

Inclusive Leadership: How Leaders Sustain or Discourage Work Group Inclusion

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Abstract

Research on leader inclusion has continued to proliferate. However, most of the research has not focused on the importance of leader inclusion for employees with marginalized social identities. Based on Shore, Randel, Chung, Dean, Ehrhart, and Singh's (2011) model of work group inclusion consisting of fulfillment of needs for belongingness and value in uniqueness, we describe four different leadership orientations including leader inclusion, exclusion, assimilation, and differentiation. Three psychological mechanisms that result when employees feel included by the leader are discussed, consisting of psychological safety, psychological empowerment, and work group identification. While leader inclusion has been shown to be beneficial to employees generally, this article provides increased attention to the particular importance of leader inclusion for employees who are members of marginalized social identity groups.

Keywords

diversity, exclusion, identity or identification, inclusion, leadership

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While there are many studies and theories of leadership, research on inclusive leadership has only received attention recently (Boekhorst, 2015; Booysen, 2014; Ferdman, *In Press*; Gallegos, 2014; Henderson, 2014). This is not surprising considering the limited research on inclusion at work more broadly (Shore et al., 2011) and some confusion as to the meaning of inclusion (Chung et al., 2020). As scholarship on inclusion continues to grow, there is an obvious need to develop clear and compelling conceptual work on what leader inclusion is and is not. Importantly, it is still unclear as to what leaders need to do to be inclusive, and how some leader behaviors and styles which are well intended may have the opposite effect and discourage inclusion.

In this article, we use Shore's et al. (2011) four-quadrant model of work group inclusion to develop a basis for defining and articulating ways in which leaders may support and encourage inclusion and also ways in which leaders may discourage or prevent inclusion in the work group. Through linking leadership to Shore's et al. (2011) model, we seek to clarify how leader inclusion operates as compared with other leadership approaches. We highlight the psychological mechanisms of psychological safety, psychological empowerment, and work group identification among employees that result from experiences of leader inclusion. Following, we integrate research on diversity that underscores the challenges and impediments to an inclusive work group that the leader must address (cf. Ely & Thomas, 2001). Finally, we present ideas for becoming an inclusive leader.

Shore et al. (2011) define inclusion as "the degree to which an employee perceives that he or she is an esteemed member of the work group through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for belongingness and uniqueness" (p. 1265). This definition is theoretically built on optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 2012) which argues that people have the need to be both similar and different from others simultaneously (Brewer, 1991). Similarity increases the chance that an individual will be welcomed in a group and thus increases fulfillment of the need to belong, whereas difference is related to recognition of ways in which a person is distinctive, increasing possible fulfillment of need for uniqueness. To satisfy a vital human need for belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), people seek acceptance into groups that they identify with. An employee's belongingness needs at work can be fulfilled by forming and maintaining strong and constructive relationships with the leader and with members of the work group. Being a valued group insider has benefits other than fulfilling needs for belongingness as there are advantages associated with favoritism and in-group bias among members (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

While in-group membership is advantageous in many ways, it also can require a level of compliance to group norms that reduces the fulfillment of human needs for uniqueness (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Uniqueness refers to the need to maintain a distinctive and differentiated sense of self (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). When this need becomes activated, individuals define themselves in terms of distinctive membership categories that are unique personal identifications (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender identification, and age), by comparing themselves with others. A personal identification within a group reflects deindividuation, the ways in which individuals are different within a social context (Brewer, 1991). When these or other personal identifications are perceived to be devalued, then experiences of inclusion are diminished.

Shore et al. (2011) presented a 2×2 inclusion framework in which belongingness and value in uniqueness combine to create different employee experiences in the work group. *Inclusion* consists of high belongingness and high value in uniqueness. When employees feel included, they can retain their individuality in the group while also being treated as an insider (Jans, Postmes & Van der Zee, 2012). *Assimilation* (high belongingness and low value in uniqueness) occurs when the employee is regarded as an insider in the work group when they fit into organizational behavioral norms by minimizing the display of ways in which they are unique (Bell, 1990; Lee & Kye, 2016; McCluney & Rabelob, 2019). *Differentiation* (low belongingness and high value in uniqueness) occurs when the employee is not treated as an insider in the work group, but their unique characteristics are viewed as important and necessary for the group and/or organization's success. For example, executive and management arguments justifying selection or promotion of minority employees for the business case for diversity (Robinson & Dechant, 1997) may contribute to these employees experiencing differentiation rather than inclusion. Affirmative action and hiring quotas may also lead to employee experiences of differentiation since these practices have been shown to stigmatize recipients with assumptions of lower competence (Heilman, Block, & Lucas, 1992). *Exclusion* (low belongingness and low value in uniqueness) ensues when the employee is not considered an organizational insider with unique value in the work group, but there are other employees or groups who are insiders (Mor Barak, 2015; Wang & Li, 2018). Such exclusion can come in a number of different forms, for example, through microaggressions (Sue, Capodilupo et al., 2007), ostracism (Robinson & Schabram, 2017), and rejection (Wesselmann & Williams, 2017).

A significant topic that has not received adequate research attention is how the leader of the work group contributes to each of the quadrants described in the Shore et al. (2011) model. Prior research on leader inclusion primarily focuses on the leader treatment of team members generally (Carmeli, Reiter-

Palmon, & Ziv, 2010; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006), rather than of individual members. In this article, we focus on the inclusive experience of individual employees. Our departure supports our efforts to describe the experience of members of marginalized social identity groups who may encounter exclusion, even in a work group in which the leader behaves inclusively with majority members. Note however that we cite prior literature on leader inclusion as it provides valuable insights into the ways in which inclusive leadership is shown.

The leader plays a very influential role in the work group and their treatment of individual employees is a signal as to the degree of inclusion afforded, or whether the employee is expected to assimilate, is a recipient of differentiation, or is excluded. Below, starting with leader inclusion, we articulate each of the leadership approaches for the four quadrants of the Shore et al. (2011) model of inclusion. We describe the leader's motives and styles that contribute to each of these categories of group membership and the effect of each of these group membership types on employees. We conclude with the implications of these four leadership orientations for organizations.

The Leader Emphasizing Inclusion

Prior Research on Leader Inclusion

Most leader inclusion research focuses on the inclusiveness of the immediate supervisor or manager of employees. One of the first empirical studies was conducted by Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) who defined leader inclusiveness as “words and deeds exhibited by leaders that invite and appreciate others’ contributions” (p. 941). They showed that average leader inclusiveness in the team helped cross-disciplinary medical teams (primarily doctors and nurses) deal with profession-derived status differences effectively. Specifically, the perceived presence of an inclusive leader was related to the psychological safety of low professional status team members encouraging engagement in quality improvement work.

Building on Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) and Edmondson's (2004) ideas about psychological safety, Carmeli et al. (2010) sought to explicate how an inclusive leadership style encourages creativity through building an individual employee's psychological safety. Carmeli et al. (2010) devised a measure of leader inclusion consisting of items measuring leadership openness, availability, and accessibility. The items in the Carmeli et al. (2010) scale ask about behavior of the leader, some of which describes generally displayed behavior (e.g., “The manager is open to hearing new ideas”) and some of which is treatment received by the individual employee (e.g., “The

manager is ready to listen to my requests”). Using Carmeli’s et al. (2010) leader inclusion measure, studies found positive relationships with psychological safety (Carmeli, et al., 2010; Hiraak, Peng, Carmeli, & Schaubroeck, 2012; Khan, Jaafar, Javed, Mubarak, & Saudagar, 2020), psychological empowerment (Khan et al., 2020), creativity (Carmeli et al., 2010; Choi, Tran, & Park, 2015), work engagement and affective commitment (Choi et al., 2015), thriving at work (Li, Guo & Wan, 2019), and enhanced unit performance (Hiraak et al., 2012). These studies show that leader inclusion is an impactful approach with a great deal of potential for advancing organizational goals in addition to the beneficial effects on employees.

This body of research suggests that the leader who is inclusive is motivated by developing good relationships with followers to create an environment in which employees can share their perspectives, experience psychological safety, and inspire creativity and innovation. While Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) focus on the value of leader inclusion to create teams in which professional status is not an impediment to making contributions, ideas pertaining to leader inclusion in relation to the experience of employees from marginalized social identity groups are not well developed. Given the emphasis on inclusion that has emerged in many organizations to address inequity and discrimination, it is important that the leader inclusion literature incorporates ideas for creating environments where employees from marginalized groups can thrive. Below, we review literature that emphasizes leader inclusion in relation to creating inclusive environments for diverse groups.

A conceptual article by Randel et al. (2018) built on Shore et al. (2011) conceptualization and applied these ideas to a model of leader inclusion. Randel et al.’s definition differs from prior studies in that “leaders’ efforts are specifically focused on fostering group members’ perceptions of both belonging and value for uniqueness as a group member” (p. 192). Their conceptualization focuses on the experience of the individual within the work group, with leader inclusion efforts centered on fulfillment of both belonging and value for uniqueness needs of each member in their team. They proposed that pro-diversity beliefs are antecedent to leader inclusion. Leaders who perceive diversity as being positive for group outcomes are likely to have pro-diversity beliefs (Homan, Van Knippenberg, Van Kleef, & De Dreu, 2007). Pro-diversity beliefs also recognize and appreciate within-group differences of the individual group members which should translate into behaviors that encourage both belongingness and value in uniqueness.

To facilitate belongingness, several behaviors are suggested by Randel et al. (2018). First, *supporting group members* entails leaders making members feel comfortable and communicating that they have the members’

best interests in mind (Mor Barak & Cherin, 1998; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Second, *ensuring justice and equity* requires that inclusive leaders show fair treatment of group members and thus indicate to members that they are a respected member of the group (Lind & Tyler, 1988; Sabharwal, 2014; Shore et al., 2011). Third, *shared decision-making* is also important for facilitating belongingness (Mor Barak & Cherin, 1998; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Nishii, 2013; Roberson, 2006). Two behaviors were proposed for encouraging value in uniqueness. The leader should *encourage diverse contributions* (e.g., Mor Barak & Daya, 2014; Shore et al., 2011; Winters, 2014) by seeking different points of view and approaches. Finally, *helping group members fully contribute* by urging individuals who otherwise might not feel that their contributions are welcome to experience their unique value by bringing their authentic selves to work. Their model proposed that these leader inclusion behaviors lead to individual member experiences of work group inclusion and subsequent work group identification and psychological empowerment.

While there is limited empirical research, the current evidence is generally quite supportive of the value of leader inclusion in facilitating positive outcomes in diverse teams. Ashikali, Groeneveld, and Kuipers (2020) examined average inclusive leadership in teams, basing their measure on Shore et al. (2011) theoretical descriptions of inclusion involving high belongingness and high value in uniqueness. Their findings showed that greater team diversity did not automatically yield an inclusive climate. Instead, they concluded that inclusive leadership was critical for cultivating an inclusive climate in diverse teams. In addition, Randel, Dean, Ehrhart, Chung, and Shore (2016) found that when leader inclusiveness was high, this was satisfactory for facilitating leader-directed helping behavior among men and whites even when psychological diversity climate was not high; however, women and racioethnic minorities lowered their leader-directed helping behavior when the leader was inclusive and the diversity climate was not high. Likewise, Nishii and Mayer (2009) operationalized inclusive leadership at a group level as involving a high group mean on leader–member exchange (LMX) and low LMX differentiation (low variability). They showed that the relationship between demographic diversity and turnover was negative when groups experienced high leader inclusion. In addition, the greatest turnover ensued when only some and not all members of diverse work groups had a high-quality relationship with the manager. This study suggests the importance of consistently positive relations between the leader and followers in diverse teams. Another study examined inclusive leadership and professional diversity (Mitchell et al., 2015). In this study, diverse Australian healthcare teams were investigated over a 12-month period. The authors found that

inclusive leaders enhanced identification with the team which in turn improved team performance. [Zheng, Diaz, Zheng, and Tang \(2017\)](#) examined leader inclusion in China and found that leader inclusion moderates the relationship between deep-level similarity of the supervisor and subordinate (personality, interests, and values) and taking charge such that leader inclusion was especially important when deep-level similarity was low. Finally, [Adams, Meyers, and Sekaja \(2019\)](#) combined authentic, inclusive, and respectful leadership into a single measure they called positive leadership and concluded that such leaders are particularly good at fostering an employee's work group inclusion and simultaneously reducing discrimination in both Western and non-Western contexts.

Psychological Mechanisms of Leader Inclusion

One key theme in the literature is that leader inclusion is a relational leadership style that promotes psychological safety ([Carmeli et al., 2010](#)). [Randel et al. \(2018\)](#) further proposed that work group identification and psychological empowerment among employees supervised by inclusive leaders would be enhanced and result in group member contributions. Each of these psychological mechanisms can serve to mediate leader inclusion with important outcomes such as creativity and turnover for the work group and the organization. Such mediation can help to explain why leader inclusion may be effective, as well as provide insight into leader motives for engaging in an inclusive manner with their group members.

Psychological safety “facilitates the willing contribution of ideas and actions to a shared enterprise” ([Edmondson & Lei, 2014](#), p. 24). Research suggests that psychological safety fosters voicing ideas for organizational improvements ([Detert & Burris, 2007](#)), the sharing of information and knowledge ([Collins & Smith, 2006](#); [Siemsen, Roth, Balasubramanian, & Anand, 2009](#)), taking initiative to develop new products and services ([Baer & Frese, 2003](#)), and facilitating teams and organizations to learn and to perform ([Bunderson & Boumgarden, 2010](#); [Carmeli, 2007](#); [Carmeli & Gittell, 2009](#); [Carmeli et al., 2012](#); [Collins & Smith, 2006](#); [Edmondson, 1999](#); [Schaubroeck, Lam, & Peng, 2011](#); [Tucker, Nembhard, & Edmondson, 2007](#)). The inclusive leader who is promoting psychological safety is not only facilitating effective performance, but also is creating a work environment in which employees feel they can share their unique perspectives. Thus, employees who perceive that their leader values the ways in which they are unique are more likely to experience psychological safety.

Work group identification is defined as “perception of oneness with or belongingness to” the work group ([Ashforth & Mael, 1989](#), p. 34). Being

treated as an insider by the leader enhances the employee's experience of belonging in the work group. This inclusive treatment thus facilitates employee identification with the work group. Such identification is beneficial to the individual through improvements in their job satisfaction and to other employees as it leads to work group extra-role behavior (Riketta & Van Dick, 2005). Likewise, Riketta and Van Dick argued based on their meta-analysis that work group identification as compared with organizational identification is a more salient unit that serves "employees' needs for optimal distinctiveness" (p. 504). Work group diversity and group identification are more positively related the more individuals believe in the value of diversity (Van Knippenberg, Haslam, & Platow, 2007). As with psychological safety, work group identification promotes employee activities that serve the interests of the group as a whole. Therefore, it is important that leaders are motivated to facilitate work group identification by displaying behaviors that promote an employee's perceptions of belongingness while also experiencing that they are valued for their uniqueness. The latter is especially important for employees who are members of marginalized social identity groups (Van Knippenberg & Van Ginkel, 2021) who are seeking confirmation that they are valued group members.

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) defined psychological empowerment as intrinsic motivation expressed in four cognitions reflecting an individual's orientation to his or her work role: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. When group members experience leader inclusion, the opportunities they have for expressing their opinions, behaving authentically, and contributing to work-related decisions provide for psychological empowerment (Randel et al., 2018). Influence on decision-making "occurs when employees believe that their ideas and perspectives are influential, and that they are listened to" (Shore et al., 2018, p. 185). This is often identified as a key element of inclusion (Mor Barak & Cherin, 1998; Mor Barak & Daya, 2014; Nishii, 2013; Sabharwal, 2014). Psychological empowerment is positively related to work engagement and innovation and negatively to turnover intentions (Bhatnagar, 2012). Likewise, Spreitzer, De Janasz, and Quinn (1999) found in a study of supervisors that their subordinates viewed their empowered supervisors as more innovative, upward influencing, and inspirational.

In sum, all three of these psychological mechanisms result from the leader inclusionary treatment that generates feelings of inclusion. Leader inclusion helps to alleviate fears of being punished or rejected for being different (Kahn, 1990; Roberson & Perry, 2021) which may be particularly important for employees who are members of marginalized social identity groups (Singh, Winkel, & Selvarajan, 2013). As pointed out by Van Knippenberg and Van Ginkel (2021), "participation and influence in the information elaboration

process of team members with an underrepresented background are under greater pressure than the participation of members with a traditionally dominant, majority background” (p. in this issue). The resulting psychological safety and psychological empowerment associated with being treated inclusively by the leader promote sharing of unique perspectives and experiences in work groups.

While the experience of belongingness resulting from inclusionary treatment by the leader is a key basis for enhancing work group identification, for employees with stigmatized social identities, such identification may not be enhanced unless they are also valued for their uniqueness (Randel et al., 2016). The value in uniqueness combined with belongingness lays the groundwork for all of these psychological mechanisms, which in turn, enhance employee contributions to the work group and organization. As yet, limited research has established linkages between these three psychological mechanisms and the work group experiences of employees who are members of marginalized social identity groups. Below, we describe some of the early stage research which suggests that these three mechanisms may be particularly important for these employees.

Research on the role of psychological safety for minoritized employees is suggestive of its importance. Singh et al. (2013) found that in a supportive diversity climate, employees felt psychologically safe expressing their identities, which influenced their in-role and extra-role performance. However, the relationship between diversity climate and psychological safety was stronger for minorities than for whites, and the relationship between psychological safety and OCB-interpersonal was stronger for minorities than for whites. These findings suggest that psychological safety is particularly important for minority employees, and leader inclusion, as an antecedent, can play a major role in encouraging psychological safety for people of color.

Work group identification is a mechanism that also can benefit from considering diversity of the work group. Chattopadhyay, George, and Shulman (2008) found that for women, sex dissimilarity with the work group was related to lower levels of work group identification and higher perceived levels of task and emotional conflict, whereas men in these work groups did not have such effects when they were more dissimilar from their group members. The authors concluded that the context amplifies for women the extent to which they are categorized based on their sex with the associated lower status afforded women. Given these types of results, this indicates that minoritized employees who are in a compositional minority in the work group may need the reassurance provided by a manager who is high on leader inclusion in order to fulfill belongingness needs through work group identification.

Psychological empowerment may play an important role in translating leader inclusion into valued outcomes for minority employees. Chrobot-Mason and Aramovich (2013) found that when employees feel they work in an environment in which they have equal access to opportunities and are treated fairly (two components of affirming climate for diversity), they are less likely to report intentions to leave the organization. In addition, four psychological outcomes (identity freedom, psychological empowerment, perceived climate for innovation, and organizational identification) fully mediate the relationship between diversity climate perceptions and turnover intentions. Identity freedom in which employees can express their true identity at work rather than attempt to suppress differences was particularly impactful on the experience of psychological empowerment. Chrobot-Mason and Aramovitch considered identity freedom as closely aligned to value in uniqueness in the Shore et al. (2011) model. Finally, it was determined in this study that psychological empowerment was associated with a climate for innovation.

Motives for Leader Inclusion

The inclusion literature has highlighted several reasons why leaders treat employees inclusively. Most importantly, inclusive leadership can facilitate high-quality relationships between a leader and a wide variety of employees. While we emphasize the importance of leader inclusion for employees who experience marginalization, there are many other differences, which if shared in a safe and respectful environment, can be beneficial to organizations. In addition, while diversity in a work group has the potential to facilitate team performance through information integration processes, it also has the possibility of increasing tensions among team members that prevent such beneficial processes (Van Knippenberg & Van Ginkel, 2021). Leader inclusion can address this potential problem by supporting value in uniqueness. Another motivator is pro-diversity beliefs in which leaders see the value in different perspectives and backgrounds for the benefit of the work group. Finally, systemic racism and other anti-diversity evidence may motivate increased leader inclusion at all organizational levels including between the leader and the employees in the work group that they supervise. As argued by Nkomo, Bell, Roberts, Joshi, and Thatcher (2019), p. 504, “overt negative attitudes, hate crimes, and regressive policies toward racial and ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, religious groups, immigrants and immigration, and women and women’s rights have resurfaced, particularly in the United States and other Western countries.”

In summary, while studies of leader inclusion and our three proposed psychological mechanisms are still in early stages, the evidence generally

supports the value provided to individual employees, their work groups, and their organizations. Leader inclusion is a style that promotes psychological safety, work group identification, and psychological empowerment. All three of these mechanisms have been established as supporting positive employee attitudes and performance (Bhatnagar, 2012; Edmondson & Lei, 2014; Riketta & Van Dick, 2005). Leader inclusion involves creating an environment in which their employee can be their unique selves while still being treated as valued insiders. In some ways, this is counter to human social identity processes in which similarity is more strongly associated with in-group status and belongingness, and dissimilarity is more likely associated with out-group status and uniqueness. One way to tackle this challenge is for inclusive leaders to build “superordinate identities” (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), in which all members of the work group, regardless of marginalized social identities, are deemed in-group members. Inclusive leaders who display behaviors that promote the experience of belongingness and uniqueness for all work group members provide an environment in which members (even stigmatized members) are likely to feel that they are part of the in-group. The comparison of leader inclusion with leader assimilation, leader differentiation, and leader exclusion (each discussed below) clearly highlights the value of inclusionary activities by the leader for employees, work groups, and organizations.

The Leader Emphasizing Assimilation

By virtue of their behaviors, leaders can send signals that fitting into the dominant culture in the organization is the best path for subordinates to take. Akin to the discrimination and fairness perspective (Ely & Thomas, 2001), the leader’s emphasis is on equity and treating everyone the same. Employees are accepted by the leader as long as they adhere to the rules of engagement which is often constructed by the dominant culture. For individuals who identify with the dominant culture, this would not necessarily be problematic. That is, assimilation would not necessarily prohibit experiences of inclusion for these individuals as it might for individuals with marginalized social identities. Leaders with this orientation are often seen as “well-intended” given that their core belief is that equality and fair treatment is a moral imperative. While this is a worthy principle, acting in this manner requires two norms of their employees: (1) to suppress any differences that do exist and in essence avoid conflict whenever possible and (2) to assimilate to the dominant culture in the organization which is often a white cultural standard (Ely & Thomas, 2001).

Assimilation is a form of partial inclusion (Schein, 1970), where the organization is a multilayered system with many limits and filters that restrict access for certain types of individuals. This is an in-between space that

switches between inclusion and exclusion. Partial inclusion is a situation in which individuals gain entry into the group or organization but do not fully achieve a state in which they are fully valued, respected, and supported in terms of their uniqueness (Giovanni, 2004). One feature of partial inclusion is the need for individuals to be socialized within the organization. During this process, the organization exerts significant influence on the individual. The individual is only partially included in the sense that the leader accepts and utilizes only a portion of the individual—the part that adheres to the organizational culture. In this way, employees must set aside some aspects of themselves in order to fit within the group and the organization (Dawson, 2006). Tension is created as minorities may seek acceptance, power, and control while also having the desire to maintain their own individuality and cultural identity. In other words, acceptance into the group or organization requires members of marginalized groups to become competent in the dominant culture as well as their own culture. This ability to function in and move back and forth between these two cultures is referred to as biculturalism (Richard and Grimes, 1996). Bicultural employees have to learn both written and unwritten rules for success including dress codes, preferred communication styles, ways to use career development programs, ways to build professional and personal support networks, and how to establish a mentoring relationship (Van Den Bergh, 1991). While learning and operating in the dominant culture, they remain members of a minority group that is often deemed subordinate to the dominant culture (Barrett, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2003). In other words, minority employees often have to hide their own, less-valued culture to adhere to the operating norms of the dominant culture.

Leaders who hold this orientation tend to behave in ways that support the dominant culture. The belief is that they are helping the employees by teaching them how to function well within the dominant culture so that they can enhance their performance and have greater opportunities for promotions. According to the Shore et al. (2011) model, leaders with this orientation will treat the employee as an insider but only if they conform to the dominant norms of the culture. That is, they will emphasize belongingness and downplay uniqueness. They will make the employee feel like they belong only if conformity is achieved and uniqueness is suppressed. As a result, since work group identification is related to feelings of belongingness, work group identification is likely to be lower for minorities than members of the dominant culture. Leaders working from an assimilation orientation will signal that individuals should downplay ways in which they are different in order to belong. For example, leaders might tell employees how they should dress in a way that is acceptable or conforms to corporate culture. They might give

feedback to employees regarding *how* they should communicate or voice their opinions. Divergent views are often ignored while convergent views are more readily accepted. In suppressing their uniqueness, it is likely that employees who work under this type of leader would likely experience low psychological safety and low psychological empowerment.

Since the leader is essentially a representative of the organization, they are shaping the behaviors of their subordinates through their feedback, their signaling, their coaching, and their own exhibited behaviors. As they role model the assimilation mindset, employees, especially newcomers, will construct a schema for appropriate behavior in their work world based on conformity to the dominant culture. Such a leader is likely to use socialization tactics that emphasize these dominant organizational norms. Socialization agents in diverse work contexts are challenged by the pressure to navigate tensions between their organization's expectations that they assimilate all members into the collective while recognizing the unique needs and perspectives of those they socialize (Ramarajan & Reid, 2020). An assimilative leader may view the socialization they are providing as important for both the organization and for the employee with a marginalized social identity. Specifically, assimilation may be viewed as facilitating the employee's performance and their career opportunities. With assimilation, there is high belongingness but only if uniqueness is not apparent in the work setting. As a result, employees cannot bring many aspects of themselves and their culture into the work world. In a study by Dawson (2006), a study participant called this "putting on the uniform" where they had to conform to organizational norms during the workday and take the uniform off when they went home.

Unfortunately, there is a danger in hiding a core identity for the individual, including greater stress and a slower reduction of cortisol reactivity (Albuja, Gaither, Sanchez, Straka, & Cipollina, 2019). For the organization, employees who do not identify with the dominant culture but comply with the organization's norms may ultimately affect organizational productivity through increased turnover (Hewlin, 2009). The leader who emphasizes assimilation may contribute to the loss of outstanding employees who are pressured to behave in ways that deny a core identity. The outcomes for employees in terms of the assimilation-focused leader are that these employees ultimately end up with conflict stemming from undiscussable status issues and power imbalances. There is no open discussion of conflict or differences. For example, employees of color feel disrespected and devalued as members of minority groups. Employees also have low morale, a lack of cross-cultural learning, and the inability of minority employees to bring all relevant skills and insights to bear at work (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Bicultural employees also report anxiety, compartmentalization, psychological conflict, and identity conflict (Bell,

1990) as well as marginality and maladjustment (Rudmin, 2003). Since employees are only partially included in an assimilation framework, they may be less socially engaged (Dawson, 2006), experience bicultural stress (Wei, Want, Ko, Liu, & Botello, 2019), and experience emotional exhaustion from continually having to put on a façade of conformity (Hewlin, 2009). Although we use the example of race here, the assimilation requirements can be for other marginalized social identities such as gender, sexual orientation, or nationality.

The Leader Emphasizing Differentiation

The leader in this quadrant is one that believes in the business case for diversity (Robinson & Dechant, 1997) or the notion that diversity can be leveraged for cost savings as well as for driving growth and market share. That is, the business case for diversity may reinforce this approach to leadership when the leader is uncomfortable with cultural differences but understands that organizational benefits of diversity have been shown. Based on a large national sample of corporations, Herring (2017) concluded that sales revenues, greater number of customers, higher than average shares of the market, and profits relative to competitors all benefited from greater racial and gender diversity. Thus, these differentiation-oriented leaders are cognizant that diversity is important to the success of the organization, and they will use employees strategically for the benefit of the company. Akin to the access-and-legitimacy perspective on diversity (Ely & Thomas, 2001), this leader understands that the organization's markets and constituencies are culturally diverse and that it is important for the organization to match that diversity in parts of its own workforce in order to capture those markets and constituents. However, with this differentiation perspective, the leader treats these employees as a separate group who are important to their success and the larger organization but are still marginalized and not directly integrated into the core functions of the larger organization. This perspective leads to a race-based, gender-based, or ethnicity-based division of labor and employees who are members of these social identities are used primarily to gain access to diverse markets and clients.

With a differentiation orientation, employees will feel more like a "token" (Kanter, 1977), where they have been hired because they are in a certain social category (gender and race) but experience limited acceptance by members of the organization. Similar to assimilation, there is differential power and status associated with differentiation. With token status, the employee may be exposed to negative attitudes and behaviors due to out-group bias by others (Yilmaz & Dalkilic, 2019) and may never feel like they are a full, contributing member of the group (Laws, 1975). Cha and Roberts (2019) conducted

a qualitative study in which members of minority groups used their differentiation as a resource to benefit their organization. The authors identified some tensions that individuals experienced in this role. First, the fear that they will be viewed as being capable of doing only minority group-related work. Second, concern about the possibility that they will be perceived as disruptive or offensive. Third, the worry that they will be perceived as positively biased toward other members of their marginalized social identity group. Fourth, concern that they will reinforce existing stereotypes about their minority group. These fears point to the importance of the leader in reinforcing the value of minority social identities. If the leader communicates that women and nonwhite race/ethnicity members are hired merely for the benefit of the organization while communicating that the employee is not an organizational insider, then differentiation is likely to be experienced.

When leaders have a differentiation orientation, employees might also experience stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995). According to stereotype threat theory (Steele, 1997), performance suffers when negative stereotypes are activated in a performance situation and when the performance domain is self-relevant for the individual. Given that an employee may believe they are in their current position because of their uniqueness, they may feel a heightened sense that they are responsible for behaving in ways that do not perpetuate stereotypes for their race, ethnicity, or gender. For example, an Asian American employee could believe they were hired in order to market company products specifically to the Asian American community. However, due to their differentiated status, they may feel pressure to perform in ways that do not perpetuate any negative stereotypes such as having poor language skills or poor leadership skills (Sy et al., 2010) thereby activating stereotype threat. The degree to which the leader emphasizes this employee's differentiated status, the stronger the threat may become.

According to the Shore et al. (2011) framework, differentiation leaders will value employees for their uniqueness but will not necessarily make the employee feel like they are truly accepted or belong. The employee's views might be accepted but only when it relates to the employee's "specialty" area or area of differentiation. That is, differentiation leaders will only exhibit belongingness behaviors in relation to areas in which employees are seen as valuable to the organization. Sometimes, the leader will isolate their employees or subject them to race-based or other negative stereotypes. As a result, since overall feelings of belongingness is likely to be low, overall work group identification is likely to be low as well. For employees that work in an isolated unit (e.g., Spanish-speaking branch of the department), there might be high work group identification within the isolated unit but low work group identification overall with the larger department.

Leaders might show that they are appreciative of an employee in times when their unique skill sets are needed but may be dismissive when they are not; thus, treatment is based on their differentiated value to the organization. Like LMX contingencies (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), the differentiated group becomes the in-group in times where their skills are needed and becomes the out-group when their skills are not needed. Leaders also role model to other employees the value or lack of value they place in these differentiated employees. This suppression of true uniqueness and being appreciated for one's whole self would likely lead to low psychological safety and low psychological empowerment as employees would be unsure of their overall meaning, competence, and impact in the organization.

The effect on differentiated employees is a sense of a lack of power and status and possibly conflict with other employees who do not understand their particular worth to the group. Minority employees may question whether they are valued and respected equally and as a result feel marginalized. There may be a lack of real learning and engagement amongst differentiated employees as well (Ely & Thomas, 2001). On top of that, the employee may feel agitation and anxiety and experience performance decrements from stereotype threat (Osborne, 2001; Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999).

The instrumental nature of this type of employee–organization relationship has been shown to consistently result in fewer beneficial outcomes for the employee and for the organization (Shore, Coyle-Shapiro, & Chang, 2018). The assumption of limited value which may be communicated by the leader to members of marginalized social identity groups also points to narrow career opportunities within the organization. If the philosophy of leader differentiation is prevalent throughout the organization, higher rates of turnover for that organization among members of marginalized groups would be likely. While still not clear whether it is linked to leader behavior, evidence shows the turnover of female professionals and managers is higher than that of their male counterparts, and that African American employees quit more than white or Asian American employees (Hom, Roberson & Ellis, 2008). One possible explanation for the latter finding is suggested by McKay and Avery (2005) who noted that diversity recruitment practices, while effective at attracting people into the organization, may unluckily contribute to high early turnover if they increase expectations for a positive diversity climate that is not satisfied.

The Leader Emphasizing Exclusion

Shore et al.'s (2011) model of inclusion is based on social identity theory (SIT). Self-categorization theory is complementary to SIT, referring to the process by which people describe their self-concept in terms of their

memberships in various groups. Group members create a positive social identity and confirm their connection to a group by showing partiality to members of their own social category (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This can result in disruption of interaction among members in diverse groups (Jehn, Northcraft & Neale, 1999). Categorizing individuals into different groups can elicit animosity within the work group and heighten in-group and out-group membership. This type of social categorization process can encourage exclusionary treatment within the work group.

Social exclusion can involve rejection, microaggressions, or ostracism (Williams, 2007). When targets are socially excluded by the leader, they can feel as though the leader does not consider them to be worthy of even minimal acknowledgment or respectful treatment. People generally respond negatively to opinion and behavior deviates and pressure these individuals to conform to group social norms. When these members do not conform, they are likely candidates for social exclusion (Williams, 2009). In order to prevent the negative consequences of exclusion (Robinson, O'Reilly, & Wang, 2013), the leader needs to consciously consider which group norms are beneficial to their work group members and work goals (e.g., showing up to work on time), and which are really a matter of the leader's preference (for example, hiring employees who belong to the same religion). But norms often evolve without planning or strategy involved, and sometimes exclusion occurs and causes harm to individuals. Below, we briefly describe these types of social exclusion and then the leader exclusion behaviors and effects of those behaviors.

Rejection. Experiences of rejection involve direct negative attention that signifies relational devaluation or otherwise indicates someone is unwanted (Blackhart, Nelson, Knowles, & Baumeister, 2009). Rejection can include when the leader refers to someone in a demeaning way (Demoulin, Leyens, Paladino, Rodriguez-Torres, Rodriguez-Perez, & Dovidio, 2004), when a leader allows an employee to experience discrimination or stigmatization (Kurzban & Leary, 2001; Smart Richman & Leary, 2009), or when the leader laughs at an employee in a disparaging way (Klages & Wirth, 2014).

Microaggressions. Microaggressions are "brief or subtle comments, insults, or discriminatory behaviors that members of minority groups often experience on a daily basis" (Wesselmann & Williams, 2017, p. 694). The mistreatment may not be intended, as for example, when the leader expresses surprise that a woman in his team is good at math. These can still be harmful (Sue, Bucceri et al., 2007; Sue, Capodilupo et al., 2007) because it can express racist or sexist attitudes that might otherwise be consciously refuted. Sue, Capodilupo et al. (2007) have proposed a taxonomy of racial microaggressions that classifies them under three forms: microassault, microinsult,

and microinvalidation. Microassaults are defined as explicit racial derogations that can be verbal (e.g., racial jokes), nonverbal (e.g., discriminatory behavior), or environmental (e.g., offensive posters). These are attacks meant to hurt the recipient. It is generally intentional and conscious. The two other forms of microaggression described (microinsults and microinvalidations), however, tend to operate unconsciously and are unintended. A microinsult is an act or comment by the leader that conveys rudeness, insensitivity, or degrades a person's racial identity or heritage (e.g., saying to a black employee that another person was chosen for promotion due to a better "culture fit"). Microinvalidations are actions that exclude or nullify the views, experiences, or reality of a person of color (e.g., when an Asian American is asked what country they come from).

Microaggressions can be focused on various social identities, though most of the research has focused on race (Nair, Good, & Murrell, 2019). Even if the microaggression is not intended to do harm, the recipient may indeed interpret the treatment as disrespectful and implying that they are of lower status and less importance than members of nonmarginalized social identity groups. Evidence is building that microaggressions are associated with both mental and physical harm to the recipient (Williams, 2020).

Ostracism. Workplace ostracism is defined as "when an individual or group omits to take actions that engage another organizational member when it is socially appropriate to do so" (Robinson, et al., 2013, p. 206). Examples of ostracism include employees receiving unanswered greetings from the leader, not being included on email threads, being treated as if they are not present, having ideas ignored, getting passed over for an opportunity, having the leader refuse to talk to them, or if the leader exits the area when they enter (Ferris, Brown, Berry, & Lian, 2008). Wesselmann and Williams (2017) provided additional examples of ostracism such as not being given eye contact (Böckler, Hönke, & Sebanz, 2014; Wesselmann, Cardoso, Slater, & Williams, 2012; Wirth, Sacco, Hugenberg, & Williams, 2010), being forgotten (King & Geise, 2011), or experiencing uncomfortable silences (Koudenburg, Postmes, & Gordijn, 2011).

While ostracism is an effective social influence tool, it often leads to harmful consequences for individuals who are the recipients (Ferris et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 2013). In a meta-analysis by Howard, Cogswell, and Smith (2020), they concluded that ostracism was negatively related to core performance, helping, and voice, positively related to turnover and turnover intentions, and negatively related to well-being, satisfaction, and justice perceptions.

In light of the harmful effects of rejection, microaggressions, and ostracism, it is difficult to understand why leaders would engage in these types of

social exclusion. Hales, Ren, and Williams (2016) suggested that there are three purposes of ostracism that might apply to leader exclusion. First, to protect groups from problematic members. Second, to reveal to individuals that their behavior needs modification to remain in the group. Third, to remove deviant individuals who resist correction. Nezlek, Wesselmann, Wheeler, and Williams (2012) also found that ostracizers were motivated by self-protection. Rejection is likely to be similar to ostracism in terms of motivation of the perpetrator. However, microaggressions are more specifically associated with marginalized social identities. While likewise forms of social exclusion by the leader, the bias associated with them is also prone to reflect the attitudes of the leader toward the particular social group the individual belongs to.

Leader exclusion can have harmful effects at multiple levels and can cause particularly damaging experiences to group members (Fiset, Hajj, & Vongas, 2017). The leader may justify an exclusionary orientation for the good of the group as a whole or in the case of microaggressions, may not even recognize that their actions are harmful to an employee with a marginalized social identity. For the employee, a core issue is the perceived threat to their sense of belonging in the work group (Robinson & Schabram, 2017). Exclusion impedes the opportunity to build the social relationships in the work group that can lead to belongingness. Since the leader is in a position of power in the group, this may be especially likely. The experience of belongingness means that the employee is part of the in-group and likely receiving benefits from their status. In contrast, leader exclusion can lead to expectations by the recipient that they are in the out-group and unlikely to be treated as well as others in the work group. The leader who engages in exclusion may assume that the employee will learn a valuable lesson and carefully manage their behavior to comply with work group or organizational norms in the future. But in light of the evidence linking exclusion to many negative outcomes for the target and for the organization (Howard et al., 2020), such a leader orientation may well have more negative than positive effects.

The exclusive leader also risks alienating other employees who observe the exclusion. If the employee is dissimilar to the leader and/or the work group, other employees who observe the exclusion are more likely to attribute the exclusion to malicious motives of the leader, such as in-group favoritism, and devalue the leader (Rudert, Sutter, Corrodi, & Greifeneder, 2018). Leader exclusion may thus decrease the support of other group members for their leader if those members make the moral judgment that the treatment was unfair. This is especially likely if the target employee is a minority group member working in a predominantly white group. This raises questions as to whether the diversity of the work context is related to members of minority groups experiencing more exclusion than whites. Recent research from a cross

section of the United States has shown that microaggressions, a form of exclusion, are more likely in predominantly white organizational contexts than in diverse organizational contexts (Meyers et al., 2020). This points to the risks for marginalized group members of accepting employment in less diverse organizations as they increase their likelihood of experiencing exclusion.

Finally, leader exclusion by a white male leader toward women and other stigmatized social identity group members may be interpreted as an act of discrimination, especially if there is a pattern of such leader behavior. Employees who are in the same social identity group and observe or learn about the leader exclusionary treatment may assume the exclusion was discriminatory, leading to turnover of other stigmatized employees (Simon, Kinias, O'Brien, Major, & Bivolaru, 2013). Furthermore, a pattern of leader exclusionary treatment that prevents women, people of color, immigrants, and sexual minorities from equal opportunities in the workplace for pay and promotion may also result in Title VII lawsuits, hurting the organization's reputation, and possible financial loss as well due to damages incurred to plaintiffs (Dworkin, Schipani, Milliken, & Kneeland, 2018).

Conclusion

Leaders have a strong impact on their group members. With increasing levels of diversity in organizations, awareness of the different effects that each leader orientation can have is critical. Leader inclusion is the "gold standard" in relation to an approach to leading that is highly beneficial, and leader exclusion is the most harmful orientation to leading. However, assimilation and differentiation also are problematic as they limit the opportunity for employees who belong to marginalized social identity groups to fully contribute.

Leaders in organizations may face many challenges as they seek to be inclusive. This can occur through an organizational environment that is more focused on legal compliance to protect organizational interests than a focus on enhancement of inclusion (Shore et al., 2018). Likewise, Leroy, Buengler, Veestraeten, Shemla, and Hoever (2021) found that reaping the benefits of diversity without cultivating value-in-diversity beliefs did not promote team inclusion. These studies suggest that at both the team level and the organizational level, it is not enough to have diversity in the workplace but that leaders must promote the value that diversity provides and the unique perspectives that such employees can offer for inclusion to be enhanced.

In a similar vein, Mor Barak, Luria, and Brimhall (2021), argue for the importance of decoupling as another way to understand why efforts to create an inclusionary workplace may be challenging. "Simply stated, decoupling

refers to failing to ‘walk the talk’ (Brunsson, 1989; Oliver, 1991). In the context of inclusion, decoupling indicates a gap between the adoption of policies intended to treat all employees fairly, value them for who they are, and involve them in organizational processes and decision-making, and the actual fulfillment of actions to engage in these behaviors” (p. in this issue). Leaders can seek to create the type of integration of policies and practices that promote inclusion in the work group, but also have awareness that they may need to serve as a buffer for employees who are members of marginalized social identity groups. These employees are more likely than white men to experience exclusion, assimilation, or differentiation. To accomplish this, the leader may need to serve as an ally for these members (Hebl, Cheng, & Ng, 2020) when there are situations in which low inclusion may be taking place. This can occur in the work group itself among coworkers, or in the broader organization. The inclusive leader needs to be aware of people or situations that are likely sources of low inclusion and make efforts to facilitate psychological safety and psychological empowerment for marginalized members of their work group.

It can be difficult for members of privileged social identities to have awareness of their own advantages (Pratto & Stewart, 2012) and to concurrently perceive when employees with marginalized identities are treated in ways that make them an outsider at work. Marginalized employees have backgrounds and experiences that are quite different than those who are privileged, and the expectation that majority member norms should be operational, inflexible, and unchanged in an organization, that all members should know and effectively follow the “rules of the game” is both unrealistic and unfair. It may be common for privileged leaders to consider themselves fair when they engage in equal rather than equitable treatment. Although both equality and equity are presumed to promote fairness, equality attains this through treating everyone the same regardless of need, while equity achieves this through treating people differently dependent on need. By implementing equitable practices, recognizing that not everyone has had the same advantages, opportunities, or experiences, the leader can ensure a more welcoming and inclusive environment that facilitates the experience of being an insider for all members of the work group.

This article highlights the value of leader inclusion but describes three other leader orientations of exclusion, assimilation, and differentiation which can be harmful to all employees but especially to employees with marginalized social identities. This raises questions as to whether a leader can become more inclusive, and if so, what are some initial steps a leader can take toward this goal? Below, we share several ideas for increasing leader inclusion in organizations.

A first step is for the leaders themselves to seek feedback about their effectiveness in being inclusive by observing and promoting meaningful conversation with their group members. [Roberson and Perry \(2021\)](#) found leader availability and openness are key elements of inclusion as leaders listen to and learn from different perspectives. Leaders can also look for signs that they are inclusive or whether they adopt one of the other orientations by observing the behavior of work group members who are from marginalized social identity groups. Do minority members voice their opinions, share their knowledge, and make suggestions for organizational improvement? These are all signs of psychological safety, which is one of the key psychological mechanisms resulting from leader inclusion.

Another area in which a leader can observe signals of their inclusiveness is whether their team is inclusive to everyone, regardless of their social identity. One of the key predictors of work group inclusion is leader inclusion ([Chung et al., 2020](#)). Members of a leader's work group look to the leader for how to act and usually behave in a similar manner ([Yaffe & Kark, 2011](#)). If group members behave in ways that support belongingness and value in uniqueness to all group members, then chances are the leader is also consistently displaying such behavior. Likewise, if all group members discuss projects and activities by using terms that suggest a deep identification with the work group, then the leader is successful in creating an inclusive environment. Terms such as "we" and "our" and speaking proudly of the team and its successes all reflect a strong work group identification. Identification reflects in-group membership and a sense of belonging which is a key element of inclusion.

When all employees in a group feel psychologically empowered, odds are that their leader is inclusive. This is particularly important for employees with marginalized social identities as empowerment is something that is not experienced with exclusion, differentiation, and assimilation. When employees feel comfortable conveying their views, behaving authentically without fear of reprisal, and contributing to work-related decisions, they are likely also feeling empowered ([Randel et al., 2018](#)). Employees, especially those who are members of identity groups of lower status and power such as women and people of color, are very likely to pay attention to any signs of being in the out-group at work. Treatment that facilitates psychological empowerment provides an inclusive message of being valued and cared about, which is associated with belongingness.

While an inclusive leader may promote strong dyadic relationships with their team members, it is important to recognize the potential limits of these efforts. Through such dyadic relationships, the employee's sense of psychological safety and psychological empowerment is enhanced, and employee

efforts to support leader goals are likely. However, to enhance work group identification and unleash the benefits of safety and empowerment, the inclusive leader must make efforts to treat everyone in the group inclusively (Mor Barak et al., 2021; Nishii & Mayer, 2009) and to ensure that work group dynamics promote and support inclusion (Randel et al., 2018). Successfully creating dyadic inclusion with all individual group members will discourage relational conflict and promote effective working relations within the team.

In sum, leader inclusion is highly effective for facilitating an inclusive work environment which welcomes employees from a diversity of social identities. Evidence is building that inclusive leadership enables psychological safety, work group identification, and psychological empowerment, along with increasing positive employee attitudes and enhanced performance (Shore et al., 2018). In this article, we sought to clarify leader inclusion through reviewing existing scholarship as well as by comparing it with leader orientations of assimilation, differentiation, and exclusion. Understanding the ways in which the leader can enhance employee experiences of belongingness and value in uniqueness is in early stages of development. However, it is apparent that this type of awareness is key to creating environments in which all employees, and not just those from dominant social identity groups, are able to thrive and contribute fully. As diversity increases globally, having leaders that can behave inclusively and inspire inclusion in their work group members are critical for organizational success.

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