve</td>
<td>Sense of identity, value, worth and fulfilment gained from work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life outside work</td>
<td>Lack of support</td>
<td>Factors external to the work environment which exacerbate or attenuate SoNB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual characteristics</td>
<td>Enduring low self-esteem</td>
<td>Enduring personal characteristics which exacerbate or attenuate SoNB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need for external validation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need to be included</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>From childhood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Moderators**

**Centrality of work to identity and value**

For many individuals work was critical to who they were, to how they defined themselves, and provided an opportunity for fulfilment, competence and value. Feeling like they did not belong at work therefore, threatened their sense of purpose and their sense of self, as articulated by Clive:

> “I really did go through a period where I think the values that I thought were driving me, and the purpose of being engaged at work, it was all sort of – it all became sort of dissolved to a point where I seemed to have no purpose.”

This drive to achieve appears closely associated with the attribute of not adding value, and it is thus likely that for those with a strong drive to achieve, not adding value within an organisation will result in a more negative impact on self-concept than for those who are less driven in this respect.

**Life outside work**

For some, life outside work moderated the experience. A lack of support, a lack of understanding from friends or family, or difficulties experienced in personal life increased the negative impact of the experience for some as described by Lydia:

> “I’m the sort of person who will need emotional support. But when you’re not getting that from anywhere and not only that, you’re having to behave in a way that is so alien to you at work, it’s going to affect you more probably psychologically.”

Conversely, having the personal support of family and friends helped others to better cope with the experience.

> “The organisation itself was in a very unhealthy position, I couldn’t achieve the things that I had been brought in to achieve.” (Joanne).
Individual characteristics

Enduring individual characteristics also emerged as either moderating the relationship between attributes and SoNB or between SoNB and self-concept. For example, an enduring sense of low self-esteem could moderate the impact of SoNB on self-concept by reaffirming a negative sense of self:

“It kind of well, it all helps I think to support my, the sort of low self-image I can have of myself.” (Jason).

Similarly, a need for external validation or to be included, could moderate the impact of not belonging on self-concept because of the assumed lack of acceptance that is associated with the experience:

“I have a high need to be included, so to know that I had to be like that to be included in that team made me feel very uncomfortable.” (Delia).

Finally, for some their SoNB was more salient due to a SoNB during childhood.

Discussion

A model of sense of not belonging in the workplace

Organisational and individual moderators

Figure 1: A model of SoNB in the workplace
The research reveals SoNB in the workplace as multi-dimensional, arising through one or a combination of factors which involve an absence of close, quality relationships, an absence of shared characteristics, and a sense of not adding value – factors which, by their nature, leave the individual feeling outside the group. Augmenting the findings with previous research however, organisational culture is more likely a moderator of rather than characteristic of SoNB. As such, cultures which are hierarchical and political, or are absent of psychological safety, might provide the context in which SoNB can manifest.

Critically, the psychological and detrimental impact of SoNB appears to arise through it undermining a sense of self, in terms of self-efficacy and self-esteem, as well as undermining a consistent and coherent self-concept. Self-concept is central to the process because it is impacted both by having a SoNB as well as by how individuals feel about and attempt to deal with not belonging. The cause of SoNB is internally attributed, and as such, the assumption is drawn that there must be something ‘wrong’ with them either in terms of competence or personality, which impacts self-perception and lead to the belief that the “in-group” (of which they are not a part) are perceiving them negatively. This often results in individuals feeling like they are unable to be themselves, because they believe that who they are doesn’t fit, and so feel the need to mask their identities or change how they present themselves. The emotional impact of the experience further compounds the negative self-concept because of what having the experience and their emotional response to the experience says about who they are – they must be weak, and lack resilience.

In attempting to resolve the experience, individuals may engage in a variety of strategies, some of which serve to resolve the experience, whilst others serve to further undermine the self-concept, particularly if individuals feel ashamed of the way they have behaved when attempting to conform, limit their potential, or become disruptive. Resolution strategies may also lead to a conflict with self-concept, undermining a sense of a consistent and integrated self. Attempts to fit in may result in a sense of insincerity and an inability to be oneself, and behaviours that are inconsistent with the self-concept, such as withdrawing or becoming destructive, may create a paradox between who they know themselves to be and how they behave.

The choice of strategy may be informed by an individual’s sense of control, and the perspective that they are able to influence the capacity to belong. The opportunity to develop relationships, add value or identify commonalities will likely trigger constructive and adaptive strategies, whereas a lack of a sense of control may trigger more maladaptive strategies, as individuals attempt to protect themselves from further exclusion, or try to satisfy their need for control through controlling what they can – being disruptive, disengaged, or leaving. Factors specific to the individual or their context may also enhance their sensitivity to SoNB or enhance the impact of SoNB on their self-concept.

From the perspective of the individual, the impact on psychological well-being of a SoNB is clear; both on self-esteem, on a coherent, integrated and authentic sense of self, and through stimulating an inner turmoil of emotion. However, SoNB also impacts performance, the value individuals add to organisations, and the decisions they make about their careers. As such, the benefit of helping individuals to avoid the experience or to constructively and adaptively resolve it is apparent, both for the sake of the individual and for the sake of the organisation. The integral question that arises therefore, is what might be done, by individuals or organisations to help to mitigate or alleviate the experience?

Implications for practice

From the perspective of the individual, the impact on psychological well-being of a SoNB is clear; both on self-esteem, on a coherent, integrated and authentic sense of self, and through stimulating an inner turmoil of emotion. However, SoNB also impacts performance, the value individuals add to organisations, and the decisions they make about their careers. As such, the benefit of helping individuals to avoid the experience or to constructively and adaptively resolve it is apparent, both for the sake of the individual and for the sake of the organisation. The integral question that arises therefore, is what might be done, by individuals or organisations to help to mitigate or alleviate the experience?

Fostering a sense of belonging in the workplace

Support the development of relationships. Given the integrity of quality relationships to SoNB, establishing practices and processes within the workplace that encourage the development of these relationships, such as recruiting for and developing interpersonal skills, and supporting the establishment of a positive social network through ‘off-task’ activities, may help to ensure that employees have access to supportive, empathetic and genuine relationships. These relationships can serve to provide a safe space for voicing concerns, help the individual to feel understood and appreciated for their contribution and for who they are.

Given the integrity of quality relationships to SoNB, establishing practices and processes within the workplace that encourage the development of these relationships, such as recruiting for and developing interpersonal skills, and supporting the establishment of a positive social network through ‘off-task’ activities, may help to ensure that employees have access to supportive, empathetic and genuine relationships. These relationships can serve to provide a safe space for voicing concerns, help the individual to feel understood and appreciated for their contribution and for who they are.
Make employees feel valued. Organisations can also support a sense of value by providing clarity on the expectations, requirements, and boundaries of roles, along with training in necessary skills, allowing employees to perform effectively and make a valuable contribution. Less structured hierarchies and more autonomous job designs might also signal to employees that they are perceived as a trusted, competent, and valued employee. Furthermore, as a need for control may be implicated in the maladaptive resolution strategies, enhancing a sense of control by offering autonomy through which employees are able to enhance their sense of belonging might encourage more constructive approaches to resolving SoNB.

Foster a culture of psychological safety. Organisations can also help to mitigate against SoNB through developing a culture that fosters psychological safety, allowing individuals to contribute, feel included and valuable, and feel comfortable to express their concerns and vulnerabilities, as well as their diversity. One means of fostering psychological safety is through the establishment of high-quality relationships, in which goals and knowledge are shared, and there exists mutual respect for the expertise, skills, and abilities of others. Leadership style is also significant in enhancing psychological safety, particularly the extent to which leaders are inclusive. Ensuring that managers are conveying a genuine message of inclusivity to their employees by inviting and acting upon ideas and contributions, might both enhance a sense of adding value as well as mitigate the personal risks associated with speaking up about SoNB encouraging disclosure, which may in turn lead to an appreciation that the individual is not alone in their experience. Inclusive leadership behaviours may also help those who feel ‘different’ at work overcome barriers to relationship development and acceptance. Adopting a mindset and culture of openness and curiosity to different experiences and demographics, as well as emphasising commonalities, such as work goals, may help to demonstrate the value of difference and diversity.

Awareness. Developing an understanding in managers of the impact of a lack of quality relationships, of a sense of not adding value, or feeling different might also help leaders to identify those at risk of SoNB. For example, employees who have not established quality relationships, who are in a minority demographic, or have experienced a failure in the workplace, may all be at risk of SoNB. Being open to the potential presence of these factors and their impact on SoNB may alert leaders to a need to support their employees in re-establishing a sense of belonging. Similarly, being aware of the behavioural ways in which SoNB may manifest, such as withdrawal or conformity behaviours, may also help managers to identify SoNB in their employees and provide the impetus for them to try to understand how they may support them in mitigating the experience.

Implications for practice

Developing a personal sense of belonging

There is much therefore, that organisations and leaders can do to help ensure that the attributes of SoNB are absent in their organisations. However, the core concern of SoNB is the self-concept; the meaning that individuals attribute to SoNB. It is as such vital that individuals attribute to SoNB. It is as such vital that individuals who are going through it understand that they are not unique in their experience, they are not ‘deficient’, and they are not weak. This may help them to appropriately assign responsibility for SoNB to the situation, and to maintain a more positive sense of self throughout the experience, helping them identify constructive ways to resolve it and avoid the spiral of the undermined self-concept. It is also important that, perhaps with the support of workplace counselling and coaching practices, employees understand and identify the attributes and underlying belief that influence how they interpret events, which then influences how they respond to that event. Challenging these thought processes and helping employees to make more accurate attributions, such as attributing the cause of the experience to the situation, might help individuals to avoid the impact of SoNB on self-concept.
Dr Lee Waller
PhD, MSc, BSc

Lee Waller is LeadershipFaculty at Hult Ashridge Executive Education. She supports individuals in becoming the best of themselves at work by developing an awareness of their strengths and their individual leadership style, and through teaching a range of leadership skills including influencing, coaching, personal impact and resilience. She also works with leaders to equip them with the skills and strategies to develop a team and organisational climate that will maximize team performance through fostering a culture of learning and psychological safety, supporting the development of a sense of belonging, and developing inclusive leadership behaviours.

Prior to her faculty role Lee was Director of Research at Hult International Business School, responsible for global delivery of the School’s research strategy. Her research areas include the processes involved in adult learning, belonging and identity in the workplace, organisational culture change, and approaches to developing skills and attitudes around diversity and inclusion.

Lee has an Honours degree in Psychology from the University of Westminster, a Masters degree in Occupational Psychology from Birkbeck College, University of London, and a Doctorate in Psychology from the University of Reading. She is also a graduate member of the British Psychological Society, and is qualified in Level A and Level B.

References


