

Chapter 7

Barriers to Belonging

“We belong to each other. We stand together, or we fall apart.”¹

-Antonio Guterres, United Nations Secretary-General.

Before delving into our final “how to” chapter, it’s crucial to emphasize the barriers hindering our efforts to help young people belong. These barriers, far from being merely “how not to,” provide a deeper understanding of “what stands in the way of helping young people belong.” This understanding equips us with knowledge of common biases we may hold, empowering us to help young people belong effectively. We discussed shame in the previous chapter as an obvious barrier to helping young people belong, but we would like to identify a few additional barriers.

1. The FAE!

How often do we encounter a young person who seems distracted, disengaged, or indifferent to what we are saying, and quietly think to ourselves, *I am investing so much time here. I am stepping away from my family and my work, and he does not even seem to care. What a waste of time.*

Only later do we discover the fuller story. That same young person may be experiencing one of the most difficult days of their life. His car broke down early that morning, causing him to arrive late to school and receive a stern warning. He brought the wrong textbook to class and realized his homework was still sitting at home. When he tried to share his frustration with his girlfriend, her response was sharp, leading to a painful argument. And yet, despite the weight of all this, he still chose to come and meet with you.

Does this deeper knowledge not soften our initial judgment? Does it not invite us to reconsider our reaction, our impatience, even our sense of being “wasted”? When we see the hidden burdens a young person carries, distraction begins to look less like indifference and more like endurance. What once felt like a lack of interest is revealed as a quiet act of perseverance, showing up when everything within him was already fraying.

We have all been in these situations where we were quick to judge before understanding the situation. Although it might seem simple, the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE) is a powerful concept.

It's our tendency to expect people to behave uniformly in every situation, which can profoundly impact our ability to help them belong. Understanding and addressing FAE is crucial for effective support.

¹ Antonio Guterres, “Annual Lecture 2020: Nelson Mandela Foundation,” July 18, 2020, <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/annual-lecture-2020-secretary-general-guterress-full-speech>.

FAE is a theory that posits that others' behavior is determined by who they are, without considering the effects of the situation on that behavior. Simply put, it asks whether this behavior was fundamentally about them or their situation.² The short answer is that it is likely a combination of both. The human person's complexities and behavior in each situation are vast. But this is exactly what Lee Ross and Richard Nisbett pointed out in their landmark book in 1991, "*The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology*" - that we all have different personalities and come from different backgrounds. Therefore, expecting each person to behave uniformly, without understanding the nuances of the situation and how they respond, would be a biased approach. Overcoming this bias and recognizing that situational factors play an important role in a person's behavior are essential to helping young people belong.

2. Stereotyping Gen Z

Most of us, especially those who work closely with young people, have faced this challenge. At one time or another, we have likely found ourselves saying, "*This generation does not know what hard work means*," or "*These kids are glued to their phones all day*." While there may be elements of truth in such observations, our purpose here is not simply to acknowledge that people are different or to suggest that we should give them the benefit of the doubt. Rather, the deeper issue lies in how quickly labeling a person through a stereotype can obstruct the very process of belonging.

When we reduce a young person to a generalized narrative, we risk overlooking their concrete struggles, their unspoken fears, and their desire to be seen and understood. In doing so, we may unintentionally create distance rather than connection, judgment rather than accompaniment, and exclusion where belonging could have taken root.

A study by Darley and Gross (1983) examined the effects of stereotyping or labeling individuals.³ The study examined 67 undergraduates and their perceptions of how they were perceived in the classroom. One group was told to be of a higher socioeconomic status (SES), while the other was said to be of a lower SES. When asked by the perceiver to rate the students' abilities, those who had information indicating that the students came from a higher SES rated the students' abilities higher than their grade level. In contrast, those with lower SES rated them lower than the grade level.

Yes, Gen Z has its own challenges, whether it's the role of technology in their lives, risk-taking, or religious decline.⁴ However, the more we stereotype and label them, the more biases we introduce into helping them belong. In his book on *Belonging*, Geoffrey Cohen (a Professor of Psychology at Stanford University) presents a simple method to overcome this bias toward stereotyping or labeling. This method involves first acknowledging that we are all prone to stereotyping others. Once we have admitted and become aware of our (stereotype) bias, we can use this simple strategy - assess the

² Geoffrey Cohen, *Belonging: The Science of Creating Connection and Bridging Divides*, First Edition (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2022), chap. 5.

³ John M. Darley and Paget H. Gross, "A Hypothesis-Confirming Bias in Labeling Effects," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 44, no. 1 (1983): 20–33, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.44.1.20>.

⁴ Amoris Christi (Boynton Beach, Florida), ed., *The Art of Listening to Young People* (Saint Louis: En Route Books and Media, LLC, 2023), chap. 3.

situation, suspend judgment, be open and respectful, pause, reflect, and look again.⁵ This strategy can serve as a starting point for overcoming stereotype bias and aid our work to help young people belong.

3. Belonging Uncertainty.

It was James's first week in college. When he arrived, he knew almost no one, only one or two familiar faces, and yet he was certain that this was where he wanted to be. Leaving his family behind, James moved away from home to begin college life. On the surface, everything seemed ideal: a Catholic college guided by dedicated priests, with a clear commitment to forming students not only academically but also spiritually. That first week, however, told a different story. Orientation was filled with introductions, conversations with classmates, and the sharing of personal stories. The college organized several social gatherings to help new students connect and form friendships. And yet, by the end of the week, James found himself asking a quiet but unsettling question: Is this really the place I want to be? Feelings of loneliness crept in, accompanied by the persistent thought, I feel alone. Later that week, James participated in a silent directed retreat organized for new Catholic students. The retreat deepened his awareness of God's presence and strengthened his sense of belonging to God, even as his sense of belonging within the community itself was still taking shape. Now, three years later, James describes the college as home.

This raises an important question. Why did James experience a sense of not belonging during that first week, even within a community that was welcoming, well-intentioned, and intentionally structured to help students belong? What was missing in those early days that could not be resolved by programs, social events, or shared religious identity alone? Think of the first time you went to a party because of an invitation from that one friend whom you barely knew. You walk into that party, and your first sense is, "I don't belong here."

We all have experienced this sense of not feeling part of the group, especially when it's somewhere new. But it's important to distinguish these initial feelings, particularly in a new place, from belonging.

Geoffrey Cohen (whom we mentioned earlier) and Dr. Greg Walton (Professor of Psychology at Stanford University) were the first to coin the term "Belonging uncertainty."⁶ Although there are many reasons for "belonging uncertainty," such as a perceived threat to our sense of belonging, self-protective mechanisms, sensitivity to the perception of others, and fear of failure, we need to keep in mind and distinguish "belonging uncertainty" from actually "not belonging."⁷ Sometimes, belonging takes time, as it did for James in college. James had no negative experiences at the college, yet he experienced "belonging uncertainty" and attributed it to a lack of belonging. Think of all the young people entering high school and/or college. On top of the uncertainty that they experience, what if they now have a negative experience of bullying, hazing, and not being welcomed? Belonging uncertainty will only become worse.

⁵ Cohen, *Belonging*, 156–59.

⁶ Cohen, chap. 2.

⁷ Cohen, 30.

In a study by Cohen and Walton, 73-86% of students answered positively to a belonging uncertainty during their freshmen year. However, 82-97% of upperclassmen reported that since their freshman year, “their comfort in school” and “confidence in their abilities and teachers” improved.⁸ We understand that not every situation is just about giving time. It’s important to recognize toxic communities and situations in which one may be, and to distinguish them from belonging uncertainty. However, helping young people understand and normalize “belonging uncertainty” can significantly alleviate their distress. As we will expand on in the next chapter, relationships can be integral to belonging and to overcoming belonging uncertainty. Having the courage to try to connect to one person or make one friend can make a difference. This can be daunting for young people, but accompanying them and encouraging them to make this connection can be a source of belonging. This may be why we tend to associate with people of the same culture, ethnicity, or religion when starting school or college. We experience a sense of connection that helps us overcome uncertainty about belonging, and the fear of others’ judgment and perception is less heightened.

4. Othering: Creating an Us vs Them.

This is the story of Thomas, a young physician, reflecting on the beginning of his medical career in the United States.

“I remember my first day of residency in Family Medicine. I matched, which is the medical term for acceptance, at a hospital in rural Missouri. Growing up in India, I probably did not imagine that I would end up in rural Missouri when I first dreamed of coming to the United States for residency training. And yet, studying medicine in the United States had always been my dream.

I remember my first week of residency clearly. Apart from the residents and a few faculty members, most of the attending physicians were from this small town or had long-standing ties to it. Nearly my entire patient population consisted of white working-class Americans. I felt I had nothing in common with them. Because they seemed so different from me, I found myself keeping my distance as much as possible.

In our previous publication, *The Art of Listening to Young People – A Pastoral and Scientific Guide*, we discussed an analogical barrier to listening called “Person-Idea conflation.”⁹ Person-idea conflation occurs when we think that people, in terms of who they are, can be reduced to their ideas. So, when we find ourselves listening to an idea we disagree with, we don’t just reject the idea; we reject the person themselves. We can say the same thing about belonging.

What is our response when we encounter people who are different from us?
Othering is when one “defines and secures one’s own identity by distancing and stigmatizing another.”¹⁰

⁸ Cohen, 39–43.

⁹ Amoris Christi (Boynton Beach, Florida), *The Art of Listening to Young People*, 81.

¹⁰ Natalie J. Grove and Anthony B. Zwi, “Our Health and Theirs: Forced Migration, Othering, and Public Health,” *Social Science & Medicine* (1982) 62, no. 8 (April 2006): 1931–42, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.08.061>.

Othering " reinforces notions of one's own normality" and "sets up the difference of others as a point of deviance."¹¹ Othering taken to the extreme is what leads to radical group identities and racial extremism. The Canadian Museum for Human Rights indicates the Holocaust as a case of othering taken to the extreme – where "we highlight the differences between groups of people to increase suspicion of them, to insult them or to exclude them."¹² Although none of us will take othering to this extreme, othering can manifest subtly in our daily interactions, including with young people. We (and young people) may use othering to create a us-versus-them dichotomy. This us-versus-them can arise from technology, language, age, values, or any perceived difference. Young people (and us) can feel intimidated because of these differences, creating their own secure spaces with themselves and interacting only with people who share the same ideas they have. There is a sense of belonging we experience with persons who share our values.

However, we would like to point out that this barrier of othering is not something to fear; the other person and their difference are not to be feared but embraced.

Early in his Papacy, Pope Francis, in one of his morning meditations, invited us to work for "a culture of encounter."¹³ The Holy Father discussed how we treat the poor because of their differences from us, which results in us merely pitying them. The Holy Father drew inspiration from the Gospel passage of Luke 7:11-17, where Jesus encounters the widow on her way to bury her son. The Gospel says, "When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her. And he drew near and spoke. He said to her: Do not weep." (Luke 7:13). The Holy Father reminds us of what it means to encounter the other. To encounter the other is not just to look at the other and stop there. Instead, a culture of encounter allows us to touch the other person's humanity. This is where the Holy Father asks us not just to look past them but to look and not just see, listen, and not just hear. In doing so, the Holy Father points out that we overcome our differences. Whatever othering we have can be overcome through a culture of encounter. In our interactions with young people, we can witness this culture of encounter.

We are called to see the young person in front of us not merely as their ideas, hobbies, or differences, but as a person with dreams, hopes, and desires.

Allowing ourselves to see and listen to them, the culture of encounter can be an antidote to othering.

The young physician Thomas, who spent his early career in rural Missouri, realized that despite significant cultural differences between him and the people of Missouri, they all shared a basic humanity and values. Thomas realized how his colleagues all wanted what was best for their patients. By listening to and knowing his patients and allowing himself to "encounter" them, he realized his patients just wanted to get better. Encountering their humanity allowed Thomas to overcome any othering that he first experienced. By the end of his residency, Thomas had loved the place so much

¹¹ Grove and Zwi.

¹² Clint Curle, "Us vs. Them: The Process of Othering," Canadian Museum for Human Rights, January 24, 2020, <https://humanrights.ca/node/887>.

¹³ Pope Francis, "For a Culture of Encounter," September 13, 2016, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2016/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20160913_for-a-culture-of-encounter.htm and used Thomas to overcome the othering they simply he initially

that he decided to stay there to work for another year. A culture of encounter can be a preventive measure to overcome any othering between us and young people, and young people among themselves.

Having identified some barriers to helping young people belong, we can examine in greater depth how we can support their belonging and what role we can play.