I COULD USE SOMEONE LIKE ME:
THE SOCIAL PROJECTION OF BELONGINGNESS NEEDS

By

BRIAN D. COLLISSON

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The motivation to form relationships with others drives people to seek social connection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It is therefore functional for those motivated to form social relationships (i.e., high in belongingness need) to infer that others share a similar interest in forging social bonds. The present research examines a motivational explanation for engaging in social projection as a means of facilitating and satisfying one’s own need to belong. I hypothesized that one’s own need to belong would be related to the projection of similar belongingness needs in others, but not other characteristics that are less immediately relevant to satisfying that need. To test this hypothesis, participants guessed the preferences, personality traits, and belongingness needs of an unknown other after first rating themselves on these dimensions. Results show that participants’ own need to belong was related to the projection of belongingness needs but was unrelated to the projection of preferences and traits. Additional findings from a field study provide convergent evidence by showing a robust relationship between one’s own belongingness need and the projection of belongingness needs in others. Supporting a motivated cognition perspective, I suggest that the social projection of belongingness needs is an adaptive strategy for regulating
one’s belongingness needs by inferring the nature and motives of others who could be potential relationship partners.
CHAPTER 1
I COULD USE SOMEONE LIKE ME:
THE SOCIAL PROJECTION OF BELONGINGNESS NEEDS

People are motivated to create relationships with one another. Strangers approach each other at parties, people join online networking sites, and others even participate in speed dating with the hope of forming social connection with others. This motivation to form social bonds stems from an innate need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and the desire for social connection is a powerful determinant of much of human functioning (e.g., cognition, emotion, and interpersonal behavior).

Unmet or thwarted belonging needs triggers the awareness that one's inclusionary status is deficient (Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000; Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). If someone does not have a minimum amount of social relationships necessary to satisfy belonging needs, he or she is motivated to form relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; DeWall, Maner, & Rouby, 2009; Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007). Previous research has illustrated the impact of motivational states on social cognition (Kenrick, et al., 2010; Kunda, 1990; Maner, Kenrick, et al., 2005) and in particular, how people regulate their belonging needs by monitoring and interacting with their social world (Baumeister, Brewer, Tice, Twenge, 2007; DeWall, Maner, Rouby, 2009; Gardner, Pickett, Jefferis, Knowles, 2005; Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, Schaller; 2007; Molden, Lucas, Gardner, Dean, Knowles; 2009; Zhong & Leonardelli, 2008). However, little research has targeted one of the more fundamental questions of how individuals with unmet belongingness needs perceive the nature and motives of others who could be potential relationship partners. Specifically, do individuals infer that others share a similar need to belong as themselves?
The Need to Belong

At first glance, the literature on unmet belongingness needs paints a disheartening picture of the socially excluded individual. Several studies have demonstrated relationships between a lack of social connection and an array of negative physical and psychological health outcomes (see Pickett, Gardner, and Knowles, 2004, Twenge, Catonese, & Baumeister, 2003, Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). Equally as dejecting, numerous studies have shown that thwarted belongingness needs, via social rejection, lead to increases in aggressive behavior (see Baumeister, Brewer, Tice, & Twenge, 2007 for a review). However, a negative portrait of the individual with unmet belonging needs conveys only half of the story. A lack of social connectedness can also evoke more inclusive-driven cognitions and promote more socially adaptive behavior (DeWall, Maner, & Rouby, 2009; Lakin, Chartrand, & Arkin, 2008). Although people who experience social rejection view instigators of their rejection negatively and aggress towards them, these same excluded individuals also view new interaction partners positively (Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007). In regards to novel social targets, those who experience social rejection report more favorable impressions and express a greater interest in establishing a future relationship than those who are not previously rejected. It appears that favorable attitudes towards novel social targets may be one of the preliminary steps necessary for social reconnection and the satisfaction of belongingness needs.

Other research has shown that belongingness needs play a pivotal role in shaping the way in which rejected individuals perceive the social world. Both chronically high belongingness need and temporary feelings of rejection have been shown to create a greater attentiveness to, and memory for, socially relevant cues within one’s
environment (Gardner, Pickett & Brewer, 2000; see Pickett & Gardner, 2005 for a review; Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). A heightened awareness for social information is a highly functional means of monitoring one’s environment for social inclusion opportunities as well avoiding situations where exclusion is likely. This engaged social monitoring system allows the individual with unmet belongingness needs to either approach inclusionary situations or avoid situations indicative of social rejection (Pickett & Gardner, 2005). It is adaptive for people motivated to form relationships to notice subtle inclusionary cues (i.e., a friendly wink or smile) as well as exclusionary cues (i.e., a dismissive frown) so that future behavior can be directed towards satisfying, and not further frustrating, belongingness needs. Highly functional and motivationally driven behavior is engaged in to promote social relationships; however, there is one preceding step to this inclusionary process that has received far less empirical attention. That is, what are people with unmet belonging needs thinking when they meet someone new? More specifically, do people with unmet belonging needs tend to assume that others share their same need to belong?

**Social Projection**

As a means of better understanding and predicting one’s social environment, people engage in the difficult task of trying to figure out the nature and thoughts of others (Mead, 1934; Vorauer, Cameron, Holmes, & Pearce, 2003). This form of social perception can be difficult because people often lack the necessary information to draw conclusions about others (Krueger, 2000). This is especially true in the initial stage of a relationship because at the very onset, little to no information is available to base inferences upon. When information regarding another is unknown, people use self-referent information as a perceptual anchor from which to base inferences about others.
(Krueger & Clement, 1997; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). People project knowledge of themselves onto others by inferring that other people act, think, and behave as they would. This mind-reading process of perceiving similarity between the self and others is referred to as social projection (Ames, 2004).

Social projection is a valuable tool for making inferences about others because it is often the only information available to serve as a guide (Dawes & Mulford, 1996). For example, when the host of a party is deciding on whether or not to offer a drink to a guest, it may be logical to infer, “If I am thirsty, my guest may be thirsty as well” (Van Boven & Loewensteins, 2003). This aforementioned inference is meaningful, and departs from more traditional forms of projecting opinions and preferences onto others, because the host’s current motivational state is influencing his or her thoughts about the guest’s current motivational state (Campbell, 1986; Marks, 1984; Pyszczynski et al., 1996; Sherman, Presson, & Chassin, 1984).

Recent research offers indirect support that belongingness needs, in particular, influence projection. People who have perpetually unmet belonging needs (i.e., lonely people) are likely to anthropomorphize human-like traits and attributes onto non-human objects (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2008; Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). For example, lonely people are more likely than non-lonely people to attribute human-like emotions and personality traits to pets (i.e., perceiving one’s dog as friendly or sociable). Thus, lonely people imbue animals and other non-human objects (e.g., religious agents and machines) with human-like attributes to satisfy their own belongingness needs. These findings suggest that those who are highly motivated to
satisfy belongingness needs can create a semblance of human connection by engaging in projection.

Anthropomorphism provides supportive evidence that people may engage in greater projection to fulfill their unmet belonging needs. Projection may also occur in more traditional inclusive strategies (i.e., making a real friend) because peoples’ lives are rife with other people who can potentially satisfy unmet belonging needs. It may be that people motivated to satisfy belonging needs commonly engage in social projection when meeting new people as a means of setting the stage for a potential relationship.

The current study extends both the need to belong and social projection literature by suggesting that one of the preliminary steps in creating social relationships (and thus satisfying belonging needs) involves projecting similarity onto others. Broad and indiscriminate projection of similarity (e.g., shared preferences and traits) far exceeds the minimum prerequisites for social connection and thus would be disadvantageous for satisfying belongingness needs. Meeting a potential relationship partner who shares the same traits and has the same preferences as oneself would be ideal; however, making the assumption that every new social target is similar to this degree would reflect a clearly unrealistic perception of reality. In contrast, the projection of one’s motivational state (e.g., need to belong) would optimize opportunities to form relationships and thus would be highly advantageous. For example, projecting a high need to belong (i.e., thinking another person also has a strong desire to form a relationship) presumably would make it easier to approach and form a relationship with the other person.

The rationale for the social projection of belongingness needs is clarified by considering two diametrically opposing scenarios:
What if people did project similar belongingness needs onto others?

What if people did not project similar belongingness needs onto others?

The relational risks and benefits of projecting (or failing to project) similar belongingness needs are greatest for those with a high need to belong and therefore the two scenarios will be discussed in regards to those with higher belongingness needs. People with a high need to belong who project their own belongingness needs will either accurately or inaccurately infer the other’s motives. Those who do not project high belongingness needs may mistakenly infer that others have a low need to belong and miss a valuable opportunity to form a relationship. Given the physical and psychological consequences of unmet belonging needs, the cost of a missed opportunity may be too great to bear. However, assuming that others also have a high need to belong comes with risk as well. Mistakenly inferring that someone else has a high need to belong, when he or she truly has a low need to belong, may result in rejection and further frustrate one’s own need to belong. Overall, the costs of projecting a similar belongingness need outweigh the costs of failing to project, and hence, an individual with high belongingness needs is more likely to project than not project. Thus, in ambiguous situations where little or no information is available regarding the other’s belongingness need (i.e., when meeting someone for the first time), I hypothesize that people with high belonging needs will project a similarly high need to belong so as to maximize opportunities to create a potential relationship.

Overview of Present Studies

Two separate studies are conducted to test the hypothesis that individual differences in belongingness needs are related to social projection. In the first study, participants guessed the personality traits, attitudes, and need for belongingness of an
unknown other after first rating themselves on these dimensions. I predict that participants will project their own belongingness needs onto the other (i.e., those high in need to belong will assume that the other is similarly high in need), but will not necessarily project their general personality traits or attitudes.

Study two attempts to replicate the findings of Study 1 within a larger community sample. This second study also deviates from Study 1 by testing whether people infer that the average person possesses a similar need to belong as oneself. By establishing projection of belongingness needs onto an individual target (Study 1) as well as a general, average other (Study 2), a case can be made that individual differences in belongingness need are related to the social projection of belongingness needs.
Method

Participants. Sixty-six students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at the University of Florida participated in the study. All participants received credit towards the research exposure requirement of their psychology course as remuneration. Participants’ age ranged from 18 to 28 years ($M=19.2$). Eighty-six percent of the sample identified as female. In regards to ethnicity, 44% of the sample identified as Caucasian, 20% as Hispanic, 18% as Asian, and 17% as African-American.

Materials

Need to belong scale. The Need to Belong Scale (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2007) assesses one’s chronic desire to feel social acceptance and belonging. The scale is comprised of ten items endorsed on a five-point continuum (1=not at all, 5=extremely). An example item is, “It bothers me a great deal when I am not included in other people’s plans.”

Preference assessment. Six items (borrowed from Ames, 2004) asked participants to indicate (yes or no) whether they enjoyed a variety of activities (e.g., watching professional sports on television).

Trait assessment. Participants ranked 14 traits (borrowed from Epley et al., 2008) in terms of how characteristic they were of the self (from 1 = most descriptive of me, to 14 = least descriptive of me). Three of the traits were related to social connection (e.g., thoughtful, considerate, sympathetic), four were unrelated to social connection (e.g., embarrassed, creative, devious, jealous), and seven were behaviorally descriptive traits (e.g., aggressive, agile, active, energetic, fearful, lethargic, muscular).
**Self-esteem.** The self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965) includes 10 items assessing chronic feelings of self-worth (each rated on a scale from $1 = $ strongly disagree to $5 = $ strongly agree). An example item is, “I believe that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.”

**Similarity.** One item was used to assess perceived similarity to an unknown individual who was of the same age and gender as the participant. The question asked participants to indicate the extent to which they believed they were similar to the other (from $0 = $ Not at all similar to $10 = $ Completely similar).

**Optimism for future relationship.** One question was used to measure optimism for establishing a friendship with an unknown other. The question was worded as follows: “How likely is it that you would become close friends with the other participant if you met?” (1=Not at all likely to 11=Highly likely.

**Procedure**

After arriving at the experiment room and signing a consent document, participants completed a demographic card indicating their gender, age, year in school, and hometown. This demographic card was designed to lend credibility to the deception used later in the study. All participants were then given a questionnaire packet containing the Need to Belong Scale (Leary et al., 2007), items assessing preferences (Ames, 2004), traits (Epley et al., 2008), as well as the Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). After completing each measure, participants then received a demographic card of another participant who purportedly completed the study one week prior. In actuality, there was no other participant. The demographic card described a participant that was of the same age, gender, and year in school as participants themselves. To make this subtle deception believable, the other participant was similar on all demographic
characteristics (age, gender, year in school) with the exception of hometown.

Participants were then given a blank questionnaire containing the same measures that they had previously completed and were asked to answer each question as they thought the other participant had the week prior.

**Results and Discussion**

An index of projection of belongingness needs was calculated by subtracting each participant’s own total score on the Need to Belong Scale from his/her prediction of the other participant’s total score, and then taking the absolute value of this difference. Smaller scores on this index indicate greater similarity between ratings for the self and other and thus, greater projection. The projection of self-esteem was calculated similarly using self and other ratings for the Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). The projection of preferences was assessed by adding each of the matched self-other preferences (e.g., self-yes/other-yes or self-no/other-no) into an aggregate preference score. Higher scores, and thus greater perceived similarity in self-other preferences, indicate projection. To assess the projection of attributes, within-subjects partial correlations were computed for the ranking of self-attributes with the other’s (assumed) self-rankings. Larger correlation coefficients indicate greater projection of attributes.

A series of bivariate correlations were conducted to test the hypothesis that one’s own need to belong would be related to the social projection of belongingness needs but not the projection of traits, attributes, and evaluations of self-worth. The results offered strong support of the hypotheses. As can be seen in Table 1, participants projected their belonging needs ($r=-.48, p < .001$) onto the other, such that those with a higher need to belong assumed that the other participant also had a higher need. However, they did not project self-esteem, traits, or preferences (all $rs < -.17, ps > .17$).
Additional tests (using Fisher’s r to z transformations) confirmed that the degree of projection for belongingness needs was in fact stronger than the other forms of projection (all zs > 2.67, ps < .007). It should be noted that although higher belongingness needs were unrelated to projection of similar traits and preferences in others, it was related to perceiving greater overall similarity between self and other (r = .29, p = .02) as well as greater optimism for establishing a future relationship (r = .23, p = .06).

The results of Study 1 suggest that people project their own belongingness needs onto others even when they do not project other personal qualities less immediately relevant for establishing relationships (such as their beliefs, attitudes, and preferences). In support of previous social reconnection hypotheses (Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, Schaller, 2007), it appears that a stronger motivation to belong is related to perceiving similar belongingness needs in others, perceiving greater overall similarity between other and self, and a greater optimism for establishing a future relationship.
CHAPTER 3  
STUDY 2

Study 2 extends the previous study by demonstrating the projection of belongingness needs onto an average other. The distinction between a specified other (Study 1) and a non-specified, average other (Study 2) is an important one to make because if the projection of similar belongingness needs in others is a functional precursor for forming relationships in general, this effect should hold for an average other target as well. Replicating the effect found in study one would also lend convergent evidence for the projection of belongingness needs within a larger, more diverse community sample.

Method

Participants. Three hundred members of the Gainesville community participated in the study. Participants were recruited while in downtown Gainesville or regions directly adjacent to the University of Florida campus. Participants’ age ranged from 13 to 73 years (M= 25.7). Fifty-three percent of the sample identified as female. In regards to ethnicity, 40% of the sample identified as Caucasian, 18% as Hispanic, 15% as Asian, and 14% as African-American.

Materials

Abridged 3 item need to belong scale. Given the time constraints and demands of the community population targeted within this study, a brief, modified version of the original need to belong scale was created. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted to determine which items from the original Need to Belong Scale (Leary, et al., 2007) loaded best onto the need to belong latent construct. Using data obtained from 661 undergraduate students who completed the original ten item Need to Belong...
Scale during a mass prescreening session, three items emerged as the strongest manifest variables. Each of the three item's loading weight was greater than .63 and possessed communality in excess of .40. An item-total correlation analysis supports the notion that each of the three items was highly correlated with the remaining overall scale (rs > .55). As in the original measure, the scale is endorsed on a five-point continuum (1=not at all, 5=extremely). The three extracted items included: “I want other people to accept me”, “I have a strong need to belong”, and “My feelings are easily hurt when others do not accept me.”

Procedure

While loitering in the city of Gainesville, participants were approached by a trained research assistant and asked to complete a “Social Cognition Questionnaire”. Participants who verbally assented to participate in the study were then presented with a questionnaire packet that contained two counterbalanced versions of the abridged self and average other Need to Belong Scale as well as several demographic questions. After completing the questionnaire, participants were thanked and dismissed.

Results and Discussion

As in study one, an index of projection of belongingness needs was created by subtracting each participant’s own total score on the abridged Need to Belong Scale from his/her prediction of the average other’s total score, and then taking the absolute value of this difference. Again, smaller scores on this index indicate greater similarity between ratings for the self and other and thus, greater projection of belongingness needs.

A bivariate correlation was conducted to test the hypothesis that one’s own need to belong would be related to the projection of similar belongingness need in an average
other. Results strongly supported this prediction. Participants’ own need to belong was related to the projection of similar belongingness needs in an average other ($r = -.67$, $p < .001$), such that participants with higher belongingness needs viewed an average other target’s belongingness needs as being more similar to the self, as compared to those with lower belongingness needs.

The results from study two converge nicely with those of study one. Across both studies, it appears that people that have a higher need to belong differ from those with lower belongingness needs in the way that they perceive the belongingness needs of others. People with a stronger desire to form and maintain social bonds (high in need to belong) project their own belongingness needs onto others. This form of social projection presumably provides those high in need to belong the perception of relationship opportunities with a specified partner (study 1) as well as with an average other (study 2). It appears that projection of belongingness needs may be one of the first steps for creating social connection by socially perceiving others’ belongingness needs.
CHAPTER 4
GENERAL DISCUSSION

At the heart of social psychology is the belief that human thought, emotion, and behavior are influenced by social relationships (Allport, 1954; Leary, 2010). The present research addressed whether the need to belong and feel socially accepted (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) was related to the way people think about one another. In particular, the current studies tested the relationship between one’s chronic need to belong and the social projection of similar belongingness needs in others. It may be that one’s unmet belongingness needs influence perceptions of others that create opportunities for a relationship to develop. The idea that people socially construct and perceive reality in a way that serves to satisfy their own unmet needs has a rich history within psychology and provides a backdrop for the present research (Kunda, 1990).

As illustrated in the classic work of McClelland and Atkinson (1948), soldiers who were hungry (i.e., had been deprived food for sixteen hours) reported seeing more food related items during a low-intensity visual perception task than soldiers that had already satiated their hunger need (i.e., had eaten a few hours prior). Motivated perception has also been demonstrated more broadly, such that people’s wishes, preferences, and desires motivate people to see what they would like to see. Balcetis and Dunning (2006; 2010) showed that visual perception is tainted in favor of satisfying one’s motives. For instance, participants that were thirsty (i.e., had recently eaten salty pretzels) estimated a water bottle as being closer to the self than participants who were not thirsty (i.e., had drank their fill of water prior to the study). The underlying message from these studies is that people’s motives distort perceptions of one’s social world in ways that favor satisfying one’s unmet motives.
In the present studies, people who were motivated to form and maintain stable, meaningful, and positive relationships were given the opportunity to make inferences about another potential relationship partner. In the same manner that the hungry soldiers and thirsty pretzel eaters saw what they would like to see, participants who were motivated to satisfy belongingness needs saw a potential relationship partner in a manner that facilitated their own belonging. People with high belongingness needs regulated their belonging by inferring similar needs in others. This inference of similarly high belongingness needs in others created opportunities for a potential relationship to develop.

Study one illustrated this effect by having participants answer several questions related to their preferences, traits, self-esteem, and belongingness needs. After participants had completed this task, they were told that another participant had completed the same task a week prior and that the aim of the study was to see if they could infer how this other past participant had completed his or her questionnaire. The findings revealed that participants that valued social acceptance and belonging the most projected their own belongingness needs onto the other participant but did not project other traits less immediately relevant for forming a relationship. That is, participants that desired social connection themselves inferred that an unknown other possessed a desire for a relationship. By perceiving similar belongingness needs and a mutual desire for a relationship, participants’ belongingness motives tainted their perception of another in such a way that could later satisfy their own need to belong.

The second study demonstrated the projection of belongingness needs onto a general, average other within a larger and more diverse population than that of study
one. Members of the community were asked about the belongingness needs of themselves and that of an average other. People that were high in belongingness need, as compared to those that were low, projected their own need to belong onto an average other. Again, they construed an average other’s belongingness needs in a manner that would facilitate their own social belonging.

The current research supports and extends the self-regulatory process of belonging need (Pickett & Gardner, 2005). According to this model, an individual with a high need to belong first assesses (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995) his or her degree of social connection and then may experience negative affect (Marcus & Askari, 1999; Williams et al., 2000) or anxiety (Baumeister & Tice, 1990) as a result of unmet belonging needs. It is at this point when people high in belonging need become more attuned to their social world (Pickett et al., 2004) and focus on interpersonal signs of acceptance (DeWall et al., 2009). I argue that just as people high in the need to belong seek social reconnection through social monitoring, they also cognitively construe their social world in a manner that would facilitate new opportunities for social connection. People perceive others as sharing a similar desire to form and maintain relationships and they are optimistic that if they were to meet a potential relationship partner, a friendship would develop. Projecting one’s high belongingness needs and therefore perceiving other’s needs as similar to one’s own is a highly functional and adaptive way of facilitating and satisfying one’s need to belong.

There are limitations of the present studies that need to be addressed by additional research. For example, the correlational designs used in the current studies cannot disentangle a motivational from cognitive explanation for the findings. It may be
that when people are asked the belongingness needs of an unknown other, they tend to rely on information they have of their own belongingness need as a perceptual anchor from which to base their inferences upon. If having unmet belongingness needs makes people more self-aware and thus more likely to use their own belongingness need as a basis for inference, the projection findings could be explained by self-awareness instead of belongingness motives. Additional research may manipulate an individual's belongingness need (e.g., via social rejection or acceptance) and then measure the inferred belonging needs of others. Greater projection following the manipulation of one’s need to belong would provide evidence for a motivational explanation.

Despite the limitations of the present studies, the current findings serve as a stepping stone for further understanding the relationship between belongingness needs and social perception. For those motivated to achieve social connection, simply thinking that others are inclined to share similar belongingness needs may be the first step for establishing social relationships. It is refreshing to know that those motivated to forge social bonds can rely on the social projection of belongingness needs to regulate their own need to belong.
Table 2-1. Correlation matrix of one’s own need to belong with other forms of social projection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Difference Measure</th>
<th>Correlation with Own Need to Belong (r)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need to Belong</td>
<td>-.48**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferences</td>
<td>-.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributes</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>-.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Similarity</td>
<td>.29**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimism for future relationships</td>
<td>.23†</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: †p<.10. *p<.05. **p<.01.
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Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke (2001). If you can't join them, beat them: Effects of social exclusion on aggressive behavior. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 81(6), 1058-1069.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Brian D. Collisson was born to Dean and Joey Collisson. He was raised in southern California alongside his older sister, Deanna, and younger brother, Steven. As an aspiring social psychologist, Brian majored in psychology as an undergraduate student and earned his associate’s degree from Chaffey College and his bachelor’s degree from California State University, San Bernardino. After graduating, Brian continued pursuing his passion for social psychology in graduate school at the University of Florida.