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Outcasts by choice: Development and initial validation of the fear of being included (FOBI) scale

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ABSTRACT

While research has focused on social exclusion, modern inclusion often involves obligations that threaten personal autonomy. This paper introduces Fear of Being Included (FOBI), a novel construct distinct from social anxiety, defined as resentment and avoidance related to anticipated loss of autonomy and "time theft" from social commitments. We validate this construct across three studies. In Study 1 ($N = 240$), we developed the 10-item FOBI scale, establishing its unidimensional structure and strong discriminant validity relative to social anxiety. In Study 2 ($N = 386$), a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) replicated the scale's structure and further differentiated FOBI from pathological narcissism and the general need for autonomy. In Study 3 ($N = 282$), we employed a scenario simulation task that manipulated inclusion through "forced" versus "consented" means. As hypothesized, we found that high-FOBI individuals reported significantly higher resentment and perceived autonomy violation *specifically* in the forced condition, while reacting similarly to low-FOBI individuals in consensual scenarios. These findings establish FOBI as a distinct construct, suggesting social avoidance has multiple pathways and pointing to a conflict between the needs for relatedness and autonomy.

Contemporary social life increasingly offers opportunities for inclusion that entail extensive ongoing obligations, from workplace team-building initiatives and community organization memberships to digital group memberships that require continuous engagement (Randel et al., 2018; Shore et al., 2011). While psychological research has extensively documented the distress caused by social exclusion (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Williams, 2007), remarkably little attention has been paid to situations where inclusion itself becomes a source of resentment and avoidance.

The present research introduces Fear of Being Included (FOBI): an individual-difference construct that captures anticipatory dread and resulting resentment specifically related to anticipated autonomy loss and time appropriation in social inclusion. Unlike Social Anxiety, which centers on evaluation fears, FOBI reflects negative anticipatory responses to the commitments, obligations, and loss of control over one's time that accompany group membership. While we label the construct 'fear' to capture the anticipatory avoidance and dread associated with these situations, its core affective mechanism is more precisely defined as resentment (i.e., a hostile response to the threat of autonomy loss) rather than a phobic-style anxiety about the social interaction itself. This nomenclature intentionally contrasts with the well-known 'Fear of Missing Out' (FOMO). Whereas FOMO represents an anxiety regarding absence and disconnection, FOBI represents resentment regarding presence and the resulting "time theft".

Understanding FOBI is particularly relevant in contemporary contexts where digital connectivity (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Perlow, 2012), workplace culture, and social expectations increasingly blur boundaries between voluntary and mandatory participation. Time has become an increasingly scarce and valued resource (Bellezza et al., 2017; DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2011), making the temporal demands of social inclusion more acutely felt. If individuals avoid social connections not from fear of judgment but from resentment of autonomy loss, current social anxiety interventions may be missing a critical population. We present three studies establishing FOBI as a distinct, measurable construct.

1. Theoretical development and nomological network

We define Fear of Being Included (FOBI) as an individual difference

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construct reflecting "the tendency to experience anticipatory resentment and avoidance motivation in response to social inclusion opportunities that threaten personal autonomy through imposed obligations, time commitments, and loss of control over one's time". Unlike social anxiety, which centers on evaluation fears, FOBI reflects a defensive agency-protection response to the autonomy costs of group membership.

This construct addresses a gap in the literature on social motivation and avoidance. While extensive research has examined why people fear exclusion (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Williams, 2007) and why people fear negative evaluation in social contexts (i.e., social anxiety), remarkably little attention has been paid to situations where inclusion itself becomes a source of resentment due to its autonomy costs. This gap is especially relevant today: digital connectivity has erased many traditional boundaries around availability (Mazmanian et al., 2013), and workplace cultures increasingly treat social participation as obligatory (Randel et al., 2018).

Theoretically, this situates FOBI within the fundamental tension between Agency (individuation, mastery) and Communion (participation, contact; Locke, 2018; Wiggins, 1991). This Agency-Communion framework has proven valuable for understanding fundamental dimensions of social cognition and motivation (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Locke, 2018). While social anxiety is a threat to Communion (via rejection), FOBI is a threat to Agency (via absorption). Recent literature on inclusive leadership highlights that successful inclusion must balance 'belongingness' with 'uniqueness' (Randel et al., 2018). We argue that when inclusion initiatives emphasize belongingness at the expense of uniqueness and autonomy—manifesting as obligatory participation—they trigger a defensive agency-protection response.

FOBI encompasses two interrelated but conceptually distinct threat dimensions, including autonomy loss (i.e., the erosion of self-determination and control over one's choices and decisions when group membership imposes obligations) representing the psychological mechanism—a threat to Agency, and time theft (i.e., the appropriation of one's time resources through scheduled commitments, ongoing communications, and participation expectations that colonize one's calendar) representing the material mechanism—the loss of a finite, valuable resource (Bellezza et al., 2017; DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2011). While autonomy loss represents the psychological experience, time theft represents its concrete manifestation. Both contribute to the resentment that characterizes FOBI, with time serving as the tangible evidence of autonomy violation. We use 'time theft' deliberately to capture the involuntary nature of this resource transfer when inclusion is obligatory rather than freely chosen.

Consider two individuals declining the same social invitation: one experiences anxiety about potential negative evaluation during the event (social anxiety), while the other experiences resentment about the ongoing obligations the event might generate, including future reciprocal invitations, participation in group chats, and regular attendance expectations (FOBI). This distinction suggests different underlying mechanisms: fear of (social) judgment versus resentment of autonomy loss, implying that social avoidance may stem from multiple pathways and require different interventions depending on whether the core concern is evaluation or autonomy.

Another theoretical foundation for FOBI emerges from self-determination theory (SDT), which identifies autonomy as a basic psychological need alongside competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2024). Research in organizational contexts has consistently demonstrated the importance of autonomy for motivation and well-being (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Van den Broeck et al., 2016). However, FOBI reveals a tension within SDT's framework. While both autonomy and relatedness are considered essential for well-being, social inclusion often requires trade-offs between them. FOBI captures the resentment that arises when this trade-off feels coercive or imbalanced—when the price of belonging is perceived as surrendering control over one's time and choices.

Unlike voluntary time allocation, which preserves autonomy, obligatory social participation represents calendar colonization, in which one's schedule becomes subject to external control. Research on work-life boundaries demonstrates that individuals vary in their need for segmentation versus integration of life domains (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012; Kreiner et al., 2009). This framing positions FOBI not as irrational anxiety, but as a potentially adaptive response to environments where inclusion operates through obligation rather than genuine choice.

Importantly, we conceptualize FOBI as a general individual difference that manifests across social contexts (work, community, personal relationships) rather than as a domain-specific trait. However, its expression may be moderated by contextual factors such as the degree of choice, the magnitude of obligations, and the perceived value of the group. The proposed measure items are worded to capture this general tendency while allowing for contextual variation.

2. Distinguishing FOBI from related constructs

The primary challenge in establishing FOBI is distinguishing it from related constructs that also involve social withdrawal or autonomy concerns. Table 1 provides a systematic comparison of FOBI with associated constructs, highlighting the unique theoretical space FOBI occupies.

2.1. Social anxiety and fear of evaluation

Social Anxiety involves fear of judgment and negative evaluation in social situations, with avoidance motivated by anticipated scrutiny. Related work has also identified fear of positive evaluation (FPE) as a related but distinct construct, characterized by anxiety about receiving positive attention due to heightened expectations (Weeks et al., 2008). However, FOBI and social anxiety differ fundamentally in their core mechanism. Social anxiety is driven by Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE). The locus of the threat is the *self-image* (e.g., "Will I look foolish?"). In contrast, FOBI is driven by what we term a 'Fear of Obligation.' The locus of the threat is the *self-resource*—specifically, time and autonomy.

We hypothesize that FOBI differs fundamentally from both FNE and FPE in its core mechanism. While evaluative fears center on how one is perceived, FOBI concerns obligations. Consider two individuals declining the same invitation to join a workplace book club. Individual A (high Social Anxiety) declines because they fear their literary opinions will be judged or they will have nothing to say. Individual B (high FOBI) declines because they resent the reading deadlines, the recurring calendar invites, and the expectation of attendance. The surface behavior is identical, but the psychological pathway is distinct. While Individual A avoids the risk of rejection, Individual B avoids the certainty of obligation.

Distinguishing these motivations is critical because they require opposite interventions. The clinical "gold standard" for social anxiety is exposure therapy, which works by demonstrating that the feared negative evaluation is unlikely to occur (Hofmann, 2008). However, for an individual with FOBI, 'exposure' (i.e., forced participation) does not disprove their fear—it confirms it. Forced inclusion validates the obligation and the loss of autonomy, potentially deepening resentment and avoidance. Identifying FOBI is therefore essential to explain the "unexplained avoidance" in which socially competent individuals withdraw from participation not out of fear but out of a defensive protection of their Agency.

2.2. Introversion and solitude preference

Introversion is a personality trait characterized by a preference for less stimulating environments and comfort with solitude (Costa & McCrae, 1992). However, introversion reflects a preference-driven choice rather than resentment-driven avoidance (Bowker et al., 2017; Coplan et al., 2019). Introverts may decline social invitations because

Table 1
Overview of construct comparison.

Construct	Core Mechanism	Primary Emotion	Avoidance Motivation	Key Difference from FOBI
Fear of Being Included (FOBI)	Threat to autonomy via obligations	Resentment	Avoid autonomy loss and time theft	–
Social Anxiety / Fear of Negative Evaluation	Threat to self-image via judgment	Anxiety/Fear	Avoid negative evaluation	FOBI concerns obligations, not evaluation; present regardless of evaluation threat
Fear of Positive Evaluation	Threat from raised expectations	Anxiety/Fear	Avoid heightened scrutiny	FOBI concerns time/autonomy, not performance expectations
Introversion	Preference for low-stimulation environments	Neutral/ Preference	Seek solitude (positive pull)	FOBI is resentment-driven (negative push), not preference-driven
Need for Autonomy	General desire for self-determination	Neutral/ Motivational	Seek independence	FOBI is context-specific (social inclusion) and affectively charged (resentment)
Solitude Preference	Positive orientation toward alone time	Contentment	Seek restorative solitude	FOBI involves negative affect and avoidance, not positive solitude seeking

they genuinely prefer solitary activities, while individuals high in FOBI decline them despite potentially desiring connection, but resenting the obligations involved. Recent research on person-specific solitude priorities has demonstrated that individuals vary in their optimal amount of alone time, and that honoring these preferences predicts well-being (Nguyen et al., 2018). This positive pull toward solitude differs qualitatively from FOBI's negative push away from obligation-laden inclusion. The distinction has potential clinical relevance: introversion is generally viewed as a stable preference that requires no intervention, while FOBI—if it proves malleable—may be responsive to interventions when resentment prevents desired connections.

2.3. The role of consent in FOBI activation

A critical moderator of FOBI is whether participation is forced or consented to. Forced inclusion (e.g., mandatory team building, required group projects, non-optional social events) represents the maximum violation of autonomy from the outset. In contrast, voluntary inclusion preserves initial autonomy even if subsequent obligations emerge. This distinction is both theoretical and practical. If FOBI fundamentally concerns the loss of autonomy, forced inclusion should activate FOBI-related resentment and avoidance to the greatest extent. Therefore, we would expect that forced inclusion will not only be perceived as a greater violation of autonomy and fundamentally less fair than consensual inclusion, but it will also trigger the core affective FOBI response: resentment. Popowski et al. (2024) provide indirect support for this potential moderation, demonstrating that online groups with explicit participation commitments show different engagement patterns than voluntary groups, with commitment requirements serving as barriers even for interested individuals. Research on forced participation in educational and organizational contexts consistently demonstrates that autonomy-suppressing contexts undermine intrinsic motivation and increase reactance (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This suggests that the obligation structure of inclusion, particularly whether it begins with choice or coercion, critically shapes avoidance behavior.

3. Scale development and hypotheses

Based on the theoretical framework outlined above, we propose several hypotheses for scale development and validation. In terms of discriminant validity, we hypothesize the following:

H1. *FOBI will demonstrate weak or null correlation with social anxiety (H1a), fear of negative evaluation (H1b), fear of positive evaluation (H1c), and extraversion (H1d).*

While introversion and FOBI may both correlate with need for autonomy and social withdrawal, they operate through different mechanisms (preference vs. resentment), and extraversion primarily reflects social stimulation preferences rather than obligation concerns.

In terms of criterion-related validity, we hypothesize the following:

H2. *Higher FOBI scores will predict greater resentment (H2a), perceived autonomy loss (H2b), and lower perceived fairness (H2c) in response to forced rather than consented inclusion scenarios.*

4. Overview of studies

We present three (non-pre-registered) studies that establish FOBI as a distinct, measurable construct. In Study 1, we develop and validate the FOBI scale, demonstrating content validity, dimensionality, and discriminant validity from related constructs. In Study 2, we validate the FOBI scale in a separate sample, conduct a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA), and demonstrate further discriminant validity from related constructs. Finally, in Study 3, we contribute to criterion-related validity by empirically testing whether FOBI uniquely predicts resentment when inclusion threatens autonomy, particularly in a forced-versus-consent scenario simulation task.

5. Study 1

5.1. Participants and procedure

A sample of 240 participants (125 women, 112 men; Mage = 45.59 years, SD = 13.75, range = 21–84) was recruited via Prolific (Palan & Schitter, 2018; Peer et al., 2017). The sample size was determined based on recommendations for factor analysis, which require 10 participants per item (Costello & Osborne, 2005). All participants were U.S. nationals and fluent in English. The sample was predominantly White (77.5%), followed by Black and African American (16.6%). After providing informed consent, participants completed the FOBI scale, followed by the validation measures, in a randomized order to minimize order effects. Attention check items were embedded throughout, with no participants excluded due to failed attention checks, resulting in a final sample of 240 participants.

5.2. Measures

5.2.1. Fear of being included scale (FOBI)

To develop the *Fear of Being Included* (FOBI) *Scale*, an initial pool of 20 items was generated based on the theoretical framework established in the literature review. The items were designed to capture the core features of FOBI, focusing specifically on autonomy loss and time theft, while deliberately avoiding content related to the fear or anxiety of social evaluation. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The two subscales were comprised of (a) autonomy loss (10 items; e.g., "Being automatically included feels like losing personal freedom") and (b) time theft (10 items; e.g., "My time feels stolen when I'm included without permission"). The initial item pool, including items deleted during scale reduction, is available in the Supplementary Materials.

5.2.2. Social interaction anxiety scale

This scale (Mattick & Clarke, 1998) contained 20 items measuring anxiety in social interaction situations (α = 0.96). Example items include "I get nervous if I have to speak with someone in authority (teacher, boss, etc.)" and "I find myself worrying that I won't know what to say in social situations", rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all, 5 = extremely).

The ***Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale*** (BFNE; Leary, 1983) included 12 items assessing concern about others' evaluations (α = 0.97). Example items include "I am frequently afraid of other people noticing my shortcomings." and "I often worry that I will say or do wrong things.", rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all characteristic of me, 5 = extremely characteristic of me).

Fear of positive evaluation was measured using the Fear of Positive Evaluation Scale (FPE; Weeks et al., 2008), containing 10 items (α = 0.85). Example items include "I feel uneasy when I receive praise from authority figures" and "If I was doing something well in front of others, I would wonder whether I was doing 'too well'", rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all characteristic of me, 5 = extremely characteristic of me).

5.2.3. Big five traits

We used the Mini IPIP (Goldberg et al., 2006) to measure the Big Five personality dimensions, including openness (α = 0.76), conscientiousness (α = 0.73), extraversion (α = 0.83), agreeableness (α = 0.81), and neuroticism (α = 0.77). Example items include "I am the life of the party" (extraversion) and "I have a vivid imagination" (openness to experience), rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = very inaccurate, 5 = very accurate).

5.3. Data analysis plan

Following established scale development procedures (Clark & Watson, 1995; Hinkin, 1995), we conducted exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Items were evaluated based on: (1) factor loadings (retained if >0.70), (2) conceptual clarity and non-redundancy, and (3) contribution to internal consistency. A 10-item scale was derived based on these criteria. To ensure robust factor retention decisions, we utilized Parallel Analysis (Hayton et al., 2004) alongside the traditional Kaiser criterion (see Robustness Check section). Finally, we examined pairwise correlations between the FOBI scale and the other measures to establish discriminant validity.

5.4. Results

Maximum likelihood factor analysis was used to evaluate the structure of all 20 items (10 autonomy/resentment items, 10 time theft items). Testing a two-factor model revealed that Factor 1 had an eigenvalue of 11.63, accounting for 96.25% of the variance, while Factor 2 had an eigenvalue of only 0.45, accounting for merely 3.75% of the variance. This dramatic difference, with Factor 2 falling well below the conventional Kaiser criterion of 1.0, strongly indicates a unidimensional structure. Indeed, all items loaded strongly on Factor 1 (range: 0.636–0.846), whereas Factor 2 showed weak, inconsistent loadings (range: −0.216 to 0.382) with no interpretable pattern. These results confirm that despite theoretical distinctions between autonomy loss and time theft, the constructs are empirically inseparable in participants' experience of FOBI.

Given the strong unidimensional structure but recognizing the importance of content representation, we selected the five highest-loading items from each conceptual domain to create a balanced one-factor 10-item scale. This decision was guided by: (1) psychometric parsimony, (2) content validity, ensuring both autonomy and temporal concerns were represented; (3) practical utility, creating an efficient assessment tool; and (4) respondent burden (i.e., reducing administration time by 50% while maintaining reliability). All 10 items loaded strongly on the single FOBI factor (resentment item loadings ranging from 0.75 to 0.83, and time theft item loadings ranging from 0.62 to 0.86). The 10-item scale (see Table 2) maintained excellent internal consistency (α = 0.93). Both facets (resentment and time theft) correlated strongly with the 20-item full scale ($r > 0.93$–0.94, $p < .001$). In contrast, resentment and time theft correlated highly ($r = 0.86$, $p < .001$), further validating the unidimensional structure and suggesting that these represent complementary facets of a single underlying construct rather than distinct factors.

5.5. Discriminant and content validity

Table 3 presents correlations between the 10-item FOBI scale and the constructs assessed.

FOBI showed low positive correlations with social anxiety ($r = 0.20$, $p = .002$), BFNE ($r = 0.22$, $p < .001$) and FPE ($r = 0.22$, $p < .001$). FOBI correlated less strongly with Big Five traits overall (ranging from $r = -0.17$ for agreeableness to $r = 0.13$ for neuroticism), suggesting greater distinction from these constructs. These results provide support for H1a-H1d.

As a further test of divergent validity, we conducted a lexical-semantic similarity analysis comparing FOBI items against all items from the five comparison scales used in Study 1, following procedures for item-level semantic overlap assessment in scale development (Fischer et al., 2023; Rosenbusch et al., 2020). Using TF-IDF cosine similarity computed across item text, FOBI items showed near-zero average semantic overlap with social interaction anxiety items (M = 0.002), fear of negative evaluation items (M = 0.001), fear of positive evaluation items (M = 0.005), and pathological narcissism items (M = 0.003). The highest semantic proximity was observed with Need for Autonomy items (M = 0.011), consistent with FOBI's theoretical grounding in autonomy motivation. In all cases, within-FOBI item similarity (M = 0.021) substantially exceeded cross-scale similarity, with distinctiveness ratios ranging from 1.9× (Need for Autonomy) to 14.7× (BFNE). These results indicate that FOBI items are lexically and conceptually distinct from all comparison constructs, providing additional support for their divergent face validity.

Table 2
Factor loadings for the 10-item FOBI scale.

Item	Factor 1 Loading	Item Content
Autonomy Loss Items		
resent1	0.77	I resent when others sign me up for things without asking.
resent2	0.78	Being automatically included feels like a violation of my boundaries.
resent4	0.75	Default opt-in systems disrespect my right to choose.
resent7	0.80	I feel my autonomy is stolen when added to groups without consent.
resent10	0.83	Being forcibly included feels like others control my life.
Time Theft Items		
timetheft1	0.86	My time feels stolen when I'm included without permission.
timetheft3	0.69	I guard my calendar against unwanted group commitments.
timetheft6	0.75	Forced inclusion prevents me from pursuing my actual priorities.
timetheft7	0.62	I protect my schedule from others' assumptions about my availability.
timetheft10	0.74	My time belongs to me, not to groups that add me automatically.

Note: $n = 240$.

Table 3
Pairwise correlations between main variables in Study 1.

	Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	
(1)	FOBI	(0.93)								
(2)	Social Anxiety	0.20**	(0.96)							
(3)	BFNE	0.22***	0.79***	(0.97)						
(4)	FPE	0.22***	0.73***	0.70***	(0.85)					
(5)	Openness to Experience	−0.01	−0.24***	−0.20**	−0.17**	(0.76)				
(6)	Conscientiousness	0.03	−0.45***	−0.40***	−0.35***	0.04	(0.73)			
(7)	Extraversion	−0.13	−0.54***	−0.29***	−0.39***	0.22***	0.16*	(0.83)		
(8)	Agreeableness	−0.17**	−0.28***	−0.05	−0.14*	0.32***	−0.01	0.38***	(0.81)	
(9)	Neuroticism	0.13*	0.63***	0.57***	0.55***	−0.08	−0.44***	−0.30***	−0.24***	(0.77)

Note: FOBI = Fear of being included, BFNE = Fear of negative evaluation, FPE = fear of positive evaluation; values in parentheses on the diagonal represent Cronbach's alphas.
*** $p < .001$.
** $p < .01$.
* $p < .05$.

5.5.1. Robustness checks

To confirm the stability of this final 10-item structure given the ordinal nature of the data, we conducted a Parallel Analysis using polychoric correlations (Hayton et al., 2004). Parallel analysis is considered a more robust method for factor retention than the Kaiser criterion, as it compares observed eigenvalues against those generated from random datasets. The analysis confirmed a decisive unidimensional structure: the first factor's eigenvalue (6.45) substantially exceeded the 95th percentile of eigenvalues generated from random data (0.39), confirming that only a single latent construct underlies the data.

6. Study 2

6.1. Participants and procedure

We collected data from 402 adult participants recruited via Prolific. Due to a failed attention-check question, 16 observations were excluded, yielding a final sample of 386. All participants provided informed consent before the survey began. Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 73 years, with a mean age of 42.90 years (SD = 11.27). The sample was relatively balanced in terms of gender, with 51.3% identifying as male (n = 198), 47.2% as female (n = 182), 1.3% as other (n = 5), and 0.3% preferring not to say (n = 1). Participants reported an average of 21.64 years of work experience (SD = 11.57). In terms of racial and ethnic background, the majority of the sample identified as White or Caucasian (80.8%). The remainder of the sample identified as Black or African American (13.0%), Asian or Asian American (5.2%,), Hispanic or Latino (5.2%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (1.3%), Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (0.5%), or other backgrounds/mixed race (0.5%, n = 2). Percentages exceed 100% because participants were permitted to select multiple racial/ethnic categories.

6.2. Measures

6.2.1. Fear of being included scale (FOBI)

The same 10-item scale was used as described in Study 1.

6.2.2. Pathological narcissism

Pathological narcissism was assessed using the Brief Pathological Narcissism Inventory (BPNI; Schoenleber et al., 2015). The BPNI is a 28-item self-report measure capturing two higher-order factors: Narcissistic Grandiosity (comprising Exploitativeness, Grandiose Fantasy, and Self-Sacrificing Self-Enhancement) and Narcissistic Vulnerability (comprising Contingent Self-Esteem, Hiding the Self, Devaluing, and Entitlement Rage). Example items included "I can make anyone believe anything I want them to" and "I like to have friends who rely on me because it makes me feel important". Participants responded on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all like me) to 5 (very much like me). In the current study, internal consistency was excellent for the total scale (α = 0.93) and ranged from 0.75 to 0.88 for the individual subscales.

6.2.3. Need for autonomy

We measured Need for Autonomy using Deci and Ryan's (2000) using the 7-item Need for Autonomy subscale derived from the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction Scale. Participants responded to items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true, 7 = very true). Example items include "I feel like I am free to decide for myself how to live my life" and "People I interact with on a daily basis tend to take my feelings into consideration". Internal consistency was high (α = 0.82).

6.3. Results

To evaluate the construct validity of the 10-item FOBI scale, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted using Stata's Maximum Likelihood with Missing Values (mlmv) estimation (N = 386). A single-factor measurement model was first specified without residual covariances. This baseline model yielded acceptable but improvable fit: $\chi^2(35) = 161.38$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.941, TLI = 0.924, RMSEA = 0.097 [0.082, 0.112], SRMR = 0.043. Inspection of modification indices identified one residual covariance between two items: "I guard my calendar against unwanted group commitments" and "I protect my schedule from others' assumptions about my availability." These items share a distinctive behavioral focus on proactive calendar and schedule protection that is not fully captured by the general FOBI factor, providing theoretical justification for the modification (Kline, 2016). Allowing this covariance (cov = 0.354, $p < .001$) resulted in a significant and substantial improvement in fit, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 47.40$, $p < .001$. The modified model demonstrated a strong fit to the observed data. Although the chi-square test was significant, $\chi^2(34) = 113.98$, $p < .001$, this index is sensitive to sample size. Alternative fit indices indicated an excellent fit: CFI = 0.963 and TLI = 0.951, both exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.95; SRMR = 0.035, well below the 0.08 cutoff; and RMSEA = 0.078 [0.063, 0.094], within the acceptable range. All standardized factor loadings were statistically significant ($p < .001$), ranging from 0.615 to 0.828 (M = 0.723), supporting the scale's internal structural validity. The overall Coefficient of Determination (CD) was 0.924. As a robustness check for the ordinal nature of the data, both models were re-estimated using WLSMV (Li, 2016) in R/lavaan (Rosseel, 2012). Results were consistent with the MLMV solution: modified model CFI = 0.986, TLI = 0.981, RMSEA = 0.083 [0.067, 0.098], SRMR = 0.033; versus baseline CFI = 0.973, TLI = 0.965, RMSEA = 0.113 [0.098, 0.128], SRMR = 0.042; WLSMV-corrected difference test: $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 54.28$, $p < .001$. Standardized CFA factor loadings are provided in Table 4.

To evaluate the criterion validity of the FOBI scale, Pearson

Table 4
Standardized CFA factor loadings for the FOBI scale (Study 2).

Item	Standardized Loading (λ)	z-value	*p*-value
Item 1	0.664	21.59	< 0.001
Item 2	0.815	41.33	< 0.001
Item 3	0.744	29.52	< 0.001
Item 4	0.768	32.80	< 0.001
Item 5	0.813	40.85	< 0.001
Item 6	0.828	44.33	< 0.001
Item 7	0.615	18.09	< 0.001
Item 8	0.671	22.13	< 0.001
Item 9	0.634	19.35	< 0.001
Item 10	0.679	22.78	< 0.001

Note: $n = 386$.

correlation coefficients were calculated between FOBI scores and theoretically related constructs, including the BPNI and the Need for Autonomy. Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for all scales was robust, ranging from 0.75 to 0.93 (see Table 5).

The FOBI demonstrated significant positive correlations with the BPNI total score ($r = 0.16, p < .01$) and several of its subscales, providing evidence of convergent validity. The strongest association was observed with the Hiding the Self subscale ($r = 0.25, p < .001$), suggesting that the FOBI construct is closely linked to the tendency to conceal one's true self from others. Additionally, FOBI was significantly correlated with Devaluation ($r = 0.17$, $p < .01$), Grandiose Fantasy ($r = 0.16$, $p < .01$), and Entitled Rage ($r = 0.12$, $p < .05$). In contrast, the FOBI exhibited evidence of discriminant validity through its non-significant relationships with Contingent Self-Esteem ($r = 0.03, p > .05$). In addition, FOBI was not significantly associated with Need for Autonomy ($r = -0.06$, $p > .05$). These results indicate that the FOBI captures a distinct psychological phenomenon that is not merely a reflection of low self-worth or a lack of independence. Furthermore, the FOBI showed no significant relationship with the Exploitativeness ($r = 0.08$) or Self-Sacrificing Self-Enhancement ($r = 0.01$) subscales of the BPNI, further refining the construct's boundary conditions within the narcissistic spectrum.

7. Study 3

In this final study, we tested the core prediction that FOBI specifically concerns autonomy loss rather than social evaluation. We developed a scenario simulation task that systematically varies whether participation is forced or consented to, and we predict that FOBI will uniquely predict resentment and perceived autonomy violation under forced participation conditions. We acknowledge that the FOBI scale includes items that reference resentment toward obligations, whereas in this study, we measure resentment as an outcome. This reflects a theoretically meaningful distinction between trait and state: the FOBI scale assesses the general dispositional tendency to experience resentment toward autonomy-threatening inclusion (trait), whereas here we measure situational resentment in response to specific inclusion scenarios (state). This approach parallels established practices in personality research, where trait measures predict corresponding state responses in relevant contexts (e.g., trait anxiety predicting state anxiety; Spielberger, 1983). To address potential circularity concerns, we also included outcomes that do not overlap with scale content: perceived autonomy loss and fairness judgments.

7.1. Sample and procedure

We recruited 301 participants via Prolific Academic for an online study on workplace communication preferences. All participants provided informed consent to participate in this study. The sample size was determined using power analysis (G*Power 3.1), which indicated that 200 participants would provide 80% power to detect medium effect sizes (d = 0.50) in within-subject comparisons, with additional participants recruited to account for potential exclusions.

Participants were compensated £1.35 (approx. $1.75) for approximately 9 min of participation. Participants were required to be U.S. nationals, currently employed or have recent workplace experience, be fluent in English, and reside in the United States. Participants who failed the included attention-check question were excluded (i.e., "I do not understand a word of English"; $n = 19$), leaving a sample of 282. With 10 rounds completed per participant, our final sample included 2820 observations.

Participants completed a custom-designed scenario simulation task programmed in JavaScript and embedded in Qualtrics. After providing informed consent, participants were presented with an introduction screen describing the study as examining "workplace inclusion practices" without revealing the specific focus on consent. The introduction emphasized that participants should imagine each scenario as if it were happening in their workplace and respond with genuine feelings. Participants then completed the 10-scenario scenario simulation task. The task presented 10 workplace scenarios as realistic emails, announcements, or messages that varied systematically in their approach to consent.

Three scenarios depicted consensual inclusion (explicit permission sought, voluntary participation, or individual opt-out available), while seven depicted forced inclusion (no consent sought, mandatory participation, or automatic enrollment). This 7:3 ratio was chosen to ensure sufficient statistical power and a greater number of stimuli for the 'forced' condition, which was the primary focus of our moderation hypothesis. Scenarios in both the forced and consensual conditions covered identical situations (e.g., committee formation, team meetings, training requirements) and differed only in terms of consent.

Example Scenario (Forced/High Obligation): "Your manager has informed you that you have been assigned to the new Workplace

Table 5
Pairwise correlations between main variables in Study 2.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. FOBI	(0.92)									
2. BPNI	0.16**	(0.93)								
3. Exploitative	0.08	0.61***	(0.79)							
4. Self-Sacrificial	0.01	0.72***	0.43***	(0.79)						
5. Grandiose fantasies	0.16**	0.79***	0.41***	0.56***	(0.88)					
6. Self-esteem	0.03	0.79***	0.31***	0.45***	0.55***	(0.84)				
7. Hideself	0.25***	0.67***	0.23***	0.36***	0.38***	0.51***	(0.81)			
8. Devalue	0.17**	0.80***	0.36***	0.41***	0.50***	0.69***	0.56***	(0.79)		
9. Entitled Rage	0.12*	0.87***	0.51***	0.55***	0.66***	0.69***	0.47***	0.72***	(0.75)	
10. Autonomy	−0.06	−0.33***	0.04	−0.07	−0.26***	−0.39***	−0.39***	−0.37***	−0.24***	(0.82)

Note. $N = 386$.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

Wellness Committee. The committee meets every Tuesday from 4-5 pm for the next six months, and attendance is mandatory. Members are also expected to respond to group emails within 24 hours and participate in monthly weekend wellness events."

Example Scenario (Voluntary/Low Obligation): "You have been invited to join an optional monthly lunch discussion group. The group meets on the last Friday of each month from 12-1 pm. Attendance is completely voluntary, and there are no expectations for participation outside of the lunch meetings."

Each scenario was presented in an email format, including sender information, subject line, and message body. Visual indicators clearly marked whether consent was requested (green badge: "✓ CONSENT REQUESTED") or not sought (red badge: "× NO CONSENT"). Below each email, details were displayed regarding relevant information, including decision type (voluntary/mandatory), notice period (same day to 4 weeks), time commitment (hours per week), and opt-out availability. Critical phrases highlighting consent elements were visually emphasized with yellow highlighting (e.g., "Would you be interested in joining?" vs. "You have been added to the team").

For each scenario, participants provided four ratings on 10-point scales: (a) resentment level (1 = no resentment, 10 = extreme resentment), (b) perceived autonomy violation (1 = no violation, 10 = complete violation), and (c) fairness of inclusion approach (1 = completely unfair, 10 = completely fair)—the interface required all three ratings before allowing progression to ensure complete data. Upon completion of the task, participants viewed a summary of their average responses to forced versus consensual scenarios.

Following the task, participants completed a series of validated individual-differences scales (including FOBI, social anxiety, and Big Five traits) in a randomized order, along with demographics. Individual difference measures were administered after the scenario ratings to avoid priming participants to think about their general tendencies before responding to specific situations, which could inflate correlations between trait measures and scenario responses (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This procedure prioritizes the validity of state responses to scenarios, with the trade-off that it may slightly reduce the predictive validity of trait measures due to fatigue effects. However, because our primary research question concerns whether FOBI predicts differential responses to scenarios (rather than absolute prediction), this ordering was deemed appropriate. As an engagement and transparency measure, participants were shown a summary of their average ratings across scenarios. However, this feedback was provided after all scenario data collection was complete and thus did not influence behavioral responses. Participants were debriefed about the study's purpose and thanked for their participation.

7.2. Measures

Measures of social anxiety and the Big Five traits were the same as those outlined in Study 1. Given the low correlation among FOBI, BFNE, and FPE, we did not include them as additional controls in this study.

Fear of Being Included was assessed using the 10-item refined scale ($\alpha = 0.91$) as outlined in Study 1.

Social Anxiety was added as a control assessed using the same scale ($\alpha = 0.96$) as outlined in Study 1.

7.3. Data analysis

Primary analyses employed multilevel modeling (MLM) with scenarios nested within participants to account for the within-subjects design. Random intercepts and slopes were specified to account for individual differences in baseline ratings and sensitivity to consent manipulation. We were primarily interested in the consent × FOBI interaction, which examines whether high-FOBI individuals show greater differentiation between forced and consensual scenarios in perceptions of resentment, autonomy violation, and fairness. Furthermore, because common method bias typically inflates main effects rather than creating complex interaction patterns, the presence of a significant interaction between FOBI (trait) and the manipulated consent condition would serve as evidence against common method variance.

7.4. Results

Zero-order correlations are provided in Table 6.

Descriptive statistics indicated that participants showed clear differentiation between forced and consensual scenarios. Across all participants, forced participation scenarios elicited significantly higher resentment than consensual scenarios ($t(2818) = -36.48$, $p < .001$). Similar patterns emerged for autonomy violation ($t(2818) = -44.06$, $p < .001$) and (reverse) fairness ratings ($t(2818) = 40.41$, $p < .001$).

7.5. Scenario simulation

Next, we tested whether FOBI moderated responses to forced versus consensual inclusion, controlling for social anxiety, Big Five personality traits, and demographics (see Table 7).

As hypothesized, significant FOBI × Forced Participation interactions emerged across all three primary outcomes. For resentment, the interaction was highly significant ($\beta = 1.71$, SE = 0.20, $z = 8.43$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.31, 2.10]). To better understand this interaction, we plotted it at +/− 1 SD from the mean (Fig. 1). As shown in Fig. 1, individuals low in FOBI exhibited a modest increase in resentment from consensual to forced scenarios (slope = 2.51, SE = 0.18, $z = 13.60$, $p < .001$). In contrast, individuals high in FOBI showed a more dramatic increase from consensual to forced scenarios (slope = 4.75, SE = 0.16, $z = 28.78$, $p < .001$).

For autonomy violation, a parallel interaction emerged ($\beta = 1.74$, SE = 0.21, $z = 8.21$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.33, 2.16]). Plotting this interaction (Fig. 2) illustrated that both groups perceived minimal autonomy violation in consensual scenarios. In contrast, high FOBI individuals perceived significantly greater violation in forced scenarios (slope = 5.56, SE = 0.18, $z = 31.62$, $p < .001$) compared to low FOBI individuals (slope = 3.28, SE = 0.19, $z = 17.10$, $p < .001$).

Finally, for fairness perceptions, the interaction was also significant, but in the opposite direction ($\beta = -1.42$, SE = 0.22, $z = -6.49$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−1.85, −0.99]). Plotting this interaction (Fig. 3) revealed that both groups rated consensual scenarios as highly fair ($\chi(1) = 1.82$, $p = .18$). In contrast, high FOBI individuals rated forced scenarios as substantially less fair compared to low FOBI individuals ($\chi(1) = 46.13$, $p < .001$).

7.6. Personality and demographic covariates

Several control variables showed significant main effects. Extraversion predicted higher resentment ($\beta = 0.27$, $p = .009$) and neuroticism predicted higher resentment ($\beta = 0.25$, SE = 0.12, z = 2.09, $p = .036$). Agreeableness was associated with lower perceived autonomy violation ($\beta = -0.21$, SE = 0.09, z = −2.32, $p = .021$). Age and education showed small positive associations with ratings of resentment and autonomy. Finally, the scenario order effect was significant but small ($\beta = 0.12$, SE = 0.01, z = 7.00, $p < .001$ for resentment), suggesting mild habituation across the 10 scenarios. However, this did not affect the interaction between FOBI and the consent participation condition, indicating that the primary findings were consistent throughout the task.

8. Discussion

Across three studies, we established Fear of Being Included (FOBI) as a distinct individual difference construct that captures resentment and avoidance related explicitly to the autonomy costs of social inclusion. The discriminant validity evidence was robust. FOBI showed only

Table 6
Pairwise correlations between main variables in Study 3.

	Variable	M	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
(1)	FOBI	4.24	0.66	(0.91)									
(2)	Social Anxiety	1.35	0.92	0.09	(0.96)								
(3)	Openness	4.04	0.91	0.15*	−0.28***	(0.84)							
(4)	Conscientiousness	3.91	0.86	0.05	−0.32***	0.16**	(0.78)						
(5)	Extraversion	2.78	1.10	−0.12*	−0.64***	0.26***	0.15**	(0.85)					
(6)	Agreeableness	3.90	0.86	−0.07	−0.22***	0.40***	0.16**	0.30***	(0.83)				
(7)	Neuroticism	2.38	0.99	−0.02	0.52***	−0.17**	−0.43***	−0.26***	−0.13*	(0.82)			
(8)	Age	43.24	11.48	0.15**	−0.20***	−0.03	0.13*	0.06	−0.00	−0.20***	–		
(9)	Gender	1.51	0.5	0.00	0.08	0.02	−0.01	0.03	0.10	0.08	0.02	–	
(10)	Education	3.70	1.12	−0.06	−0.07	0.04	−0.02	0.08	0.10	−0.12*	−0.13*	−0.00	–
(11)	Work Experience	22.01	11.69	0.18**	−0.15**	−0.03	0.10	0.02	−0.02	−0.15**	0.89***	0.02	−0.24***

Note. $N = 282$. FOBI = Fear of Being Included; Gender coded male (1) and female (2); Education coded as high school (1), some college (2), associate degree (3), bachelor's degree (4), master's degree (5), doctoral degree (6); values in parentheses on the diagonal represent Cronbach's alphas.
*** $p < .001$.
** $p < .01$.
* $p < .05$.

Table 7
Regression interaction between consented participation and FOBI (Study 3).

Variables	Resentment					Autonomy					Fairness				
	Coef.	SE	z	L95%	U95%	Coef.	SE	z	L95%	U95%	Coef.	SE	z	L95%	U95%
Forced participation	−3.62***	0.88	−4.11	−5.34	−1.89	−2.97**	0.92	−3.23	−4.77	−1.17	2.02*	0.95	2.13	0.16	3.88
FOBI	−0.21	0.15	−1.41	−0.50	0.08	−0.29*	0.14	−2.12	−0.56	−0.02	0.19	0.14	1.38	−0.08	0.46
Forced Participation X FOBI	1.71***	0.20	8.43	1.31	2.10	1.74***	0.21	8.21	1.33	2.16	−1.42***	0.22	−6.49	−1.85	−0.99
Social Anxiety	0.32*	0.14	2.25	0.04	0.60	0.28*	0.13	2.21	0.03	0.53	−0.09	0.12	−0.69	−0.33	0.16
Openness to Experience	−0.20	0.11	−1.92	−0.41	0.00	−0.01	0.09	−0.08	−0.18	0.16	0.03	0.09	0.37	−0.15	0.22
Conscientiousness	−0.10	0.10	−1.05	−0.29	0.09	0.01	0.09	0.14	−0.16	0.18	0.13	0.08	1.60	−0.03	0.28
Extraversion	0.26*	0.10	2.51	0.06	0.46	0.14	0.09	1.53	−0.04	0.32	−0.05	0.09	−0.51	−0.23	0.13
Agreeableness	−0.20	0.11	−1.87	−0.42	0.01	−0.21*	0.09	−2.32	−0.40	−0.03	0.12	0.09	1.32	−0.06	0.29
Neuroticism	0.25*	0.12	2.09	0.02	0.48	0.16	0.10	1.51	−0.05	0.36	−0.05	0.10	−0.51	−0.24	0.14
Age	0.04*	0.02	2.47	0.01	0.07	0.02	0.01	1.67	−0.00	0.05	0.01	0.02	0.41	−0.02	0.04
Gender	0.16	0.17	0.94	−0.17	0.49	−0.02	0.15	−0.15	−0.31	0.26	−0.21	0.14	−1.45	−0.49	0.07
Education	0.16*	0.08	2.09	0.01	0.31	0.16*	0.07	2.26	0.02	0.29	−0.05	0.07	−0.80	−0.19	0.08
Work Experience	−0.02	0.02	−1.48	−0.06	0.01	−0.01	0.01	−0.79	−0.04	0.02	−0.00	0.02	−0.18	−0.03	0.03
Scenario	0.12***	0.02	7.00	0.08	0.15	0.06***	0.02	3.77	0.03	0.09	−0.04**	0.01	−3.01	−0.07	−0.01
Constant	0.86	1.03	0.84	−1.15	2.87	1.35	0.99	1.36	−0.59	3.29	7.27***	0.98	7.43	5.36	9.19

Note: Coef. = Coefficient; SE = Robust Standard Error; L95% = Lower 95% CI; U95% = Upper 95% CI; n = 282.
*** $p < .001$.
** $p < .01$.
* $p < .05$.

modest correlations with social anxiety, confirming it captures resentment over autonomy costs rather than evaluative fears. Hence, while socially anxious individuals worry about judgment and scrutiny, those high in FOBI resent the temporal and autonomy costs that inclusion imposes. This distinction matters theoretically: social avoidance is not a single phenomenon but reflects multiple pathways, each requiring its own conceptual framework and potentially its own intervention.

The pattern of correlations with Big Five traits further illuminates FOBI's nature. The negative correlation with extraversion was modest, suggesting FOBI is not simply introversion reframed. Extraverts may experience lower FOBI not because they enjoy obligations, but because their higher social motivation may lead them to perceive inclusion opportunities more positively and to weigh social benefits more heavily against autonomy costs. However, the respective weak correlation observed suggests that FOBI is not simply the opposite of extraversion, consistent with our theoretical claim that FOBI concerns obligations rather than social stimulation preferences. Relatedly, the weak positive correlation with neuroticism suggests that FOBI is not primarily an anxiety-driven construct, though some emotional reactivity may be present. The lack of strong associations with conscientiousness or agreeableness indicates that FOBI does not simply reflect disorganization or disagreeableness, but rather a specific sensitivity to autonomy threats. Likewise, FOBI did not correlate significantly with Need for Autonomy and only showed a small correlation with BPNI. These results indicate that FOBI seems to be a distinct construct.

Study 3's behavioral validation provided compelling evidence that FOBI specifically concerns consent and autonomy. While high- and low-FOBI individuals showed similarly low resentment in consensual scenarios, high-FOBI individuals showed dramatically elevated negative responses when participation was forced. This pattern suggests that FOBI is not about disliking social involvement per se, but rather about resenting inclusion that appropriates one's time and choice without adequate consent.

8.1. Theoretical implications

The theoretical implications of FOBI extend self-determination theory by revealing a potential conflict between two basic needs: autonomy

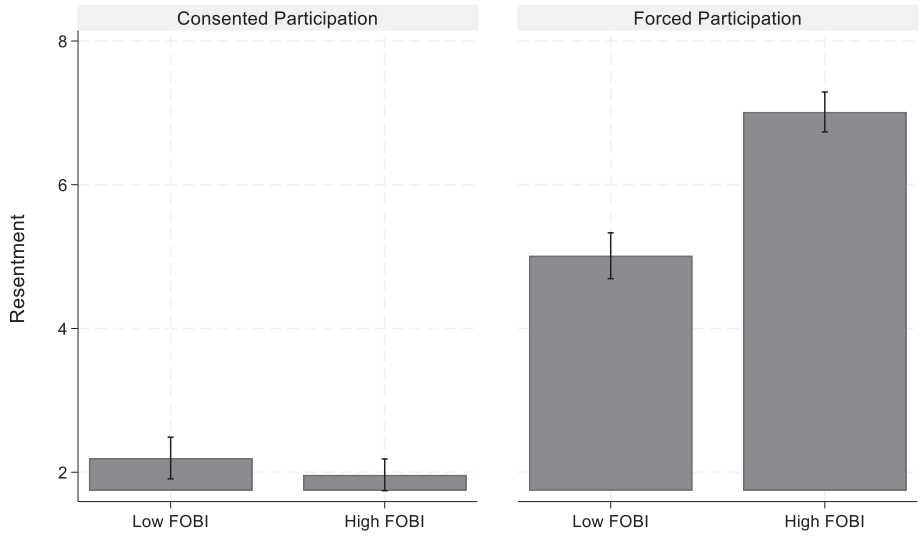

Fig. 1. Plotted interaction results predicting resentment.

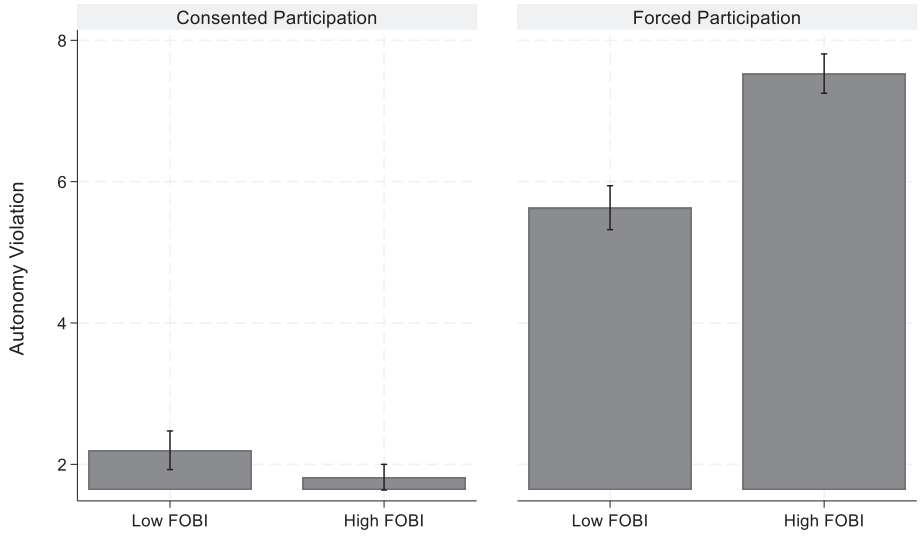

Fig. 2. Plotted interaction results predicting autonomy violation.

and relatedness. While previous research has documented contexts in which autonomy and relatedness conflict (Van Assche et al., 2018), FOBI demonstrates that some individuals have developed stable individual differences in their sensitivity to such disputes. Rather than treating autonomy-related trade-offs as situational phenomena that affect everyone similarly, FOBI suggests they are experienced more acutely by specific individuals, implying that SDT's need-satisfaction framework may require individual-difference modifiers to fully predict well-being outcomes. The existence of FOBI as a stable trait indicates that the costs of relatedness-seeking behavior are not uniformly distributed across individuals, showing that simplified models treating inclusion as uniformly beneficial are incomplete.

Second, FOBI extends the Agency-Communion framework to a threat that has received little empirical attention: Agency loss through obligatory social participation. Prior research has focused on threats to Communion (rejection, exclusion); FOBI identifies a threat to Agency that paradoxically emerges from inclusion rather than exclusion.

Third, our findings identify a pathway to social avoidance distinct from social anxiety. This matters for both research and practice, since interventions designed for social anxiety (e.g., exposure therapy, cognitive restructuring around evaluation fears) may be ineffective or even counterproductive for individuals whose avoidance is rooted in FOBI.

8.2. *Practical implications*

FOBI has direct implications for research on boundary management and work-life balance. Recent scholarship on boundary work (Kreiner et al., 2009; Tang et al., 2025) distinguishes between individuals who prefer segmentation (strong boundaries between life domains) versus integration (blended boundaries). Individuals high in FOBI may be particularly sensitive to inclusion initiatives that violate boundaries by extending work obligations into personal time or creating expectations of continuous availability. In contemporary organizational and digital contexts, inclusion often comes packaged with ongoing obligations: joining a team means attending regular meetings, accepting a group invitation generates reciprocal social debt, and digital group memberships create perpetual notification streams. Organizations seeking to foster inclusion should consider offering 'bounded inclusion' options—opportunities for connection that explicitly limit the time and obligatory scope (e.g., 'This group meets quarterly for one hour, with no expectations between meetings'). This approach respects both the need

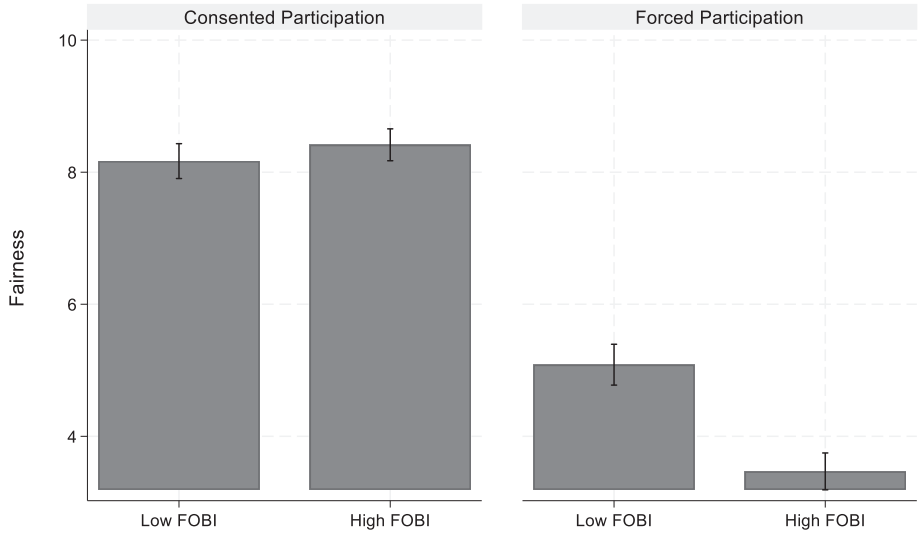

Fig. 3. Plotted interaction results predicting perception of fairness.

for belonging and the need for boundary protection, potentially reducing FOBI-driven avoidance while still achieving inclusion goals.

An open question is whether FOBI is a stable trait or a more malleable individual difference. While we conceptualize FOBI as a dispositional tendency (consistent with its measurement as an individual difference), its expression may be moderated by situational factors and organizational culture. This has implications for intervention. If FOBI is trait-like and stable, interventions should focus on person-environment fit—helping high-FOBI individuals find inclusion opportunities that respect autonomy, or helping organizations design 'low-obligation inclusion' options. If FOBI is more state-like or context-dependent, interventions might target the cognitive appraisals underlying resentment (e.g., reframing obligations as opportunities, increasing perceived control). Trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003) suggests a middle path: FOBI may be a latent tendency that is activated or suppressed depending on organizational culture, leadership style, and the specific design of inclusion initiatives. Longitudinal research is needed to assess FOBI's temporal stability and to identify moderators that amplify or buffer its expression.

For organizations, these findings suggest that inclusion initiatives should be designed with autonomy preservation in mind. "Mandatory fun" and required team-building may backfire for high-FOBI individuals, deepening rather than reducing social withdrawal. Instead, organizations might offer multiple pathways to belonging—some with higher time commitments for those who desire deep integration, and others with minimal obligations for those who value autonomy.

For clinicians, FOBI offers a new lens for understanding social avoidance. When clients present with social withdrawal, clinicians should assess not only evaluation fears but also resentment about obligations. If FOBI is the primary mechanism, interventions might focus on boundary-setting skills, assertiveness training around declining invitations, or cognitive work around the belief that all inclusion requires total absorption.

FOBI may also be relevant to understanding burnout and work-life boundary violations. The concept of time theft resonates with contemporary concerns about always-on work cultures and blurred personal-professional boundaries (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Individuals high in FOBI may be particularly vulnerable to burnout in environments where social inclusion at work extends beyond formal work hours, where digital communications create expectations of constant availability, or where declining participation risks social or professional penalties. Understanding FOBI could inform interventions that protect temporal boundaries while maintaining necessary collaboration.

8.3. Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, our discriminant validity testing focused on the most theoretically proximal constructs (e.g., social anxiety), but future research should examine FOBI's relationships with additional individual differences, including negative affectivity (Watson & Clark, 1984) to rule out general negativity, b) rejection sensitivity (Downey & Feldman, 1996) which constitutes another social avoidance mechanism, and c) boundary preferences and segmentation (Ashforth et al., 2000) which directly relates to work-life boundary management.

Relatedly, another important question for future research is whether FOBI effects are linear or curvilinear. It is plausible that minimal obligations (e.g., one brief annual meeting) may not trigger FOBI responses even among high-FOBI individuals, while extreme obligations (e.g., daily required participation) may trigger resentment even among low-FOBI individuals. This suggests a potential threshold or curvilinear model in which FOBI individual differences matter most at moderate levels of obligation. Future research should systematically vary obligation levels (frequency, duration, intensity) to map the functional form of FOBI activation and identify potential inflection points where obligations shift from acceptable to resentment-inducing.

Second, our samples were drawn from online participant pools, all of which were based in the United States, potentially limiting the generalizability of our findings to populations with different demographic characteristics or cultural contexts. The emphasis on autonomy reflected in FOBI may vary across cultures with different individualist-collectivist orientations. Specifically, the concept of 'time theft' may be culturally bound to individualistic societies (such as the United States of America), where personal autonomy is paramount. In collectivist cultures, where the self is defined through relationships (Triandis et al., 1988), the obligations of inclusion may be viewed as normative rather than intrusive. Future research is needed to test measurement invariance across cultures.

Third, while we utilized semantic mapping to distinguish FOBI from pathological traits, we did not collect clinical data. It is important to note that the semantic similarity indices reported in Study 1 reflect linguistic overlap rather than empirical comorbidity. Crucially, the FOBI scale was developed and validated strictly within normative samples to measure individual differences in social motivation; it is not intended for use in clinical settings, nor was it designed or qualified to serve as a diagnostic tool. Future research should examine FOBI in relation to personality disorders characterized by rigidity and fear of external control, such as

OCPD and Paranoid Personality Disorder, using clinical samples to further delineate the boundary between normative autonomy-seeking and pathological withdrawal.

Fourth, the present research primarily focused on workplace contexts, and it remains unclear how FOBI manifests in other domains, such as family relationships, friendships, or community involvement. The nature of obligations and the flexibility of participation may differ substantially across these contexts. For instance, family obligations may be experienced differently from workplace obligations due to their emotional significance and cultural weight. Similarly, voluntary community involvement might trigger less FOBI-related resentment than mandatory workplace participation, even when time commitments are comparable.

Fifth, we did not examine potential mechanisms linking FOBI to outcomes beyond resentment and perceived autonomy violation. Future research should investigate whether FOBI predicts actual avoidance behaviors, relationship quality, job satisfaction, or mental health outcomes. Additionally, boundary conditions warrant exploration: are there contexts in which high FOBI might be adaptive, or in which other factors, such as actual autonomy availability, social support quality, or organizational culture, might moderate the relationship between FOBI and outcomes?

Despite these limitations, this research establishes FOBI as a distinct and measurable construct capturing a previously unexamined form of social motivation. As demands on personal time intensify and always-on norms spread, understanding why some people resent obligatory inclusion has clear practical value alongside its theoretical contributions.

9. Conclusion

Fear of Being Included (FOBI) is a distinct pathway to social avoidance — driven not by evaluation fears but by resentment of the autonomy costs that group membership imposes. With strong psychometric properties and predictive validity, the FOBI scale gives researchers and practitioners a tool to distinguish obligation-driven avoidance from socially anxious avoidance, enabling more targeted interventions. The findings also challenge the assumption that inclusion is universally desirable: consent and the preservation of personal autonomy matter, and ignoring them can produce exactly the withdrawal that inclusion initiatives aim to prevent.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Dritjon Gruda: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jim A. McCleskey:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Ethical approval

Ethics approval was granted by Maynooth University, Ireland.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Claude 4.6 Sonnet (Anthropic) to assist with writing and editing. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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Declaration of competing interest

None.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2026.113827.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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