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# Life Regrets and the Need to Belong

Mike Morrison<sup>1</sup>, Kai Epstude<sup>2</sup>, and Neal J. Roese<sup>3</sup>

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## Abstract

The present research documents a link between regret and the need to belong. Across five studies, using diverse methods and samples, the authors established that regrets involving primarily social relationships (e.g., romance and family) are felt more intensely than less socially based regrets (e.g., work and education). The authors ruled out alternative explanations for this pattern and found that it is best explained by the extent to which regrets are judged to constitute threats to belonging. Threats to belonging at the regret level and the need to belong at the individual level were strong predictors of regret intensity across multiple regret domains. These findings highlight the central role social connectedness plays in what people regret most.

## Keywords

regret, belonging, need to belong, life domain, love, work, social impact

Going to school, forging a career, marrying, and raising children represent significant life goals for most people, and the mistakes that people make in these pursuits form the basis of life regrets. Regret is a negative emotion that occurs on the realization that a different past behavior might have yielded a better outcome than what actually transpired (Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). Regret is a commonly experienced emotion (Saffrey, Summerville, & Roese, 2008) that impacts a wide variety of decisions, judgments, and mental health outcomes (Inman, Dyer, & Jia, 1997; Roese et al., 2009; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007). For the most part, regret has been connected to such important outcomes in terms of its mechanisms and processes, not its contents. In the present research, we probe the content of regrets and reveal a strong connection between regret and one of the most powerful of human motives, the need to belong. As such, the present research repositions life regret as an instantiation of the motive to connect to other people.

A few studies have examined the contents of life regrets with varying results. A representative survey of adult Americans found that regrets of love (romance and family) were the most common, followed by regrets of work (career and education; Morrison & Roese, 2011). This contrasted with a meta-analysis of 11 earlier studies in which regrets of education were most common (32%), followed by career (22%), and romance (15%; Roese & Summerville, 2005). A college student sample in that same article, however, identified romance as the most frequent domain in which regret occurs. In some studies, the methodological approach was to ask people to nominate a salient life regret and then to categorize it into one or another life domain. A more direct approach (e.g., Beike, Markman, & Karadogan, 2009; Gilovich & Medvec, 1994; Roese & Summerville, 2005, Study 2) was to examine self-reported regret intensity. Adopting this latter approach, the empirical

question we first address is whether regrets of a more social nature—involving interactions with loved ones, family, and friends—are more intense on average than nonsocial regrets.

Social relationships, we suggest, are the most pivotal component of life regrets. Failed marriages, turbulent romances, and lost time with family may elicit regrets that last a lifetime. We argue that these most common of life regrets instantiate threats to the need to belong. The need for strong, stable social relationships has been cited as a “fundamental human motivation” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). People with a stronger drive for social intimacy experience greater subjective well-being (McAdams & Bryant, 1987), social interactions increase positive affect (Fleeson, Malanos, & Achille, 2002), and a threatened sense of belonging is associated with anxiety, anger, and self-defeating behavior (Baumeister & Tice, 1990; Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Peplau & Perlman, 1982; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001; Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002; Williams, 2007). Moreover, people regulate their belonging needs, such that loneliness increases people’s attention to social cues that provide hints toward future social inclusion, which in turn feeds into a search for subsequent opportunities for social connection (Hess & Pickett, 2010; Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004). Belonging, as a

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core human motive, powerfully connects to well-being and mental health.

The present research demonstrates a connection between belonging and regret in five studies. Studies 1a and 1b examined regrets within life domains (e.g., Morrison & Roese, 2011; Roese & Summerville, 2005) and tested whether greater regret intensity was associated with regrets centering on love as opposed to work. Study 2 showed that the social impact of the regret directly corresponds to its intensity and ruled out competing variables that might also capture variance in intensity between love and work regrets. Study 3 revealed that the threat to belonging associated with a particular regret in turn corresponds to its self-reported intensity. Study 4 demonstrated that individual differences in need to belong predict regret intensity.

## Studies 1a and 1b: Love and Work

These studies revealed a pattern in which more intense regrets center on love than work, which, at least since the days of Freud, have been held to be the most important domains of goal striving in life (e.g., *Love and work . . . work and love, that's all there is*, Freud cited in Erikson, 1963, pp. 264–265) and formed the basis of recent regret research (Morrison & Roese, 2011). Study 1a sampled college students, whereas Study 1b employed a representative sample of adult Americans.

### Participants

**Study 1a.** 549 students (319 females), aged 17–49 ( $M = 20.1$ ,  $SE = .09$ ), completed an Internet survey for course credit.

**Study 1b.** 370 Americans (207 females), aged 19–103 ( $M = 49.7$ ,  $SE = 1.04$ ), identified by random digit telephone dialing, completed the survey in exchange for \$5 (mailed).<sup>1</sup> The survey included numerous variables not reported here (but described in Morrison & Roese, 2011; Roese et al., 2009).

### Procedure

**Study 1a.** Participants described a life regret, randomly assigned to be high (the regret is severely upsetting; bothers you a lot), moderate (the regret is moderately upsetting; bothers you somewhat), or mildly intense (the regret is mildly upsetting; bothers you just a little bit). As a manipulation check, participants rated regret intensity (7-point scale: How much does this regret bother you?), then categorized their regret into 1 of the 12 life domains from Roese and Summerville (2005): Education, career, romance, family, leisure, self-improvement, finances, parenting, spirituality, community, friendships, and health. We focused our analysis on the love (romance and family) versus work (education and career) distinction (as per Morrison & Roese, 2011).<sup>2</sup>

**Study 1b.** Participants reported one life regret, and two independent raters coded the regret for intensity as being either high (e.g., divorce; death in the family), moderate (e.g., financial setback; more general dissatisfaction with one's job), or mild

(e.g., a minor argument with a spouse; bad day at work;  $\kappa = .79$ ). Coders also categorized the regret by life domain, as per the domains in Study 1a ( $\kappa = .81$ ). The coders used demographic information and longevity of regret for each participant to place the intensity of participants' regrets in context.

## Results and Discussion

**Study 1a.** Confirming the success of the manipulation, the regret intensity conditions varied in rated intensity (low:  $M = 3.29$ ,  $SE = .11$ ; moderate:  $M = 4.54$ ,  $SE = .10$ ; high:  $M = 5.50$ ,  $SE = .10$ ),  $F(2, 543) = 118.2$ ,  $p < .001$ . Overall, love regrets (25.7%) were no more common than work regrets (30.6%),  $\chi^2(1) = 2.36$ ,  $p = .12$ . After the love and work categories, rankings were as follows: Friendship (12.2%), leisure (8.7%), self-improvement (8.6%), finances (4.2%), health (3.6%), spirituality (1.5%), community (.7%), and parenting (.4%), with another 3.8% falling under "other."

However, the intensity manipulation was related to life domain,  $\chi^2(2) = 26.2$ ,  $p < .001$ . High-intensity regrets more often centered on love (37.1%) than work (21.1%),  $\chi^2(1) = 7.69$ ,  $p = .01$ , whereas low-intensity regrets more often centered on work (40.2%) than love (15.8%),  $\chi^2(1) = 19.7$ ,  $p < .001$ . Moderately intense regrets were almost equally likely to focus on love (24.8%) or work (30.0%),  $\chi^2(1) = .96$ ,  $p = .32$ . Love and work regrets ranked at the top as well in the high-intensity category. After these categories, the most common domains in the high-intensity category were friendship (11.4%), self-improvement (10.3%), leisure (10.3%), and health (4.0%), with all other domains less than 2%.

**Study 1b.** Regrets of love (36.3%) were somewhat more common than regrets of work (27.8%),  $\chi^2(1) = 3.49$ ,  $p = .06$ .<sup>3</sup> Intensity was related to life domain,  $\chi^2(2) = 15.6$ ,  $p < .001$ , such that high-intensity regrets were more likely to focus on love than work (56.4% vs. 19.9%),  $\chi^2(1) = 16.1$ ,  $p < .001$ , whereas mild and moderate regrets were no more likely to focus on love than work, mild: 26.5% versus 32.0%,  $\chi^2(1) = .03$ ,  $p = .85$ ; moderate: 26.7% versus 32.4%,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.04$ ,  $p = .31$ . These two studies converge on the conclusion that regrets of a more social nature tend to involve greater emotional intensity.

## Study 2: Social Impact

The primary goal of Study 2 was to test directly the connection between the social nature of regret and its corresponding intensity. Moreover, we tested whether the social impact of the regret (the impact of the regretted event on people close to the participant) captured variance in regret intensity better than other variables, which we deemed plausible candidates based on prior research.

The competing explanations involved: (a) perceived importance of the life domain and the regret within it, (b) future opportunity, (c) repetitive thought, (d) self-blame, (e) longevity of the regret, and (f) social impact.<sup>4</sup> In terms of the theoretical justification for these variables, Roese and Summerville (2005; Study 2) found that perceived importance as well as beliefs

about future opportunity independently predicted regret intensity. If love regrets are deemed more important and/or are believed to be more open to modification than work regrets, either of these variables may account for the love versus work pattern previously observed.

Further, individuals may think about regrets of love more often than regrets of work. Past research has shown that repetitive regrets are relatively more intense in terms of association with depression and anxiety (Roese et al., 2009). Moreover, people might blame themselves more for love than for work regrets leading to greater regret intensity (Ordóñez & Connolly, 2000; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007; Zeelenberg, van Dijk, & Manstead, 1998, 2000). Finally, love regrets may linger longer than work regrets. In testing the simultaneous capacity of each of these variables to predict the pattern of love versus work variation in regret intensity, we hoped to provide clearer specifications of the role of social impact in regret intensity.

### Participants and Procedure

One-hundred and eight students and university employees (77 women), aged 19–79 ( $M = 34.0$ ,  $SE = 1.40$ ), completed the study in a laboratory in exchange for \$10. Participants provided four regrets: two of high intensity and two of low intensity. Participants described the regret and then answered several questions about it using 7-point scales (unless otherwise noted).

**Regret intensity.** Participants rated intensity for each regret using the same measure as in Study 1a.

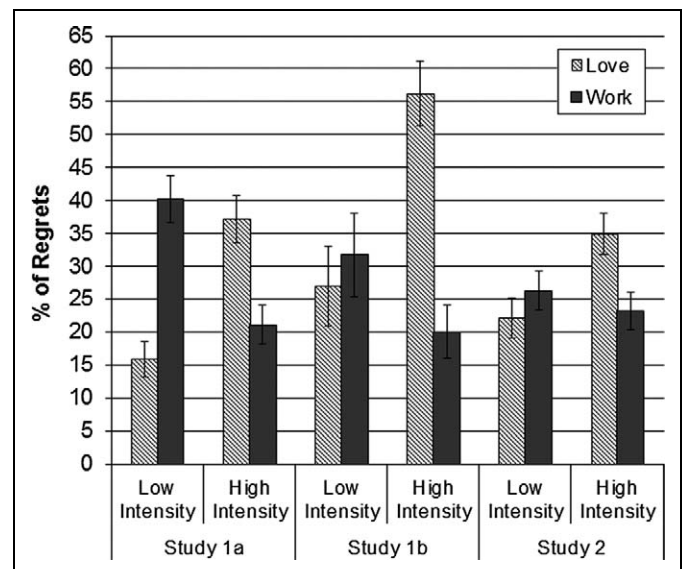
**Regret focus.** Participants categorized their regrets into one of the domains used in the previous studies. Again, analyses centered on love (romance and family) versus work (education and career) regrets.

**Social impact.** Participants rated 2 items ( $\alpha = .87$ ) for each regret: “The outcome(s) of this regret has affected other important people in my life” and “To what extent has the outcome(s) of this regret affected those you feel close to?”

**Importance.** We used two measures of importance. First, participants ranked the importance of the 12 life domains. Second, they rated 4 items ( $\alpha = .79$ ) for each regret. These ratings involved how high the stakes were in the regretted situation, how much it mattered to them if the situation had worked out the way they wanted, how great an impact it had on their life as a whole, and how much of an impact it had on other areas of their life besides the domain primarily affected.

**Future opportunity.** We measured future opportunity via 2 items ( $\alpha = .76$ ), asking whether the participant still had a chance to “fix” the regret and whether the circumstances that led to the regret were still open to modification.

**Repetitive thought.** Participants rated “How often do you think about this regret?”



**Figure 1.** Regret intensity of love versus work regrets. This figure displays the percentage of love and work regrets within the categories of low- and high-intensity regrets for the first three studies.

**Self-blame.** Participants rated “How responsible do you personally feel for the outcome(s) that triggered this regret?”

**Longevity.** Participants estimated how much time (days, weeks, and months) had elapsed since they first experienced the problem that evoked the regret. Their response yielded a variable in days, which we log transformed to ensure normality of distribution.

For all analyses in this study and later studies, SAS Proc Mixed was used with regrets being nested within individuals.

### Results and Discussion

Many different high- and low-intensity regrets were provided. Examples included: “My biggest regret is cheating on my husband” (high intensity); “I regret not using my time well at work” (low intensity).

The manipulation corresponded to variation in rated intensity, in that high-intensity regrets ( $M = 4.69$ ,  $SE = .13$ ) were rated as more intense than low-intensity regrets ( $M = 3.90$ ,  $SE = .12$ ),  $F(1, 428) = 20.0$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .43$ . Regret intensity again predicted the life domain of regrets,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.69$ ,  $p = .03$ . High-intensity regrets were more likely to focus on love than work (34.9% vs. 23.2%),  $\chi^2(1) = 5.00$ ,  $p = .03$ , whereas low-intensity regrets were equally likely to focus on love versus work (22.1% vs. 26.3%),  $\chi^2(1) = .79$ ,  $p = .38$ , thus replicating Studies 1a and 1b (see Figure 1).

We next tested which of six variables best accounted for this variation in intensity of love versus work regrets. Recall that in addition to our focal measure, social impact, we also measured: (a) the perceived importance of the life domain, (b) future opportunity, (c) repetitive thought, (d) self-blame, and (e) longevity of the regret.



**Table 1.** Love Versus Work Regrets

	Love Regrets	Work Regrets	<i>d</i>	<i>p</i>
Importance	4.50 (.14)	4.53 (.15)	.02	.91
Future opportunity	3.31 (.20)	3.75 (.20)	.21	.12
Repetitive thought	3.83 (.14)	3.94 (.16)	.07	.59
Self-blame	5.68 (.14)	5.71 (.16)	.02	.89
Longevity	6.00 (.26)	5.32 (.24)	.25	.06
Social impact	4.63 (.17)	3.17 (.20)	.74	<.001

Note. The values presented are the means for each regret type (standard errors are in parentheses).

Turning first to perceived importance, we examined both the importance ascribed to various life domains in general and to the four specific regrets provided. When asked to select from among the 12 life domains which was most important to them, participants were no more likely to select a love (romance or family; 15.4%) than a work domain (career or education; 20.2%),  $\chi^2(1) = .68, p = .41$ . When looking across all 12 rankings participants provided, the sign test did not reveal that love regrets were ranked higher than work regrets,  $z = -1.53, p = .12$ . In fact, the top ranked domain was career. Furthermore, in terms of the specific four regrets each participant provided, love regrets were not rated as more important than work regrets ( $M = 4.50, SE = .14$  vs.  $M = 4.53, SE = .15$ ),  $F(1, 226) = .14, p = .91, d = .02$  (see Table 1). Thus, importance cannot explain the love–work difference in regret intensity.

The remaining variables were tested by examining the differences in respective ratings as a function of love versus work regrets. We found no significant differences in love versus work regrets in ratings of future opportunity ( $M = 3.31, SE = .20$  vs.  $M = 3.75, SE = .20$ ),  $F(1, 226) = 2.47, p = .12, d = .21$ ; repetitive thought associated with the regret ( $M = 3.83, SE = .14$  vs.  $M = 3.94, SE = .16$ ),  $F(1, 228) = .29, p = .59, d = .07$ ; self-blame ( $M = 5.68, SE = .14$  vs.  $M = 5.71, SE = .15$ ),  $F(1, 228) = .02, p = .89, d = .02$ . We did find a relatively weak effect in longevity, in that love regrets were somewhat longer-lived than work regrets ( $M = 6.00$  elapsed log days,  $SE = .26$  vs.  $M = 5.32$  log days,  $SE = .24$ ),  $F(1, 220) = 3.58, p = .06, d = .25$ .

Finally, we turned to our focal variable, the social impact of the regret. Love regrets were rated significantly higher than work regrets on the extent to which they affected the participants' social relationships ( $M = 4.63, SE = .17$  vs.  $M = 3.17, SE = .20$ ),  $F(1, 228) = 31.3, p < .001, d = .74$ . Importantly, social impact predicted regret intensity ( $B = .12, p = .002$ ) even when controlling for all other variables. Moreover, as regret focus (love versus work) did not predict differences in any of the other variables, this left social impact as the only candidate for testing mediation. Social impact did indeed mediate the difference in regret intensity between love and work regrets (Sobel's  $z = -4.16, p < .001$ ).

In testing, competing explanations for what might account for the greater intensity of love over work regrets, only the greater social impact of love stood out. In the next two studies,

we obtained more direct evidence for a connection between belonging needs and regret intensity.

### Study 3: Perceived Threats to Belonging

In this study, we sought to measure directly the extent to which regrets of love and work threaten feelings of belonging and whether threats to belonging predict differences in regret intensity. For this purpose, we manipulated regret focus (work versus love) on a within-subject basis and measured the extent to which each regret threatened feelings of belonging. Furthermore, Study 2 revealed that love regrets were longer-lived than work regrets. In order to track this variation more precisely, we examined whether threats to belonging have an equivalent predictive validity with regard both to current as well as original regret intensity (i.e., how much regret is felt in the present vs. when the event first occurred). It is possible that the relation of threats to belonging to regret intensity builds over time rather than existing from the start. Accordingly, we measured regret intensity for both the present time frame and when the evoking event first occurred.

In addition, we tested whether threats to belonging serve as a global predictor of regret intensity within and across life domains. Perhaps, whether a given regret threatens individual's feelings of being accepted and having stable social relationships only matters for love-related regrets. The intensity of work-related regrets may be determined to a greater extent by utilitarian or materialistic concerns. Demonstrating that threats to belonging predict regret intensity for both work and love regrets would illustrate a deeper, more profound connection between belonging and regret.

### Participants and Procedure

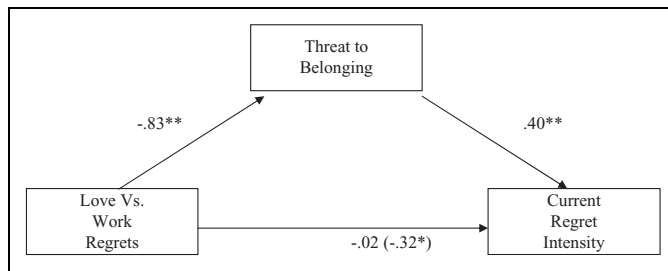
One hundred and twenty-eight adults (105 women), aged 21–75 ( $M = 45.7, SE = 1.00$ ), completed the study online in exchange for being entered into a \$100 lottery. Participants provided only love and work regrets. Specifically, each participant provided four regrets: two focused on love (e.g., romance and family) and two focused on work (e.g., career and education). After describing each regret, participants completed follow-up questions measuring regret intensity and threats to belonging for each regret. The measures were as follows:

**Current regret intensity.** The same measure was used as in Study 1a.

**Original regret intensity.** Participants rated “How much did this regret bother you at the time it first occurred?”

#### *Threat to belonging*

Participants completed this 6-item measure ( $\alpha = .87$ ) for each regret. Items were adapted from the Need to Belong scale (Leary, Kelly, Cottrell, & Schreindorfer, 2007) but were rewritten so as to focus on each regret. These items were “This regret threatened my feelings that I really belonged;” “This regret threatened my sense that I am accepted by others;” “This regret threatened my feelings that I ‘connect’ with others;”



**Figure 2.** Threat to belonging mediates the relationship between regret focus and current regret intensity. In this mediation model, regret focus (love versus work) is the independent variable, threat to belonging the mediator, and current regret intensity the dependent variable. Regret focus was coded as 0 for love regrets and 1 for work regrets. Threat to belonging and current regret intensity are continuous measures. The numbers alongside each path are the  $\beta$  coefficients for the predictor. The value in parentheses is the  $\beta$  coefficient for regret focus predicting current regret intensity and the value beside the parentheses is the  $\beta$  coefficient for regret focus when controlling for the mediator. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

“This regret has highlighted qualities within myself that others might not like;” “This regret created distance between myself and some of my loved ones;” and “This regret hurt my relationship with someone I usually turn to in times of need.”

## Results and Discussion

Participants provided a range of love and work regrets. Examples of love regrets include “I regret I married my first husband.” Examples of work regrets included “I regret quitting high school and not going on to college.”

Love regrets were rated higher in current intensity than work regrets ( $M = 4.42$ ,  $SE = .12$  vs.  $M = 4.10$ ,  $SE = .12$ ),  $F(1, 372) = 4.13$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $d = .17$ . Similarly, love regrets were rated higher in original intensity than work regrets ( $M = 5.21$ ,  $SE = .13$  vs.  $M = 4.53$ ,  $SE = .13$ ),  $F(1, 377) = 19.4$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .34$ .

As predicted, love regrets were more threatening to belonging than work regrets ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SE = .11$  vs.  $M = 2.91$ ,  $SE = .10$ ),  $F(1, 468) = 32.1$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .51$ . Further, threat to belonging predicted current regret intensity across domains ( $B = .34$ ,  $p < .001$ ), within love regrets ( $B = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and within work regrets ( $B = .41$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, threat to belonging predicted original regret intensity across domains ( $B = .36$ ,  $p < .001$ ), within love regrets ( $B = .29$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and within work regrets ( $B = .38$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

## Mediation Analysis

A mediation analysis (see Figure 2) was carried out with regret focus (love vs. work) as the independent variable, threat to belonging as the mediator, and current regret intensity as the dependent variable. Regret focus predicted current regret intensity ( $B = -.08$ ,  $p = .04$ ) and threat to belonging ( $B = -.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Threat to belonging also predicted current regret intensity ( $B = .34$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, the relation

between regret focus and current regret intensity was eliminated when threat to belonging was included alongside regret focus as a predictor (regret focus  $B = -.004$ ,  $p = .91$ ), Sobel's  $z = -5.15$ ,  $p < .001$ . Similar patterns were found when original regret intensity was the dependent variable (Sobel's  $z = -5.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, threat to belonging powerfully predicts regret intensity within both love as well as work regrets and accounts for why regrets of love are more intense than regrets of work.

## Study 4: Personality Level Need to Belong

To provide converging evidence for linking belonging to regret, we explored the personality level connection using a standard individual difference measure of need to belong. We predicted that individuals who place the greatest value on the need to belong would also report the most intense life regrets. In order to examine regrets varying over a range of social and nonsocial situations, we asked participants to share two life regrets, one high and one low in overall social impact.

## Participants and Procedure

One hundred and eighty-one adult Americans (112 women), aged 18–69 ( $M = 37.0$ ,  $SE = .96$ ), completed this Internet survey in exchange for \$5. Participants provided two regrets: one that has greatly affected their relationships with others (high social impact) and another not involving other people (low social impact). After describing each regret, participants rated regret intensity and the threat to belonging implicated within that regret. Participants then completed an individual difference measure of need to belong (Leary et al., 2007). The measures were as follows:

**Current regret intensity.** Participants rated “How intensely do you currently feel this regret” for both regrets.

**Threat to belonging.** Participants rated each regret using the same 6 items ( $\alpha = .89$ ) regret focused measure used in Study 3.

**Need to Belong scale (Leary et al., 2007).** We used a standard, well-validated measure of need to belong (10 items;  $\alpha = .82$ ).

## Results and Discussion

Participants again shared a wide range of life regrets. Examples include: “I regret I never had a positive relationship with my parents, especially my father” (high social impact); “Not going to law school when I was younger” (low social impact).

High social impact regrets were rated as more intense than low social impact regrets, replicating our previous results ( $M = 5.04$ ,  $SE = .11$  vs.  $M = 4.78$ ,  $SE = .11$ ),  $F(1, 182) = 4.10$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $d = .18$ . Also, not surprisingly, high rather than low social impact regrets were rated as more threatening to feelings of belonging ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SE = .09$  vs.  $M = 3.29$ ,  $SE = .11$ ),  $F(1, 182) = 109.3$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = .87$ .

As predicted, individual differences in need to belong predicted regret intensity across all regrets (nested within subjects;  $B = .17$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This relation was evident both within high

( $B = .21, p < .01$ ) and low ( $B = .18, p = .02$ ) social impact regrets. Moreover, individual differences in need to belong were associated with regret-focused threat to belonging for both high ( $r = .29, p < .001$ ) and low ( $r = .20, p < .01$ ) social impact regrets.

This study provides converging evidence for the link between belonging and regret. At the personality level, a greater need to belong is associated with more intense life regrets overall. This positive relation held across both levels of regret impact.

## General Discussion

The need to belong constitutes one of the most pivotal of human motives. Faced with social rejection, mental and physical health suffer dramatically (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009; Leary, 1990) and react with active attempts (both direct and symbolic) to restore a feeling of belonging (Gardner, Pickett, & Knowles, 2005). We document an important connection between this powerful human motive and the commonly experienced, yet cognitively complex emotion of regret.

We compared regrets involving love (romance and family) and work (education and career) and high and low in social impact and examined which were felt more intensely. All studies converged on the finding that regrets that affect relationships with others or sense of belonging are felt more intensely than those with lesser social impact. Thus, it appears the experiences of lost loves or quarrels with family members weigh more heavily than jobs lost or passed up and mistakes made in school. Study 2 ruled out the variables of importance, future opportunity, repetitive thought, self-blame, and time course as potential alternative explanations for variation in regret intensity across content domain. Studies 2–4 demonstrated that belonging needs accounted for differences in regret intensity, such that threat to belonging mediates the work–love difference in regret intensity and predicts regret intensity both across and within work and love regrets. Regrets with high social impact were more intense than regrets with low social impact, regardless of life domain. Individuals who have a higher need to belong reported more intense regrets. Given that the threat to belonging measure predicted regret intensity within both work as well as love regrets, social concerns apparently pervade the regret experience across multiple domains.

Life regrets have previously been interpreted as a window into chronic motives (King & Hicks, 2007; Kray et al., 2010), and the present research goes further than previous work in documenting belonging to be one of the most powerful of chronic motives. Future research on the need to belong may thus leverage regret self-reports as a measurement tool. Moreover, future studies should certainly probe deeper into the connections of the need to belong to the experience of regret. For instance, perhaps interpersonal regrets are more intense because their involvement of other people makes it easier to adopt a looking glass self (Cooley, 1902; McNulty & Swann, 1994) and thus obtain a more critical view of oneself. In this way, the impact on threats to belonging on regret intensity

could serve a further functional purpose, consistent with the wealth of research illustrating the adaptive value of regrets (see Epstude & Roese, 2008; Zeelenberg & Pieters, 2007 for reviews). What our research makes clear is that, while regrets are multifaceted with diverse consequences, their social impact looms especially large. Regrets can stem from love or work, but those stemming from the former seem to be the toughest to overcome. The need to belong is not just a fundamental human motive but a fundamental component of regret.

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## Notes

1. For full methodological information on how the representative sample was identified, see Roese et al. (2009).
2. Adding friendship and parenting regrets to the “love” category and finances to the work category does not change the pattern of results reported in Studies 1a, 1b, and 2 (in Studies 3 and 4 only regrets from career, education, family, and romance were collected).
3. Work and love regrets again outranked other domains and the same was true when looking at only regrets that were coded as high intensity. Thus, we are confident that we have not excluded the most pertinent regret domains from our analyses.
4. It could be argued that sex might be another possible explanation given that women tend to place greater importance than men on maintaining strong social relationships (Cross & Madson, 1997; Maccoby, 1990). However, in neither Study 1a ( $ps > .17$ ) or Study 2 ( $ps > .89$ ) did we find that women rated love regrets as more intense than work regrets compared to men. Thus, regret intensity differences in love versus work are better explained by other factors.

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