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A Social Ecological Approach to Belonging in LGBTQ+ People

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J.M. was responsible for the conception and design of the article, writing and editing, and supervision of student authors. J.S., E.T., and M.K. reviewed the literature and contributed writing of sections. J.C. provided content expertise, writing, and editing. All authors reviewed the manuscript before submission.

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Abstract

People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer and other people who are sexual and gender minorities (denoted by the umbrella term LGBTQ+) experience more physical and mental health problems than cisgender or heterosexual people, in part due to excess stress of experiencing stigma. Although it is important to document negative events in LGBTQ+ people's lives, it is also necessary to identify conditions that provide LGBTQ+ people with the opportunity to thrive. One key psychological factor that can promote prosperity and lessen LGBTQ+ people's disparate health problems is a sense of belonging. In this Review, we summarize factors identified in the psychological science, public health, and public policy literatures that influence LGBTQ+ people's belonging. We use a social ecological model to describe factors that enhance and detract from belonging at the individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels. Our multi-pronged approach encourages the flourishing of LGBTQ+ people as individuals while addressing structural forces that shape their psychosocial well-being. This Review is a resource for researchers, health practitioners, and policymakers who seek to understand diverse factors of belonging based on sexual orientation and gender diversity.

Keywords: belonging, sexual orientation, gender identity, stigma, social identity, health disparities

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Introduction

People who are sexual and gender minorities experience more physical and psychological health problems[1,2] than their cisgender and heterosexual peers, in part due to the excess stress that they experience in response to stigma[3-7]. The acronym LGBTQ+ is an umbrella term used to refer to sexual and gender minority individuals, including individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ), with the plus sign representing other minoritized identities, sexual orientations, and behaviors that are not reflected by the acronym's named identities. By contrast, cisgender is a term that refers to people who identify as their gender assigned at birth. The scientific literature and large-scale research funding efforts have traditionally favored a differences and deficits approach that underscores dysfunction, distress, and pathology within LGBTQ+ populations[8-16]. However, relatively less attention has been given to what enriches life for LGBTQ+ people and the conditions that promote LGBTQ+ people's well-being, which is crucial to fully understand the psychology of sexual orientation and gender diversity[17]. As a consequence of the prevailing minority-as-deficit approach, an essential aspect of life that might both reduce health disparities and promote thriving among LGBTQ+ people has been overlooked: a sense of belonging.

Belonging refers to the psychological state of establishing a sense of positive connections to others[18-20] and corresponds with a positive sense of self and identity[15,17] (Box 1). People acquire a strong sense of belonging through social acceptance and integration[21]. However, belonging can vary from moment to moment and place to place. When people feel greater belonging, they perform better on tasks[20], express more motivation[22], and experience mental health benefits, such as less depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation [23,24]. Given the dire costs of not belonging (including loneliness and isolation), fulfilling the need to belong has been considered on par with meeting other essential needs[18], such as food and shelter. Indeed, when people doubt the quality of their social relationships—situations that can trigger 'belonging

uncertainty'[22]—they psychologically and physiologically respond negatively[25,26]. For example, feeling disconnected from others is associated with more suicide attempts[27], impaired cognitive functioning[28], and greater mortality risk[29], leading experts to assert that belonging is a public health priority[30,31]. Belonging is measured through constructs including social belonging, belonging uncertainty, and general social connection and belongingness (Table 1). Furthermore, it can be measured in different contexts, such as families, communities, and schools.

Like other stigmatized groups, LGBTQ+ people routinely encounter challenges to their belonging in institutions and organizations[32], through laws and policies[33], within communities[34], and among families[35] and peers[36]. On average, LGBTQ+ individuals experience greater loneliness and isolation than their cisgender and/or heterosexual counterparts[37,38], and initial evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated such disparities by isolating LGBTQ+ people from networks that affirm their belonging[39]. Chronic threats to LGBTQ+ people's belonging can activate rejection sensitivity[40], perceptions of low social safety[41], and heighten minority stress and mental health disparities[42], all of which serve an explanatory role in social and health disparities (Box 2). By contrast, having a robust social network and feeling connected to one's community contribute to positive health outcomes among LGBTQ+ people across the lifespan, even in the face of adversity[43-46]. Put simply, for people to thrive, they need one another. Researchers have therefore called for greater empirical attention to belonging and other positive psychological states as pathways toward strengthening the psychological and physical health of LGBTQ+ people[12,15,46,47].

Conceptualizing belonging necessitates an understanding of how individuals relate to other people and their broader social contexts. A social ecological perspective helps conceptualize the determinants of belonging. Social ecological models are widely used and versatile frameworks to understand factors that influence health and well-being and inform health promotion programming[48-54]. These models detail risk and protective health-relevant

factors at four levels—the individual, interpersonal, community, and society (Figure 1). The levels are multi-faceted and interconnected, such that multiple influential factors exist at each level and the levels inform one another in an ongoing, reciprocal process [53]. For example, the psychological characteristics of people (individual level) can be influenced by broader social systems in which they live[49,52], and people can influence broader social systems[54].

Researchers, community leaders, and health professionals draw upon social ecological models to guide interventions at each level and to address a variety of health issues, such as community health[48,50,52], violence prevention[51], bullying and victimization[55], and chronic illness management[56]. The multi-level, interactional approach is useful for examining LGBTQ+ people's well-being because it organizes and accounts for factors within each level and across levels that might strengthen or weaken belonging. Further, interventions on the primary outcome (belonging) have the best chance to succeed when multiple levels are targeted[53,54] and this multi-level approach increases the likelihood of goal alignment such that interventions reinforce one another toward a shared interest[57,58]. The possible effects of interventions across multiple levels operate bidirectionally[54,58,59]: efforts made within broader systems influence more proximal systems (top-down effects), and interventions within smaller units influence social structures beyond the individual (bottom-up effects). Consequently, a cross-level approach to increase belonging simultaneously promotes the flourishing of LGBTQ+ people as individuals while critically addressing macro-level, structural forces that contribute to people's psychosocial well-being.

In this Review, we synthesize factors that contribute to LGBTQ+ people's belonging. We put forward a social ecological model of belonging to analyze how individual differences and contextual factors—from the individual to the broader society—shape belonging. First, we review factors influencing belonging at the individual level, focusing on psychological differences and sociodemographic characteristics. We then examine the interpersonal level and how relationships within families and with peers and friends might influence belonging. Finally, we

examine the broader levels, community and society, to discuss the influences of neighborhood, work, and school connections on belonging, as well as the influences of laws, norms, and policies. We aim to spark new ideas for elevating belonging among LGBTQ+ people and researchers and outline future directions for researchers to consider in measurement and theory development. Previous articles cover critical factors of LGBTQ+ people's psychological health, such as rejection sensitivity[40], social safety[41], and experiences of stigma[5,7], and previous reviews focus on the mental health of specific LGBTQ+ groups[6,60,61]. Our Review is unique in integrating the social psychology of belonging so firmly with LGBTQ+ people's psychosocial well-being. Alternative versions and approaches to social ecological frameworks exist[62,63]. We appreciate a social ecological model's flexibility and generality as it can accommodate various outcomes, life stages, and both positive and negative psychological experiences.

We acknowledge within-group differences among LGBTQ+ people, recognizing the multiple identities and systems of advantage and disadvantage that texturize people's experiences of their sexual orientation and gender identity. Referring to LGBTQ+ people as a single-category monolith is a flawed yet frequent feature of the psychology literature[64,65]—one that our Review necessarily reflects. When the information is available and relevant, we specify LGBTQ+ subgroups and use the sampling language of the original studies. The reviewed literature mostly provides a U.S. and Western perspective because that is where most of the research to date has been conducted, and we point out opportunities for expanding this research across the globe.

Individual Level

We begin with the most proximal level of the social ecological model: the individual. This section explores the diversity of LGBTQ+ people's psychological individual differences and sociodemographic characteristics associated with belonging (Table 2).

Psychological Factors

Belonging varies among LGBTQ+ individuals through experiences and expectations of stigma. Prolonged exposure to stigma increases anticipation of stigma[41] and long-term anticipatory stigma can lead to chronic threat-vigilance in which LGBTQ+ individuals alter their behaviors to protect themselves against potential threats[41], which can disrupt their sense of belonging[66]. When anticipating more stigma, individuals also expect rejection from others and exhibit higher levels of rejection sensitivity or readily perceiving rejection[40] even inaccurately[67]. In turn, LGBTQ+ individuals with higher rejection sensitivity actively try to avoid rejection and perceive potential rejection as intentional, which might act as a self-fulfilling prophecy leading to actual rejection and ultimately impacting social belonging[40,67]. Taken together, individuals who experience high anticipatory stigma, chronic threat-vigilance, and rejection sensitivity might feel less social belonging because they expect (and are sensitive to) suggestions that they do not belong.

Although the anticipated rejection experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals might hinder belonging in the general sense, stigma and discrimination can also enhance belonging to LGBTQ+ communities[68]. Shared adversity increases group cohesion because people often turn to other ingroup members seeking connections and people with whom they can confide[69,70] and turn to the group's collective resources such as social support or advocacy to cope with adverse experiences[16,71,72]. LGBTQ+ individuals can compensate for lost feelings of belonging from the outgroup of cisgender and/or heterosexual people by strengthening their belonging to LGBTQ+ communities, and this restored sense of belonging can be protective against rejection from society at large[73,74]. LGBTQ+ individuals who believe that their sexual orientation is not a choice but rather beyond their control might feel more connection to LGBTQ+ communities because that is a prevailing ideology in LGBTQ+ communities[75] and might reinforce the creation of a minoritized ingroup. Indeed, lesbian and gay people endorse essentialism (the belief that one's sexual orientation is given or natural) more than bisexual people do, which in turn is positively

related to lesbian and gay people's greater belongingness and identification with LGBTQ+ communities[76].

To some extent, belonging depends on individuals' disclosure of their LGBTQ+ identity to others (whether they are 'out', Box 3). Many LGBTQ+ people weigh the benefits of disclosure and authenticity against the risk of losing belonging if they are out to unsupportive individuals[70]. Some LGBTQ+ people decide to conceal their LGBTQ+ identities to preserve their sense of belonging and avoid discrimination. Whereas some people might temporarily alter their behavior or conceal their identity in threatening situations[77], others might pursue long-term behavior modifications by concealing their identity in some or all aspects of their life (for example, remaining closeted at work to avoid being fired). However, individuals who conceal their identity might not feel that they belong as their authentic selves[78] and carry an increased risk of internalizing negative views that others have about their identities[79] (internalized stigma), which is associated with worse psychological health and decreased belonging (for example, to LGBTQ+ communities and groups of friends [73,80]). The effort and stress of managing disclosure and concealment might create a barrier to intimacy, further perpetuating belonging concerns[73,79,80].

Strategies to increase belonging among LGBTQ+ people include helping to manage the disclosure process and leveraging tools of social psychology to help people affirm their self-integrity and reframe belonging concerns. Although we recognize that not all LGBTQ+ individuals value disclosure to the same extent (for example, LGBTQ+ people of color often feel tension with white LGBTQ+ communities' emphasis on being out[81]), providing safe spaces for disclosure might help increase belonging. Disclosure-related strategies include helping people to create positive first disclosure experiences, delaying disclosure to maximize safety, and gauging the safety of a situation to determine disclosure risks or engage in selective disclosure[82]. Social psychological interventions can increase belonging by encouraging people to affirm their core values[83] and by framing feelings of belonging uncertainty as transitory[20]. For

example, the globally widespread *It Gets Better* media campaign featured LGBTQ+ individuals sharing their stories of adversity alongside messaging that adversity experiences diminished or became more manageable over time as people form meaningful social connections[84]. Brief belonging interventions could offer a low-cost and relatively easily implemented strategy to help people consider a similar message that belonging can improve over time[20].

Long-term LGBTQ+-affirming mental healthcare can also increase belonging by offering strategies and resources that facilitate social connections, but barriers still exist to these interventions. For LGBTQ+ individuals to access affirming mental healthcare, there must be practitioners with cultural competency for the variety of identities and experiences of the LGBTQ+ population, including intersecting marginalized identities such as LGBTQ+ people of color. Moreover, it is crucial that healthcare practitioners can provide these services without the threat of legal action when providing gender-affirming care[85,86].

Sociodemographic Factors

Despite some shared experiences among LGBTQ+ people, belonging varies by sociodemographic factors, including gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, race and/or ethnicity, and age.

Transgender individuals report higher rates of discrimination than their cisgender LGBQ+ peers, which hinders their belonging in general and within specific contexts[61,87]. Furthermore, although LGBQ+ individuals might find solace in LGBTQ+ communities, transgender individuals sometimes face further exclusion within those communities[64,88,89]. Transgender individuals who do not ’pass’ as cisgender and instead are visibly transgender or gender non-conforming can feel particularly excluded from society[90]. Both cisgender and transgender LGBTQ+ people note that non-conformity in gender expression substantially contributes to their experiences of stigma[91,92]. Although being gender non-conforming can compromise belonging because it puts people at risk for heightened stigma, completely hiding one’s gender identity (going ‘stealth’) is not possible or desirable to everyone[93].

Bisexual people also deal with potential ostracization from LGBTQ+ and heterosexual communities[94], threatening their belonging. Compared to lesbian and gay people, bisexual individuals disclose their sexual identity less frequently[47] and feel less connected to LGBTQ+ communities[95-97]. Bisexual people experience different treatment within LGBTQ+ communities depending on whether they are in same-gender or different-gender relationships. For example, a bisexual woman's belonging to the LGBTQ+ community might be questioned when she dates a cisgender man[98,99]. Despite being the numeric majority of LGBTQ+ adults according to polling data[100], bisexual people (especially men) encounter persistent challenges to belonging in different contexts, as they might be perceived as not 'gay enough' for LGBTQ+ communities and not 'straight enough' for heterosexual ones[101]. As a consequence of the double stigma bisexual people experience[94], they might lack the psychological benefits of belonging to LGBTQ+ communities, which helps to explain why they experience disparate health problems compared to their heterosexual, lesbian, and gay counterparts[6].

Individuals who have multiple marginalized identities endure multiple sources of threats to their belonging. LGBTQ+ people of color might experience racism within LGBTQ+ communities and heterosexism or transphobia within their racial communities[102,103]; the resulting chronic feeling of being an outsider might make it difficult to identify the communities to which they belong[68,104-106]. Racial-cultural factors such as religion might compound feelings of shame and betrayal surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity. For some LGBTQ+ people, religious backgrounds that are unaccepting might create discomfort or tension with belonging to families of origin and faith-based communities[102,107]. Further, LGBTQ+ immigrants and refugees might experience additional difficulty feeling that they belong within their new community, immigrant circles, or LGBTQ+ community due to the complex intersection of identity and culture[108].

Most differences in experiences across LGBTQ+ subgroups persist into older age, accompanied by ageism and unique experiences of aging while being LGBTQ+[43,109]. Older

LGBTQ+ individuals might feel excluded from LGBTQ+ communities and feel forced to conceal LGBTQ+ identities from adult children or care facilities to prevent discrimination[43,110]. Other aspects of LGBTQ+ people's personal backgrounds might weaken their sense of belonging, such as having lower socioeconomic status[111] and living in rural areas with less access to LGBTQ+ communities[112,113] or within cultures less accepting of sexual and gender diversity[45,114].

An LGBTQ+ identity can be both a source of belonging and a roadblock to belonging. Lesbian identity, beyond conveying romantic and/or sexual preferences for women, signifies a community and political allegiance—one that centers around women, liberation, and feminist, anti-oppressive ideologies[115,116]. However, tensions within lesbian communities can disrupt belonging[115]. For example, minority beliefs that the lesbian community excludes transgender people can conflict with some of the politics of lesbian women, especially among younger lesbians who desire a diverse and inclusive lesbian community[115,116]. Further, women of color or women who have a feminine gender expression and are therefore not as readily perceived as lesbians might feel out of place in lesbian communities[92,102,104,115,117], yet their sexual orientation might prevent them from finding strong community in non-LGBTQ+ spaces. Lesbians of color might additionally experience both racial and gender barriers to belonging within white male-dominated LGBTQ+ spaces[92,104,117].

Overall, the myriad of individual factors that might impact LGBTQ+ individuals' belonging are as diverse as the people that comprise the community. Social status hierarchies of general society recapitulate within LGBTQ+ communities, presenting a barrier to belonging for people with multiple marginalized identities.

Interpersonal Level

We next address the second level of the social ecological model: the interpersonal or relational level. LGBTQ+ people might encounter interpersonal cues of non-belonging based on the quality of their close relationships, including families of origin, families of choice, and friends

and peers; the quality of these relationships can strengthen or weaken how threats to belonging influence psychosocial well-being (Table 2).

Families of Origin

Families of origin—the parents, siblings, or extended kin with whom one was raised—provide a foundation for belonging and can have an enduring impact on the well-being of LGBTQ+ adults. Unlike people who are raised within families who all share a culturally stigmatized identity (for example, people of color in a majority-white country or people from religious minority groups), LGBTQ+ individuals are typically minorities within their families of origin, most or all of whom do not share their LGBTQ+ identity. This sexual orientation and gender identity dissimilarity might cause the family unit to become a particularly salient source of belonging uncertainty and conflict[35,118,119]. For instance, approximately 85% of gay and lesbian people describe their families' responses to their LGBTQ+ identities as complex and ambivalent, meaning that they encounter both positive and negative reactions from family[120]. Interviews across three generations of participants suggest that coming out to parents might yield better results for younger LGBTQ+ individuals than for older generations, but despite generational change, negative reactions such as invalidation and rejection within families are still common across age groups[119]. Belonging uncertainty and the potential for negative reactions might be exacerbated among families from cultural contexts of high structural stigma and greater collectivism, who might be more likely to view a sexual minority identity as a form of disrespect or betrayal[114,121]. Among LGBTQ+ people, rejection and low support from parents correlates with negative psychological health including loneliness and depression[122,123], houselessness risk[34,124], and suicidal ideation[125]. A lower sense of belonging is likely one mechanism that leads to these outcomes[66,126]. Further, strain within parent-child relationships shapes the trajectory of psychological distress in young adulthood for LGBTQ+ individuals[127] and plays a role in explaining sexual minority women's alcohol abuse later in life[128].

Research focuses more on negative than positive influences of family[129], but specific factors within families also enhance belonging and protect against threats to belonging at different levels. For example, positive family dynamics can be protective[123,130]. Greater family belonging is associated with less emotional distress[131] and more self-acceptance[132] among sexual minority youth. Although disclosing LGBTQ+ identity might place youth at heightened risk of family rejection, some LGBTQ+ individuals who come out to their parents experience less belonging uncertainty than those who continue to conceal their sexual orientation[133,134]. Growing acceptance and reduced prejudice toward sexual diversity[135] among individual family members can be safe havens for LGBTQ+ people to cope with threats encountered in other contexts. Similarly, continuing to elevate examples of positive and loving families of LGBTQ+ children, such as through media or awareness efforts by organizations, might be a point of intervention for normalizing family support for LGBTQ+ individuals[122].

The influence of family dynamics beyond the parent-child bond on belonging is a promising area for future work. For example, Black gay men, bisexual men, and men who have sex with men[106] might turn to extended kin for social support, even when experiencing rejection within the nuclear family. When studying the role of siblings, other reviews[137,138] have noted a strong research focus on sibling comparisons with LGBTQ+ individuals and predictors or sexual orientation etiology or heterosexual siblings' acceptance. However, the interpersonal dynamics between siblings that contribute to belonging have received less attention. Interviews with LGBTQ+ adults characterize how different sibling bonds carry different implications for family belonging[139]. Whereas some LGBTQ+ individuals reported solidarity with siblings, which would reinforce and bolster feelings of belonging, others reported conflictual bonds that exacerbate problems within parents and extended family dynamics and ultimately compromise belonging. Further, some LGBTQ+ people experience tangential bonds with siblings—defined by distant and low impact relationships—that likely do little to benefit belonging. Compared to heterosexual

adults, lesbian, gay and bisexual adults are less close to their siblings, as measured by having less frequent contact and greater geographic distance between them[140].

Families of Choice Including Romantic Partners

Another source of belonging for LGBTQ+ individuals is their families of choice, defined as the loving, caring, and supportive relationships that they build beyond families of origin[141]. These constructed families reject the normative, biological family unit and function as places of refuge, often to compensate for a lack of belonging with families of origin[142]. Indeed, peer social support and friendships buffer the impact of negative dynamics within families of origin[123,142,143]. The history of LGBTQ+ people creating chosen families includes practices such as adopting parental figures within LGBTQ+ family or house cultures, using language like ‘sister’ or ’mother’ to denote close others, or establishing neighborhoods and housing together[144,145]. These relationships provide deeper support than an average friendship but might be overlooked or dismissed in research and clinical practices when inquiring about supportive ‘family,’ given the discrepancy between what is traditionally considered ‘family’ and the more expansive interpretation in chosen families.

Close friends and communities of choice provide a unique sense of belonging across the lifespan in part because they are often the first and most supportive people LGBTQ+ youth disclose to[132,143,145] and they respond to physical and emotional needs of care in older adulthood[146,147]. Families of choice and relationship partners might provide a stronger support for LGBTQ+ people than families of origin across life stages[148,149]. LGBTQ-focused settings, like Cherry Grove[150] (a historically LGBTQ+ beach enclave in the U.S.) or LGBTQ+-centered retirement communities, provide space for LGBTQ+ people to interact with similar others and foster the important relationships that they enjoy with one another.

Some of the relationships that accompany families of choice might not be strictly platonic. As with cisgender and heterosexual people, healthy romantic and sexual relationships provide LGBTQ+ individuals with deep connections and sense of belonging. For example, in

older age, living with a romantic partner is associated with less loneliness[151]—highlighting the importance of eliminating discriminatory policies against living arrangements for same-sex partners in care facilities[152]. For LGBTQ+ people, the mere pursuit of romantic and sexual same-sex partners can affirm their LGBTQ+ identities and facilitate belonging to LGBTQ+ communities[153,154]. Members of minoritized groups tend to seek out interactions with other people who are also members of minoritized groups[155,156], and for LGBTQ+ people one way to satisfy that quest for belonging is to form romantic, sexual, and platonic relationships within LGBTQ+ communities.

Friendships and Peer Relations

Authentic, deep friendships take time to develop but pay dividends in terms of how they promote belonging with peers[157]. Establishing trusting and caring relationships, even with just one or two people, can have a profound impact on people's social belonging[18]. Compared to cisgender and/or heterosexual individuals, LGBTQ+ people uniquely benefit from their close relationships with one another because they face exclusion in broader society, and these friendships can also be support systems for sexual identity development[115]. For example, when lacking family and social systems for care, immigrant Latinx transgender individuals might turn to neighbors and friends as sources of safety and belonging to cope with transphobia and xenophobia[158]. Further, transgender people and people whose gender identity or expression differs from cultural norms and expectations for their sex assigned at birth report that their sense of belonging was more enhanced by their friendships with other LGBTQ+ people than with cisgender and/or heterosexual friends[159]. Beyond in-person dynamics, online connections also foster belonging by providing community and friendship[160]. LGBTQ+ youth, more than their cisgender-heterosexual peers, perceive their online connections as important[161]. Online connections can be particularly useful when in-person connections for LGBTQ+ people are strained, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic[162], or when living in regions with high stigma[163].

By contrast, whether in-person or online, LGBTQ+-based microaggressions[164-166] and negative relationships with peers threaten belonging. Peer victimization of LGBTQ+ youth, including direct or indirect aggressive behavior based on sexual orientation and gender identity, reduces LGBTQ+ students' sense of school belonging and overall health[167-170]. When LGBTQ+ students do not feel that they belong at school or face peer victimization, they might experience greater psychological distress than cisgender and/or heterosexual students [131] or even contemplate suicide or die by suicide[171,172].

Close relationships play a pivotal role in the belonging of LGBTQ+ people and different relationships contribute to different domains of belonging. For example, a person might lack belonging in their family of origin but find belonging in their family of choice. Likewise, an LGBTQ+ young adult who experiences low belonging in school might partially find relief by finding and fitting into social networks online. Regardless of the domain, strong and positive interpersonal relationships provide benefits for LGBTQ+ individuals across the lifespan, and such relationships should be facilitated to reinforce LGBTQ+ people's sense of belonging.

Community level

Next, we identify factors within the community level. In this section, we review the influences of communities, neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces on LGBTQ+ people's belonging. These external contexts shape people's sense of identity and group membership, which ultimately impact their psychological health[173] (Table 2).

Communities and Neighborhoods

LGBTQ+ people often turn to LGBTQ+ communities (their gender identity and/or sexual orientation ingroup) and outgroup allies for social support, noting that a strength of being LGBTQ+ is the feeling of ingroup community belonging that accompanies their gender identity and/or sexual orientation[15,174]. A sense of belonging to a community contributes to more positive health for LGBTQ+ individuals, both physical (for instance, decreased smoking rates, less use of illicit drugs, and less engagement in high-risk sexual activities) and mental (for instance,

reduced distress and increased well-being) compared to cisgender and/or heterosexual people[70,175-178]. The degree to which LGBTQ+ people feel connected to LGBTQ+ communities (community connectedness) is related to their belonging and other psychological outcomes[96,97,174]. For example, rural LGBTQ+ youth experience less loneliness to the extent they feel like they belong to the LGBTQ+ community[179]. Similarly, LGBTQ+ individuals report greater sociopolitical involvement[105,180], and LGBTQ+ adults feel more positive identification with being LGBTQ+, as they experience higher connectedness[15,17,174].

Transgender and nonbinary individuals also experience improved mental and physical health from finding community connection with other transgender individuals[181]. The proliferation of gender, sex, and sexual identities that challenge traditional binaries (for example, the increased recognition of non-binary, gender fluid, and intersex individuals) presents an opportunity for LGBTQ+ individuals to connect with other community members who might not feel included in mainstream society[92,182,183], and social media could assist these connections. Researchers therefore recommend that interventions address knowledge and skills that will help individuals find and solidify connections to LGBTQ+ communities[15].

Rejection from ingroup members impedes belonging and strong community relationships. When people fail to develop a sense of ingroup belonging, they might lack access to collective resources to cope with discrimination, experience intraminority stress (stress stemming from dynamics within one's minority community), and report more psychological distress[68,70,155,184]. Otherwise-marginalized LGBTQ+ people might have particular difficulties in achieving ingroup belonging because they experience stigma within and beyond LGBTQ+ groups. For example, Black gay and bisexual men can experience racial microaggressions in white lesbian, gay and bisexual communities and are expected to adopt the cultural norms and values of white people to fit into the community[103]. LGBTQ+ women of color describe a general feeling of being left out, not having sufficient space as an LGBTQ+ person of color, and experiencing alienation in predominantly white LGBTQ+ spaces[104,115,180]. Such experiences challenge these individuals'

belonging to white LGBTQ+ communities and make it less likely for them to benefit from community belonging.

LGBTQ+ people tend to favor ingroup friendship networks[156,185]. However, not all connections to LGBTQ+ communities have a positive influence on well-being. Ingroup peer group socialization pressures might uniquely contribute to health disparities independently and/or indirectly from minority stress. LGBTQ+ communities are prone to more permissive norms around high-risk health behaviors like alcohol, tobacco, and substance use and sex work[181,186-188], which might create pressure within the ingroup to engage in these behaviors to enhance acceptance and belonging (Box 2).

High-profile community trauma events (for example, hate crimes such as the mass shooting at the gay nightclub Pulse in Orlando, Florida in 2016) might strengthen or weaken different types of belonging for LGBTQ+ people, but psychological research in this area is scarce. On one hand, community-level trauma could strengthen feelings of belonging to the ingroup: focus groups with LGBTQ+ students suggested an increase in ingroup pride and belonging in the wake of the Pulse nightclub tragedy[189]. Likewise, interviews with LGBTQ+ participants uncovered a link between community and activism, such that community trauma motivated greater social justice work and engagement with LGBTQ+ communities among older LGBTQ+ adults[180]. On the other hand, a sense of belonging to society at large could be weakened by traumatic events[190], especially if public outcry, support, and resources are lacking. For example, after the Pulse nightclub shooting, LGBTQ+ people reported concerns about their safety and that of their peers[191].

In addition to identity-related communities, physical communities (including neighborhoods or ‘gayborhoods’— an area where LGBTQ+ people live or frequent) shape belonging. Warm and welcoming LGBTQ+ community climates, such as neighborhoods with inclusive recreational opportunities, are associated with positive belonging-related outcomes[192-195]. Notably, sexual minority adolescents living in areas with more LGBTQ+-inclusive places of

worship, health clinics, housing services, and Pride events report less substance use than their counterparts living in areas with fewer of these resources[196]. By contrast, areas that lack vibrant LGBTQ+ communities or ignore or overlook LGBTQ+ people's experiences hinder connections with others and perceived inclusion[197]. Even the most seemingly LGBTQ+-friendly neighborhoods might not foster the general belonging of LGBTQ+ people if broader structural protections do not exist; we return to this issue in the Societal level section.

The gentrification of LGBTQ+ neighborhoods and places of leisure poses a threat to community members' sense of belonging and connectedness. Soaring housing prices, especially in LGBTQ+-friendly metropolitan areas, leave community members with no choice but to move from social hubs for LGBTQ+ individuals or face houselessness[180,198]. The effects of gentrification are particularly pronounced for individuals from racial and/or ethnic minority, low-income, and other disadvantaged backgrounds, further exacerbating their disparate access to resources and support within the LGBTQ+ community[180,198]. LGBTQ+ individuals are also disproportionately less able than their cisgender heterosexual counterparts to recover from natural disasters and access resources[199], which can displace their communities and places of belonging. Although the use of online discussion forums and social networking platforms can combat the negative effects of physical exclusion for LGBTQ+ individuals and play a role in the identity formation and community-building of LGBTQ+ youth[200], not everyone has equal access to technology or can reap the benefits of virtual communication. For example, LGBTQ+ older adults might not have access to technological devices or might experience difficulty navigating social media sites due to disabilities[201,202].

Schools and Workplaces

To complete our analysis of community factors, we focus on two places in which people spend a substantial amount of time: schools and workplaces. School belonging plays a notable role in the link between victimization and negative adjustment (for example, depressive symptoms, academic difficulties, substance use)[170,203-205]. Primary schools can strengthen the

belonging of LGBTQ+ youth by implementing LGBTQ+-inclusive climate interventions (such as anti-discrimination policies)[206-209], through policies protecting against discrimination, workshops to combat microaggressions, and LGBTQ+ programming in the curriculum[157,209-212]. Diversity and inclusion centers on university campuses enhance LGBTQ+ students' belonging by providing a safe space where they can authentically express themselves and connect with others through social events[210,211]. Moreover, favorable perceptions of a college or university's diversity climate are positively associated with belonging among LGBTQ+ students[213]. For LGBTQ+ youth, school opportunities outside of the classroom, like sports and extracurricular activities, also promote belonging by offering structured time to connect with peers[214]. Despite these benefits, the implementation of LGBTQ+-friendly clubs and diversity and inclusion trainings might encounter barriers, such as legislative restrictions or constraints on funding allotments to these initiatives[215,216].

Stigma within school climates threatens belonging. Sexual minority university students who perceive their schools as less safe feel less belonging and both perceptions relate to psychological health problems[42,212,213]. Further, the assumption that everyone is or should be cisgender (known as cisnormativity) within education systems might create unsupportive environments for transgender children, leading to higher rates of dropping out of primary and secondary school[217]. Students who disclose their LGBTQ+ identity to trustworthy, accepting staff members and peers at school can feel greater belonging than those who encounter negative reactions or conceal their identities[218]. Individuals who are formal and informal sources of support at school can play a substantial role as advocates for LGBTQ+ youth (for example, reporting instances of bullying or ensuring that others respect students' pronouns) and create safe spaces for them.

Workplaces are another community with implications for belonging. Nondiscrimination policies, support for LGBTQ+-inclusive activities, and diversity trainings within the workplace correlate with more disclosure and less perceived job discrimination, which can lead to

increased belonging in the workplace[219,220]. Recognizing sexual orientation and gender identity at work, rather than trying to distance LGBTQ+ issues from the workplace or bifurcate people's worker identities and LGBTQ+ identities, can also instill belonging[221,222]. Further, the implementation of workplace diversity trainings and allyship networks effectively enhances employee well-being and belonging[223].

Whereas practices that acknowledge and celebrate sexual and gender diversity likely facilitate belonging, other workplace features or inauthentic gestures can lessen belonging. For example, 'rainbow washing' describes a business's inauthentic display of support for LGBTQ+ people[224,225]. Sudden support for the LGBTQ+ community through rainbow imagery across offices and corporate social media accounts might be performative and for profit, and such manipulative branding tactics might deter LGBTQ+ consumers and employees alike, potentially reducing feelings of belonging. Similarly, companies that present diversity initiatives as a case for good business—rather than about fairness—lessen LGBTQ+ people's belonging and interest in working at such companies[226]. Although there is some research about threats to LGBTQ+ people's belonging at work, the literature for identifying positive predictors of LGBTQ+ people's workplace belonging is relatively nascent and needs more attention.

Community-level belonging is influenced by the groups to which one belongs, neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. Although a strong sense of connection and contact with LGBTQ+ communities might enhance belonging, marginalized individuals often face barriers to inclusion within LGBTQ+ communities and therefore are at risk of feeling low belonging within these spaces. The gentrification of LGBTQ+ neighborhoods, stigma within educational and workplace settings, and widescale LGBTQ+-relevant traumatic incidents underscore how characteristics of public places and events and one's sense of belonging are linked. Creating inclusive and supportive environments fosters a sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ individuals, which in turn might enhance the overall health of LGBTQ+ people.

Societal Level

We finally review factors within the broadest layer of the social ecological model: the societal level. This level includes sociocultural norms and policies that can enhance LGBTQ+ people's belonging (Table 2).

Situational Cues and Norms

One increasingly common social norm is the use of identity safety cues or features of social situations to communicate that LGBTQ+ identities are valued and that anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination is limited[224,227-229]. Used by communities, organizations, and businesses, identity safety cues signal that an organizational culture or context is welcoming to minoritized groups. For example, cities like Atlanta and London paint crosswalks in rainbow colors to mark LGBTQ+-friendly environments and celebrate LGBTQ+ pride, and companies like IBM encourage employees to share their pronouns in email signatures and meetings to avoid microaggressions and to model inclusive norms for sexual and gender diversity.

Effective safety cues that contribute to stigmatized groups' sense of belonging include the representation or presence of other people from under-represented groups, inclusive features in the environment, diversity statements, and positive information that is communicated about one's identity[224]. For instance, the presence of LGBTQ+ patients in online studies of healthcare settings suggests to other LGBTQ+ people that they would be welcomed in that setting[230]. LGBTQ+-related objects online and in person act as environmental features that foster LGBTQ+ people's belonging, such as the rainbow-flag profile filter on Facebook[231]. As another example of safety cues, diversity statements and identity-safe information can be activated in university classrooms by providing a commitment to diversity and inclusive information on a syllabus[232]. In addition, language communicates expectations for belonging. The use of preferred words to describe LGBTQ+ people, like 'lesbian' and 'gay' rather than 'homosexual', inspires greater perceived belonging among lesbian and gay people[233]. Similarly, when people explicitly share their pronouns at work (for example, by including their preferred

pronouns in an email signature) LGBTQ+ people feel greater organizational commitment — including belonging, organizational pride, and feeling cared for — than when pronouns are not present[234,235]. Safety cue interventions could be a low-effort and cost-effective strategy to promote belonging across many contexts to strengthen belonging in society, communities, and interpersonal interactions[224].

Laws and Policies

Law and policy form another societal-level context that influences LGBTQ+ people's belonging. Implementing LGBTQ+-friendly laws and lessening anti-LGBTQ+ laws can strengthen belonging. Laws that jeopardize or restrict LGBTQ+ people's rights are a source of structural stigma, defined as societal-level conditions that impact stigmatized groups by constraining opportunities, resources, and their well-being[236]. In the U.S., the election of Donald Trump in 2016 was associated with more stress, daily discrimination, depression, vigilance to threat, and concern about safety among LGBTQ+ people[136,237,238], compared to cisgender and/or heterosexual people and compared to previous self-reported distress[136]. Similarly, lesbian, gay, and bisexual people living in U.S. states that lack protective policies for LGBTQ+ people[239] and/or ban same-sex marriage[240] experience more psychiatric disorders (such as generalized anxiety and mood disorders) compared to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people living in supportive states and heterosexual people. A 2008 California law that restricted marriage to heterosexual people, called 'Proposition 8,' was associated with an increase in homophobic bullying among LGBTQ+ adolescents in the period immediately before and during the passing of the law (2008-2009) compared to prior years (2001-2007)[36]. This finding further supports the link between stigma-based politics and day-to-day discrimination that weakens individuals' belongingness. Notably, the impact of Proposition 8 on the lives of LGBTQ+ people started before the law was enacted, during the preceding campaign for a marriage ban[36,241]. However, some lesbian, gay and bisexual Californians felt that the upcoming vote brought them much closer to others, especially other lesbian, gay and bisexual people, via increased social support

and reduced conflict[241]. Although the analysis did not identify meaningful individual differences that explained how the policy differently impacted relationships, it made clear that policy matters for people's psychological sense of connection.

Research across psychology, public health, sociology, and public policy conveys that laws and policies that protect LGBTQ+ people's rights enhance their psychological and social well-being[242]. Suicide attempts among sexual minority youth decreased by 7% when U.S. states passed policies protecting same-sex marriage[243], and living in states with fewer anti-discrimination policies was associated with greater physical and mental health risks among LGBTQ+ older adults[244]. Likewise, when the U.S. Supreme Court granted same-sex marriage nation-wide, LGBTQ+ people's psychological distress decreased and life satisfaction increased compared to rates prior to the ruling[245], and people within the U.S. perceived supporting LGBTQ+ people and their rights as increasingly normative[246].

Geography provides the foundation for the laws and policies that LGBTQ+ people face. For instance, as of March 2023, 1 in 10 transgender youth in the U.S. live in areas that ban transgender-affirming care[247]. There are increasing political attacks on spaces and activities in which transgender people find community with others, such as drag shows and sports[43]. Using a coding scheme based on the ratio of affirming versus exclusionary proposed bills about gender identity[248], researchers found that transgender and gender non-conforming people who live in affirming areas experience greater belonging than those living in other areas. However, research that directly explores the links between transgender affirming laws and belonging is limited[248].

LGBTQ+-friendly policies also coincide with belonging-related outcomes, often measured as health and well-being. However, societal-level factors that promote belonging tend to focus on highly visible LGBTQ+ people (such as young people) and issues (such as marriage equality), sometimes overlooking pressing issues of belonging among people who are multiply-marginalized and therefore might experience compounded and unique experiences of stigma.

LGBTQ+ people of color, individuals experiencing homelessness, and immigrants and refugees have distinct connection points to the societal level that might diminish their sense of belonging, including tense and hostile relationships with police[249], insufficient treatment or access to public services[34], and/or immigration-related barriers and concerns[158,239,250,251]. LGBTQ+ people's belonging concerns also might become heightened in older age when encountering heteronormative assumptions within care-providing facilities, housing discrimination, and other stressors. For example, LGBTQ+ older adults might feel that care-providing institutions force them to either conceal their identity (re-enter the closet) or ignore their LGBTQ+ identity entirely, which contribute to older adults' belonging uncertainty[110]. Although the link between policy and belonging is evident in some research, the literature often lacks nuance in teasing apart which policies matter most for belonging and for whom.

This final level of our social ecological model for belonging comprises factors that characterize societal and cultural dynamics, such as norms, policies, and laws. These higher-order societal structures create a sociocultural context that promotes or impedes belonging.

Interdependence and Intersectionality

We reviewed factors that can promote or hinder a sense of belonging among LGBTQ+ people separately according to levels for conceptual clarity, but these levels are interdependent[62]. Change at any point in a social system has the potential to reverberate and induce ongoing reciprocal changes across system levels[58,252]. For instance, over time, societal level policies can promote downstream change at the community, interpersonal, and individual levels[62]. New generations of people who have formative experiences and expectations based on more inclusive policies might come to expect further change, creating upwards pressures in an ongoing reciprocal cross-level dynamic. This dynamic process over time is key to an ecological framework.

Factors that increase a sense of belonging among LGBTQ+ people at the individual level can ultimately lead to broader societal change[54]. Although we recognize that disclosure is

not safe or desirable for all LGBTQ+ individuals, LGBTQ+ people who disclose their sexual or gender identity can alter interpersonal-level and community-level dynamics in ways that spread to society[82]. For instance, changes in public opinion, influenced in part by the micro-decisions of individual people to disclose their LGBTQ+ identity (at increasingly younger ages[253]), ultimately contributed to marriage equality becoming a legal right across the U.S.[254,255], which fostered a more hospitable social and legal environment[121]. This example demonstrates how efforts to promote belonging and inclusion at any level have the potential to help generate change across levels.

The social ecological model's interlocking levels for understanding belonging also work well for considering intersectionality theory, given that both perspectives emphasize how individuals and broader systems coexist. Intersectionality theory emerged from decades of Black women's theorizing about their lives and social locations in hierarchy[256-259]. An intersectional analysis addresses social forces (such as power, systems and structures, oppression, liberation) as well as the influences of multiple intersecting identities[260,261]. It also emphasizes social and political action toward justice and social change[65,262,263]. Given the diversity of identities and social systems that characterize LGBTQ+ people's lives, an intersectional approach advances the psychology of sexual orientation and gender diversity from a study of white, cisgender, middle-class, urban, young sexual minority people to one that acknowledges within-group differences and structural intersectional oppression[46,65,260].

An advanced social ecological model can integrate intersectionality theory to yield specific facilitators and barriers to belonging for different groups of LGBTQ+ people, focusing on how a positive sense of belonging is supported at different levels. Psychologists most often employ intersectionality theory to account for dynamic, multiple negative experiences of stigma, leaving its potential for identifying positive aspects of experience or strengths largely unaddressed[46,103]. The histories of LGBTQ+ life carry trauma and oppression but also are often rich in pleasure and fun, performance, art and culture, and families of support and love.

LGBTQ+ people find and create joy in their social connections with others, despite prevailing stigma. For instance, LGBTQ+ people of color can draw belonging from various identity-based sources, such as working toward racial justice with LGBTQ+ and heterosexual people of color, socializing and organizing within LGBTQ+ communities, and finding solidarity and advocating for spaces designed for LGBTQ+ people of color[81]. Embracing the sociopolitical potential of their identities and leaning into communities of similar others can heighten belonging while promoting social change and disrupting oppression. As researchers begin to examine the positive and functional aspects of LGBTQ+ experiences from an intersectional perspective and how they contribute to belonging, the roles of power and oppression still must be held central (for an exemplar of such an approach see[92]).

At the societal level, intersectional perspectives recognize that some LGBTQ+ subgroups gain less than others from interventions that target sexual orientation and gender diversity but do not address racism, classism, and sexism[65]. For example, LGBTQ+ advocacy groups should incorporate broader sociopolitical issues into their missions (such as racism, health care, reproductive justice, houselessness) to foster a sense of community belonging and engagement from a more diverse population of LGBTQ+ individuals[180]. Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis offers a promising strategy for ensuring that policies that serve one group do not exacerbate a problem for another[263,264]. For example, participation in LGBTQ+-inclusive organizations nurtures the belonging of some LGBTQ+ students but might create added stress and conflict for students who experience biphobia, transphobia, or racism within LGBTQ+ organizations, or who fear that LGBTQ+ visibility would lead to losing current support systems (such as cultural-based or faith-based groups). Engagement with intersectionality theory can therefore equip researchers to consider influences across levels and monitor unintended consequences of seemingly positive efforts toward belonging intervention.

Summary and Future Directions

Answering the call for research to focus on determinants of LGBTQ+ people's positive

psychological experiences[10,13,17], in this Review we highlighted the factors that strengthen or weaken belonging (Table 2). At the individual level, belonging among LGBTQ+ people is influenced by various psychological factors and social identities that vary from person to person, reflecting the diverse nature of LGBTQ+ people as a group. At the interpersonal level, LGBTQ+ people's close relationships substantially impact belonging, with family and peers playing strong roles in belonging across the lifespan. Community factors of belonging emerge from the inclusive and supportive groups that LGBTQ+ individuals associate with, and LGBTQ+-affirming norms, laws, and policies create conditions that bolster LGBTQ+ people's sense of belonging. Throughout our review of each level, we identified knowledge gaps and strategies for strengthening belonging. Our use of a multi-level framework intentionally avoids placing the burden of well-being or onus of change on individuals by attending to the higher-level factors that influence LGBTQ+ people's psychosocial well-being, such as groups and social structures. We also emphasize the benefits of attending to interlocking systems and intersectionality in future research.

Researchers who develop time-lagged survey designs will be well positioned to examine how major positive and negative events at the societal or community levels impact individual and interpersonal outcomes for belonging. Longitudinal designs and the growing use of ecological momentary assessments with cell phone applications can be useful for tracking top-down and bottom-up processes—recognizing how individual and interpersonal experiences drive and are reflected by occurrence of major events and societal changes. Investing time and resources into assessing factors at multiple levels within the same study will pay dividends for empirically documenting the interconnected links of belonging across levels. Another productive research direction would be to explore the subversive strategies that marginalized individuals use as they contend with systematic oppression. Working within the approach of intersectionality theory, researchers should investigate how people push back upon and resist interlocking forms of oppression and how belonging is leveraged toward that end.

A major methodological challenge for future research will be to account for interlocking systems and intersectional perspectives to unlock a nuanced understanding of for whom, when, how, and under which conditions belonging is enhanced. As LGBTQ+ people make strides toward social inclusion but are faced with sociopolitical setbacks, a multi-level, multi-faceted approach to belonging offers the best chance for health and prosperity by reinforcing LGBTQ+ individuals' sense of belonging from a variety of sources.

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Table 1

Measures of Belonging

Construct	Description	Example questionnaire or scale	Scale type	Example items
Social belonging	A sense of having close and positive relationships with others[19,20,22]	Daily diary measure of belonging[20] Sense of social fit[22]	Agreement scale	"Right now, I feel like people at [school name] like me"[20] "People at my [school, work/company, etc.] are a lot like me" and "There is someone at [school, work/company, etc.] who I can count on"[22]
General social connection and belongingness	Non-specific feeling of connection and belonging with others in society[265]	UBC State Social Connection Scale (a momentary assessment)[266] General Belongingness Scale[265]	Agreement scale	"I felt close to people"[266] "When I am with other people, I feel included"[265]
Family belonging	Experiences and perception of parent or family rejection, support, and connectedness[267,268]	Family belonging as measured by National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health)[267]	"Not at all" to "Very much" scale	"How much do you feel that people in your family understand you?"[267,268]
Community belonging	Feelings regarding strength of community affiliation, support, and shared connection with similar others[96,97,174]	Connectedness to the LGBT Community Scale[96] LGB Positive Identity Measure (community subscale)[174]	Agreement scale	"You feel a bond with the LGBT community"[96] "I feel included in the LGBT community"[174]

School belonging	Feeling like one is accepted, included, cared for, and supported by others in their interactions at school[205]	Class Belonging and Support Scale[269]	Agreement scale	"My [class type] teacher is interested in what I have to say" and "Other students in my [class, school] like to work with me"[269]

Table 2

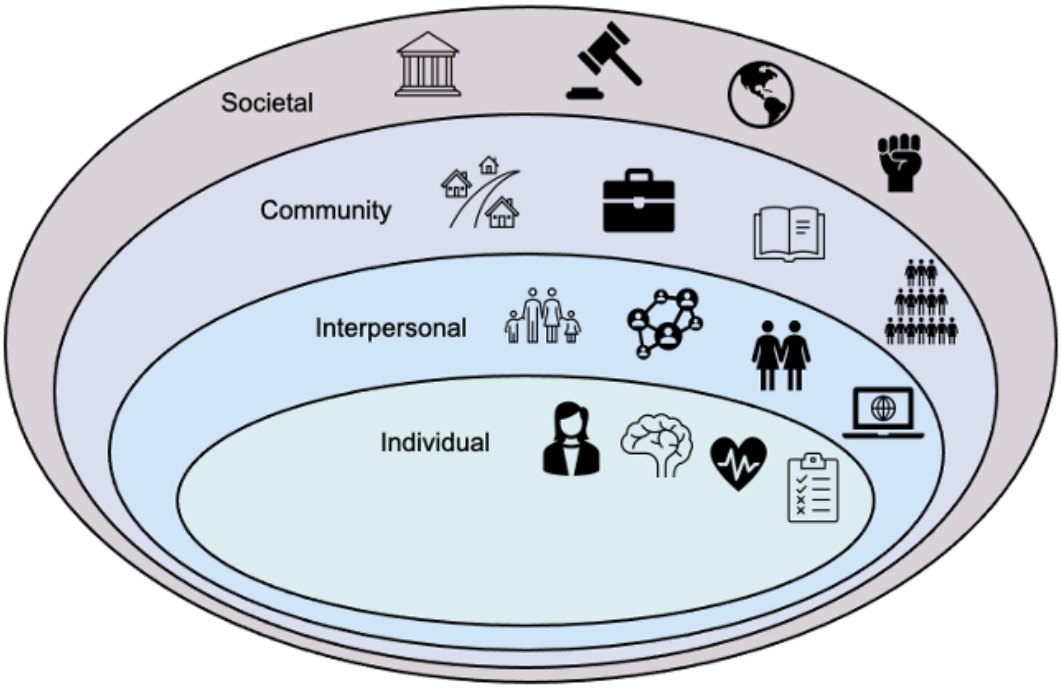
Key Factors Influencing Belonging

Level	Factor	Examples	Relationship to Belonging
Individual	Individual differences in psychological threat	High anticipatory stigma and chronic threat-vigilance[41], rejection sensitivity[40], internalized stigma[79,80]	Negative
	Shared experiences or beliefs with other LGBTQ+ people	Experiences of stigma (for example, prejudice and discrimination)[68], beliefs in essentialism of sexual orientation[76]	Positive
	Disclosure in safe and affirming environments	Coming out to or being out to supportive others[70]	Positive
	Social belonging interventions	Affirmation of core values[83], messages that belonging uncertainty is temporary[20,84]	Positive
	Gender non-conforming identity or expression	Transgender and gender diverse identities or non-conforming styles of presenting one's gender[90-92]	Negative
	Bisexuality	Identifying as bisexual or engaging in romantic and sexual relationships with people of same and different genders[95-97]	Negative
	Other identity-related sources of oppression	Being a racial or ethnic minority[102-106], belonging to an unaccepting community (for example, culture[45,108,114] or group of faith[102,107]), older age[43,109,100], low socioeconomic status[111], rurality[112,113], non-prototypical presentations of gender within LGBTQ+ subcultures[92,115,116]	Negative
Interpersonal	Negative dynamics within families of origin	Rejection, ambivalence, and negative reactions to LGBTQ+ identity[120, 119]; conflictual and tangential bonds with siblings[139]	Negative
	Positive dynamics within families of origin	Affirmation from parents[133,134], supportive extended family[106], solidarity with siblings[139]	Positive
	Families of choice	Loving and caring relationships external to families of origin [141,142,144,146,148,149,158]	Positive
	Healthy romantic and sexual relationships	Married, partnered, living together, and other partner relationships within LGBTQ+ communities[151,153,154]	Positive
	Platonic connections	Friendships[143]; online connections[160-163], friendships with other LGBTQ+ people[115,144,156,159]	Positive
	Microaggressions	Insults and invalidations[164-166]	Negative

	Peer victimization	Bullying and indirect and aggressive behavior toward LGBTQ+ people (often in school contexts)[167-170]	Negative
Community	Community connectedness	Feeling supported, included, and bonded with groups of LGBTQ+ people[96,97,174]; proliferation of non-binary gender and sexual identities[181,182]; intersectionality-focused advocacy[180]	Positive
	Intragroup stigma	Intraminority stress and rejection within LGBTQ+ communities[68,70,155,184], other forms of stigma within LGBTQ+ communities (such as racism or transphobia) [103,104,115,18]	Negative
	Collective trauma	AIDs epidemic[180], high-profile hate crimes[189-191]	Varies depending on circumstances and sample
	Inclusive and vibrant neighborhoods	Areas or inclusive spaces that offer socializing with other LGBTQ+ people[192-195]	Positive
	Geographic displacement	Gentrification of LGBTQ+-friendly space[180,198], climate change[199]	Negative
	Diversity and inclusion initiatives in education	Gay-Straight Alliances[208,209]; diversity centers on university campuses, LGBTQ+ programming, and curriculum[209-212]; inclusive sports and extracurriculars[210,211,214], positive reactions to disclosure at school[218]	Positive
	Negative interpersonal dynamics at schools	Feeling a lack of safety[42,212,213], bullying[55], negative reactions to disclosure[218], cisnormativity[217]	Negative
	Acknowledging and valuing sexual and gender diversity at work	LGBTQ+-inclusive activities and diversity trainings[219,220,223], not ignoring LGBTQ+ status[221,222], allyship networks in the workplace[223]	Positive
	Inauthentic diversity and inclusion efforts in the workplace	Promoting diversity and inclusion for business purposes (not fairness)[226]; rainbow washing and rainbow capitalism[225]	Negative
Societal	Identity safety cues	Other LGBTQ+ people[224,230], inclusive language[232,233] and features of the environment[228,232], rainbow pride Profile filter[231]	Positive
	Pronoun sharing	Disclosing pronouns as norm-setting behavior[234,235]	Positive
	Structural stigma	Marriage bans[36,240,241] or lack of protections[239], elections of anti-	Negative

		LGBTQ+ politicians[136,237,238], anti-transgender laws[248]	
	Anti-discrimination protections	Same-sex marriage and protections[242], growing support for LGBTQ+ people in public opinion[231,246]	Positive
	Other identity-related sources of oppression	Immigration threats[158,239,250,251], ageism and heterosexism[110], inaccessible or hostile public services (for example, housing)[34]	Negative

Figure 1. The social ecological model. The four levels comprise a variety of factors that interact to shape LGBTQ+ people's belonging. The societal level includes politics, laws, cultures, and norms. The community level includes neighborhoods, workplaces, schools, and groups. The interpersonal level includes families, peers and friends, romantic and sexual relationships, and social media connections. The individual level includes the person, their psychological individual differences, and their sociodemographic characteristics.



Box 1. Definitional Limitations to Belonging

The concept of belonging faces unresolved definitional issues. Although specific instruments exist to measure belonging (Table 1), research about LGBTQ+ people's psychosocial well-being often treats belonging as a higher-order, broad construct and conflates it with similar social processes. Consequently, the literature lacks strong conceptual boundaries for belonging and is often unclear about its focus (belonging in general, at home, with friends). Without a clear definition, it becomes challenging to determine how best to measure belonging, especially when some commonly used measures have yet to be validated with LGBTQ+ samples (including subgroups, such as white lesbian and bisexual adult women versus young LGBTQ+ men of color).

Measurement practices for belonging vary greatly. For example, across scientific articles belonging might be measured by loneliness, isolation, rejection, support, comfort, trust, connection, and perceived inclusion. The use of the term belonging in this Review coexists with the broader definitional and methodological complexities that accompany belonging as a widely used term for psychosocial experiences. In this Review, we use a general definition of belonging (the psychological state having positive connections to others[18-20]) to represent and include the broad literature that is relevant to understanding LGBTQ+ people's belonging.

Box 2. LGBTQ+ Minority Stress

Minority stress theory is the leading framework for theorizing about LGBTQ+ people's negative experiences of health[3,4]. An expansion of social stress theory, the minority stress model emphasizes how excess stress linked to a person's stigmatized status functions as a key mechanism in the relationship between stigma and adverse health. Uniquely, the minority stress model accounts for particular stressors associated with sexual orientation, such as internalized homophobia and concealment. Researchers have also adopted the minority stress paradigm to explain psychological experiences in the context of gender identity (for example, among transgender, non-binary, and gender diverse individuals)[270,271]. Despite the widespread use of minority stress theory in LGBTQ+ health research, notable alternatives, extensions, and critiques exist[272].

The dominant focus on minority stress theory lessens innovation and uptake of other emerging stress-adjacent theories and frameworks. Some alternative theories center on the critical roles of rejection sensitivity[40] and social safety[41]. Another perspective, the Developmental Model of the Closet[121], theorizes how a lack of access to LGBTQ+ role models and peers early in life can directly contribute to a lower sense of belonging. Researchers have also called for increased focus on psychological strengths and positive factors as aspects of LGBTQ+ people's psychological health, which are undermined by the minority stress approach[10,13,273]. As one example of a theory that considers psychological strengths, a historically grounded theory of LGBTQ+ genders (gender identities and gender cultures within LGBTQ+ communities) as a psychosocial process posits that aspects of LGBTQ+ genders (such as, butch, femme, drag, chosen family and/or house units) have multiple positive functions for LGBTQ+ communities[92]. LGBTQ+ genders are considered the catalyst for subcultures and communities to form, which spurs a sense of belonging. The underrepresentation of positive and functional perspectives in the literature[12,273] undermines the

ways in which LGBTQ+ individuals have long developed strategies to thrive in response to societies that impose legal and cultural constraints around sexual and gender diversity.

Box 3. Disclosure and Concealment

Feasibility of concealing sexual orientation and gender identity can depend on gender non-conformity or other cues that suggest one's sexual orientation or gender identity[274]. In general, people are assumed to be cisgender and/or heterosexual. LGBTQ+ people must therefore decide whether they want others to be aware of their sexual and gender identities by coming out or disclosing their identities to others.

Concealing an identity that is socially stigmatized is a normative response to protect oneself from discrimination and harm and 'the closet' (the period between awareness of a minority sexual identity and its first disclosure) is a near universal experience for LGBTQ+ people[121]. However, concealment can prevent people from feeling authentic and developing a deeper sense of belonging to family and community. Although disclosure can be risky, it can foster greater personal fulfillment and help increase the visibility of LGBTQ+ people.

Disclosure can also facilitate interpersonal and community change by increasing positive intergroup contact[275,276]. For LGBTQ+ individuals, disclosure in the context of established close relationships might be particularly effective at improving non-LGBTQ+ people's attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals because the shared history and close ties might help them overcome prior negative attitudes and beliefs[155]. However, the benefits of intergroup contact come at a cost to people from marginalized populations[277]. For example, LGBTQ+ people might need to interact with individuals who are unfriendly or unsupportive toward LGBTQ+ identities, and even potentially dangerous.

The personal benefits of disclosure vary as a function of structural stigma[114] and cultural norms[121], as well as demographic factors like socioeconomic status[278] and race or ethnicity[81]. The benefits of disclosure also vary according to individual differences in psychological factors like coping style, motivation goals, and rejection sensitivity[279-281], as well as the supportiveness of the socio-cultural context in which one resides. Decisions to disclose versus conceal need to be continually revisited as LGBTQ+ individuals meet new people and navigate social systems.

Highlighting the importance of societal-level factors, LGBTQ+ people from countries with greater structural stigma are less likely to ever disclose or to disclose later in life relative to people in countries with less structural stigma[114]. Some researchers have proposed the idea of selective disclosure—-disclosing in some situations but not others—as a strategy that might help LGBTQ+ people maximize positive outcomes of disclosure while minimizing negative outcomes[82]. Creating a positive first disclosure experience might be important for fostering belonging[282].

In sum, decisions about whether or how to disclose an LGBTQ+ identity are near-universal among LGBTQ+ populations and might need to be continually navigated throughout the lifespan. Ultimately, LGBTQ+ individuals who disclose might benefit from finding communities of acceptance and belonging and helping to foster more hospitable communities for LGBTQ+ populations. However, given the risks of disclosure in inhospitable situations, advocates can encourage selective disclosure and provide support that does not require disclosure.