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Inclusive workplaces: A review and model

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ABSTRACT

Organizations continue to be challenged and enriched by the diversity of their workforces. Scholars are increasingly focusing on inclusion to enhance work environments by offering support for a diverse workforce. This article reviews and synthesizes the inclusion literature and provides a model of inclusion that integrates existing literature to offer greater clarity, as well as suggestions for moving the literature forward. We review the inclusion literature consisting of the various foci (work group, organization, leader, organizational practices, and climate) and associated definitions and how it has developed. We then describe themes in the inclusion literature and propose a model of inclusion. Finally, we end by discussing theoretical and practical implications.

1. Introduction

Global demographic trends and forecasts worldwide of increasing diversity in the workforce highlight the importance of examining approaches to improving workplace inclusion. Evidence continues to point to social exclusion and economic inequality in the workplace (Mor Barak, 2005; Mor Barak, Findler, & Wind, 2001). The U.S. has a history of discrimination against specific racial/ethnic groups, women, disabled individuals, and older workers that has contributed to the enactment of legislation that protects these groups. However, recognized aspects of diversity continue to increase and in many cases, there are no laws that provide protection in the U.S. Employees who are members of social identity groups that have a history of discrimination (women, people of color, LGBTQ, individuals with disabilities, older adults, religious minorities, immigrants, people with accents, etc.) may experience exclusion from valued opportunities including jobs, promotions, information networks, decision making, and human resource investments (Mor Barak, 2005). A continued expansion of social categories leading to exclusion in the workplace has led to new and broader conceptions of workforce diversity. As stated by Mor Barak (2014, p. 136) “Workforce diversity refers to the division of the workforce into distinction categories that (a) have a perceived commonality within a given cultural or national context and that (b) impact potentially harmful or beneficial employment outcomes such as job opportunities, treatment in the workplace, and promotion prospects—irrespective of job-related skills and qualifications.” Throughout this article, we refer to workforce diversity with this definition in mind. Likewise, Ferdman's (2017, p. 235) broad definition of inclusion is consistent with our perspective: “In inclusive organizations and societies, people of all identities and many styles can be fully themselves while also contributing to the larger collective, as valued and full members.” Note however that in the review below we focus on the inclusion experiences of current employees in their employing organizations.

Exclusion can have negative effects on psychological and physical health, whether it occurs as an overt (i.e., acts of prejudice) or a subtle form of discrimination (ambiguous in intent to harm the recipient; Jones, Peddie, Gilrane, King, & Gray, 2013). While overt

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forms of discrimination can be addressed legally for some social categories of workforce diversity, subtle forms are much less likely to be viewed as legitimate or requiring resolution even though these subtle forms occur more frequently and perpetuate fewer opportunities for individuals who belong to social categories that are targets of discrimination (Sue et al., 2007).

While legislation around the world has focused to some extent on decreasing discrimination against women and other marginalized social categories (i.e., depending on the types of categories that exist in a given nation; Cleveland, Shore, Anderson, Huebner, & Sanchez, *in press*), what is less clear is whether organizations are proactively creating inclusive organizational environments that ensure improved prospects for these individuals after they are hired (Holvino, Ferdman, & Merrill-Sands, 2004). Without such efforts, the recruitment and hiring of individuals who are members of marginalized social categories is not likely to ensure success once those individuals are employed. Thus, inclusion in the work place has gained increasing attention in both the scholarly and practitioner literatures (Ferdman & Deane, 2014; Mor Barak, 2005) in efforts to improve the experiences of employees whose membership in particular social identity categories increase the likelihood of discrimination (c.f., immigrants, Ponsoni, Ghorashi, & van der Raad, 2017; the disabled, Folguera, 2014, Kulkarni, Boehm, & Basu, 2016; transgender employees, Ozturk & Tatli, 2016).

The objective of this article is to provide a review and an integration of ideas pertaining to inclusion that are discussed in the literature. While we focus primarily on the U.S. context, many of the ideas pertaining to inclusion are relevant to other nations. As part of that integration, we present a model of inclusive organizations which argues that inclusive treatment of employees at all organization levels with associated opportunities to advance to mid- and upper levels of the organization is critical for establishing a truly inclusive organization. Finally, we discuss needed developments among both scholars and practitioners.

2. Workplace inclusion

With growing diversity in work organizations, organizational leaders have increasingly become aware of the importance of creating inclusive environments (Nishii & Rich, 2014). At the same time, scholarship focused on inclusion is still in the initial stages. Mor Barak and her colleagues in the social work field were the first to systematically research inclusion in work organizations (Mor Barak & Cherin, 1998; Mor Barak, Cherin, & Berkman, 1998). More recently, researchers have sought to clarify that inclusion is important to everyone, but especially to those who have been excluded historically (Ferdman, 2014; Winters, 2014). As described by Nishii (2013) “In inclusive environments, individuals of all backgrounds-not just members of historically powerful identity groups-are fairly treated, valued for who they are, and included in core decision making” (p. 1754). Mor Barak and Daya (2014, pp. 393–394) indicated that “an exclusionary workplace is based on the perception that all workers need to conform to pre-established organizational values and norms (determined by its “mainstream”), the inclusive workplace is based on a pluralistic value frame that respects all cultural perspectives represented among its employees.” In sum, inclusion involves equal opportunity for members of socially marginalized groups to participate and contribute while concurrently providing opportunities for members of non-marginalized groups, and to support employees in their efforts to be fully engaged at all levels of the organization and to be authentically themselves.

2.1. Inclusion versus diversity

The terms diversity and inclusion are often treated as interchangeable, with many companies using the title of Chief Diversity Officer, others Chief Inclusion Officer, and still others Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer. But in all cases the main charge is to manage diversity and inclusion practice. Lack of advancement of historically underrepresented groups continues to be a diversity challenge. Several explanations have arisen for this disparity in advancement opportunities, such as prototypical leadership qualities perceived necessary for upward progression that are associated with White males (Sy et al., 2010). For women, work-family demands (Ryan & Kossek, 2008) and associated departure from work by some women (Byron, 2005; Hewlett & Luce, 2005) have been suggested as reasons for fewer advancement opportunities than for men. However, these explanations cannot account for the continuing disparity in salary and advancement opportunities for women and people of color.

As noted by Winters (2014, p. 206) “perhaps the most salient distinction between diversity and inclusion is that diversity can be mandated and legislated, while inclusion stems from voluntary actions.” As described above, inclusion requires a leveling of the playing field and providing opportunities through organizational and managerial practices that offer real prospects of equal access to valued opportunities for employees who belong to social identity groups that experience greater discrimination (Bell, Özbilgin, Beauregard, & Sürgevil, 2011; Roberson, 2006).

While diversity management practices have focused chiefly on bringing women, people of color, and members of other marginalized groups into the workplace, inclusion practices have sought to create equal access to decision-making, resources, and upward mobility opportunities for these individuals. Likewise, many diversity and inclusion scholars and practitioners have sought to emphasize the value that people with a variety of differences bring to the organization (Ferdman, 2014), and not just the “rightness” of supporting equal opportunity. However, diversity does not always bring beneficial results to organizations (c.f., Jackson & Joshi, 2011; Mannix & Neale, 2005), and can in fact increase conflict and turnover, and lower cohesion and performance. Hence, the focus on inclusionary practices can promote the potential advantages and opportunities of having a diverse workforce.

There are increasing efforts in recent years to clarify the distinctions between “diversity” and “inclusion” by both academics and practitioners. In the US in 2011, Executive Order 13583 was passed and required the establishment of a coordinated government-wide initiative to promote diversity and inclusion in the Federal workforce. The Office of Personnel Management developed a strategic plan to help agencies follow the EO. In that plan, diversity was broadly defined as (Office of Personnel Management, 2011,

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