**The Nature and Impact of Inclusive and Non-Inclusive Micro-Behaviours on Minority Ethnic Organisational Members**

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**The Nature and Impact of Inclusive and Non-Inclusive Micro-Behaviours on Minority Ethnic Organisational Members**

This paper contributes to understanding inclusive and non-inclusive leader behaviours and the impact on demographic minority organizational members by examining encounters between individuals in more and less privileged positions. Over a period of a month, twenty-four senior black, Asian and minority ethnic (BME) managers, half of whom were women recorded identity salient encounters in journals and discussed these in interviews. The data elicited forty-two micro-episodes of inclusion and non-inclusion, comprising interactions between BME individuals and formal organisational leaders, colleagues and clients with more privileged gender, ethnic and/or professional status. Privileged others engaged in inclusion to meet business objectives, or as spontaneous, personal acts. Minority individuals appeared to hold organisational leaders to high standards for creating inclusive cultures, and responded to non-inclusive acts by sustaining or refuting them. The study’s in-depth interpretive analysis offers insight into subjective experiences and work practices, but makes no claims about causality or predictability. The study contributes to inclusion literature in three unique ways. Its micro-level focus sheds light on inclusion practiced by the majority or privileged in the lived experience of minority organisational members. It applies a unique methodology (journals with interviews) to track experiences of inclusion in organisations. It also indicates that overtly positive (i.e. inclusive) or negative (i.e. non-inclusive) practices are complex, and not necessarily interpreted as mutually exclusive categories of positive/inclusive and non-positive/exclusive experiences. BME women and men demonstrate agency in perceptions of, and responses to, practices of inclusion and exclusion in organizations. Practical implications are that some responsibility for sustaining inclusive work cultures rests beyond formal leadership positions and challenges organisational members, line managers and team leaders to demonstrate relationship-based, ‘other’-focused leadership by learning about the ubiquitous nature of micro-behaviours and the subtle (and sometimes low effort) methods of promoting affirming and inclusive cultures demonstrated in this study.

**Introduction**

Inclusion describes “the extent to which individuals can access information and resources, are involved in work groups, and have the ability to influence decision-making processes” (Roberson, 2006:215). It is therefore concerned with organisational members’ access, involvement and opportunity to influence at work. From the perspective of organisational leadership, inclusiveness is the extent to which leaders are deemed open to new ideas, accessible and available to their followers (Nembhard & Edmonson, 2006). Leader inclusiveness thus concerns the extent to which those in privileged organisational positions facilitate or enable access, involvement and influence in others. Inclusion as a leadership attribute is positively associated with employee outcomes. Inclusive leaders are follower-centric, empowering their followers (Hollander, 2008). They promote psychologically safe working environments in which individuals feel comfortable ‘being themselves’ (Edmonson, 1999). In turn, these environments facilitate learning and work performance (Hirak, Peng, Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2012). Leader inclusiveness recognises the differential impact leaders have on individuals who vary in the extent of their access, involvement and organisational influence. When inclusive leaders share access and power with multiple team members (i.e. have high leader-member exchange relationships), it attenuates the relationship between diversity and turnover (Nishii & Mayer, 2009). However, despite the growing evidence of positive outcomes of inclusive leader behaviours, there appears to be little organisational research on leader inclusion and socio-demographic identity (e.g. gender, ethnicity, class) diversity. A cursory search of “inclusive leader” in main organisational psychology and management databases (EBSCO and PsycInfo) revealed less than 20 refereed journal articles on this topic. This is notable, given that researchers recognise the significance of diversity in enacting leadership. Empirical and review papers on leadership acknowledge the privilege inherent in leadership positions and consider the implications of its juxtaposition with less privileged gender (Powell, 2012), ethnicity (Ospina & Foldy2010) and intersecting gender and ethnicity (Atewologun & Sealy, in press). Additionally, there is growing research on the detrimental effect of leader non-prototypicality on leader-follower dynamics (e.g. Hogg, 2001; van Knippenberg, 2011).

The nature of inclusive leadership and its impact on historically minority organisational members remains to be fully understood, and is the subject of this paper. Drawing on Roberson (2006), Nembhard and Edmonson (2006) and Ryan (2006), inclusive leadership is taken as the extent to which individuals in positions of organisational privilege and power enable others’ access to information, resources and participation in decision-making by being open and available to less powerful others.

**Inclusion and micro-behaviours**

This paper focuses on intra- and inter-personal, micro-level dynamics of organisational inclusion. Research at multiple levels of analysis – intrapersonal, interpersonal, contextual and structural – is important for meaningful understanding of diversity and inequalities at work (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009). Understanding inclusion entails focus on equitable distribution of goods, rights and responsibilities among individuals and focus on the structures and forms through which the distribution occurs (Ryan, 2006). However, these structures that result in inequitable distribution of resources play out in “the formal and informal rules or norms that govern how members of society treat each other” (2006:5). Power differentials between societal members, such as members of ethnic and gender identity groups are present at every level – “*from identities and self-concepts, to interpersonal interactions, to the operation of firms, to the organisation of economic and legal systems*” (Browne & Misra, 2003:490). Power is a key process through which subtle acts legitimise some, and not other individuals, in organisations (van Laer & Janssens, 2011). Thus, examining formal and informal interactions between privileged/powerful and non-privileged/less powerful organisational members is likely to facilitate understanding of leader inclusion and forms it may take.

Theoretical and empirical researchers emphasise the significance of everyday “micro-behaviours” featuring in the experiences of minority and less privileged individuals in society (e.g. Deitch, Barsky, Butz, Chan, Brief and Bradley (2003); Kenny and Briner (2007), Cortina, (2008); Zanoni and colleagues (2010); van Laer and Janssens, (2011) and Clair, Humberd, Caruso and Roberts (2012). Clair and colleagues (2012) theorise on the psychological impact of identity ambiguous encounters for demographically atypical professionals. They propose that seemingly momentary interactions can have a powerful impact on the behaviour and engagement levels of demographically atypical organisational members and encourage research on the ‘subjective experience’ of these micro-encounters. Zanoni and colleagues recommend greater focus on “*discursive micro-analyses*” which shed light on “*interstitial, every-day forms of resistance*” (2010:17) and paying attention to identity dimensions like gender and ethnicity as “*an ongoing dynamic social practice, shedding light on the various ways in which individuals as agents relate to the structural restraints of multiple organisational inequalities*” (ibid:18). Thus, this suggests an agent-based perspective on diversity dynamics in addition to a micro-focus. Agency refers to seeing humans as *“creative and probing creatures…actively engaged in and attempting to negotiate their social settings”* (Lofland, Snow, Anderson & Lofland, 2006:166). A micro-focus on interactions between privileged and less privileged others can contribute to understanding the nature of inclusive leader behaviours and potentially how minority members may anticipate, interpret or respond to this at work.

In diversity literature, micro-behaviours are everyday positive and negative acts that reinforce inclusion of similar others and/or sustain exclusion of those who are different (Rowe, 2008). Positive micro-affirmations and negative micro-inequities are apparently ‘small’, ephemeral, often unconscious acts, in which individuals engage, which, over time, result in including and affirming people with whom one is familiar and likes, while excluding and discouraging those perceived to be different (Rowe, 2008). In contrast to overt traditional expressions of racism and discrimination, modern or everyday racism draws attention to the subtle ambiguity that typifies contemporary experiences of diversity and inequality in organisations today (Cortina, 2008; Essed, 1991). In this modern form of the manifestation of prejudice, systemic racism is reproduced through routine and taken-for-granted practices and procedures in everyday life, rather than more blatant, aggressive acts such as name calling or physical abuse. Although work on everyday discrimination (e.g. van Laer & Janssens, 2011) and workplace incivilities (Cortina, 2008) advance understanding of micro-experiences of difference and exclusion at work, further research is required on the nature of inclusion in organisations (Nishii & Mayer, 2009).

This study is informed by research on inclusion/exclusion and on micro-behaviours (micro-inequities and micro-affirmations). Its purpose was to gain further insight into the nature and impact of workplace inclusion (and exclusion), as instigated by organisational members in privileged positions. The research question guiding this was “what is the nature of inclusive leadership practice in organisations” and “how do under-represented/minority individuals experience or respond to these behaviours”?

**Methodology**

Data were elicited from the experiences of 24 black, Asian and minority ethnic (BME) senior managers in two large UK organisations, a major government department (Govt PLC) and a global professional services firm (PSF). Half the respondents were women; nine were black (African/Caribbean), 12 Asian (Chinese/Indian) and two of mixed black and white ethnicity. Respondents were invited to participate in a study on identity at work using criterion sampling and snowballing techniques (Lofland et al, 2006) for a spread of respondents across ethnicity and gender. Diaries (kept over 4 weeks) and semi-structured interviews were used, aligning with the micro-level analysis of this study. Encounters that signal difference or subtle forms of discrimination are often attributionally ambiguous (Deitch et al, 2003). Diaries help capture lived everyday experiences without putting respondents under undue pressure to engage in sense-making. They are also less reliant on respondents’ memory to recall everyday acts compared to conducting interviews in isolation, which may favour significant events. Over four weeks, respondents kept a record of ‘identity heightening episodes’ or ‘events that raised the salience of their identities as senior minority ethnic women and men’ at work. Email or text messages were sent to respondents twice a week to encourage diary completion. After about four weeks, respondents participated in interviews (lasting 90 minutes on average), elaborating on their journal entries (ranging from two to nine episodes per respondent). In total, 101 identity episodes were elicited. In line with the study aim to examine inclusive leadership behaviours, and due to the nascent nature of this topic, specific episodes of inclusion (or non-inclusion) were selected for further analysis. The encounters were interpersonal interactive experiences, including actual, virtual and anticipated social encounters. Some episodes occurred during routine/familiar encounters (e.g. team meetings) or non-routine/unfamiliar contexts (e.g. new client meetings). Additionally, some interactions occurred between parties who had relatively clear and structured role relationships (e.g. consultant to client, line manager to subordinate) or more fluid, emergent role relationships (e.g. group discussions, networking events). Episodes comprising an encounter between respondents and individuals in higher status in which higher status individuals engaged in actions that signalled inclusion, enabled respondents’ access to information, resources and participation in decision-making, or demonstrated openness and availability were selected. Assessment was made on a broad definition of privilege, power and status, rather than formal (e.g. manager-subordinate) relations. Thus, status was defined broadly, in terms of identity (e.g. male over female gender; white over minority ethnicity) or formal rank or professional relationship. Forty-two episodes, constituting about half the data set were selected, then further coded into inclusive leadership practices and behaviours, and non-inclusive leadership practices/behaviours categories. Additionally, as discussed previously, the study also sought to examine respondents’ agency with respect to their responses to experiences of non-inclusive practices.

**Inclusive and non-inclusive leadership practices**

Inclusive and non-inclusive episodes occurred in a range of contexts, including noting a major client’s limp handshake, absent offers of refreshments from majority colleagues, curiosity regarding one’s specialist expertise, one’s name misspelt by a meeting organiser, and a passing reference to bold colours and power dressing by a senior Partner. Fitting with clinical studies on micro-aggressions (Sue et al, 2007) the data revealed the cues signalling BME individuals’ inclusion or non-inclusion at work, in verbal, behavioural and environmental forms (see Table 1).

Table 1: Illustrative table of forms of inclusive and non-inclusive practices

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Episodes | Verbal cues | Behavioural cues | Environmental cues |
| Inclusive | Being greeted by name by a senior director when passing him in the corridor. | Being copied into a series of email exchanges regarding one’s role on a major client account. | Pride in attending a senior BME leadership development event and observing the wide national and cultural diversity in the room. |
| Non-inclusive | Being asked to confirm organisational position because an older, white, male deputy has been mistaken as the senior role holder. | Name misspelt leading to exclusion from an email planning the details of a strategic meeting. | Observing an image of a homogenous group titled “a high performing team” in a PowerPoint presentation at a teambuilding event. |

*Inclusive leadership*

As earlier discussed, inclusive leadership is taken as the extent to which leaders and other privileged individuals enable others’ access to information, resources, decision-making through openness and availability to less powerful others (Roberson, 2006; Nembhard & Edmonson, 2006; Ryan, 2006). Inclusive leadership manifested as subtle messages of inclusion/belonging through personal introductions, directed attention during high-stakes meetings and involvement in critical decision-making. The data suggested that these inclusive leadership practices occurred through formal/legitimised and informal/personal means. Formal or legitimised inclusive behaviours from organisational leaders were supported by explicit, business rationalisation processes that empowered minority individuals to engage in organisational decision-making. Incidents from PSF members featured prominently in this category. Lalit, a senior Indian man recounted encounters in which Directors and high net-worth clients turned to him in decision-making. For example:

So, we went for a meeting… a massive client of the firm…And all these guys are like way above my pay grade….And I’m sitting there, I’m thinking I’m the note-taker…So, the big cheese (client) from London goes to big cheese (client from) India and says, ‘Lalit is here with some of his colleagues from Professional Services Firm’. So he didn’t even bother… (to introduce my other senior colleagues)… As things went along… the client seemed to quite cling onto what I was saying…I was so active in that meeting, it completely surprised me.

As a lower status “*note taker*” Lalit was taken aback by Indian clients’ keen interest in his contributions, sought due to his shared ethnicity with them. A similar experience was recorded when he was copied in to email exchanges with Directors and Partners up to three levels above him regarding his impending loss to another Indian client account. In these encounters, Lalit’s Indian ethnicity was perceived as a tangible asset, necessitating his inclusion; his cultural and national capital as an Indian man differentiated him from his majority ethnic colleagues (the client introduced Lalit and then “*his colleagues*”). This sense of inclusion had a strong affirming impact on Lalit.

It made me realise that when it comes to clients with that background, I am in a position to do things and achieve things that others are not….It made me realise that I was key to the account.

In contrast to these legitimised inclusive behaviours, other practices appeared more informal, spontaneous and less prescribed by business outcomes. Such ‘small’ actions by significant others ranged from ephemeral encounters (such as being called by name in passing in a corridor) to more direct acts of inclusion. For instance, Vivian, an African-Caribbean female manager recalled a meeting with about twenty white colleagues in Govt Plc. Here, one of the only other two female attendees interrupted proceedings to validate Vivian’s earlier suggestion after it had been initially discredited and dismissed without warrant by others. In another episode Vivian’s team members rose to her defence when she was being unduly challenged by her manager about a piece of work. Ameet, an Indian man in Govt Plc, also valued the visible and proactive way in which a senior white male colleague supported him in challenging negative assumptions about immigrants.

Overall, whether institutionally legitimised or apparently informal and personal, minority individuals responded positively to inclusion by more powerful others. However, the findings also suggest some points of differentiation. In P.S.F., many respondents of Indian heritage reported their sense of inclusion came from the vital role they played in enabling the firm to implement its corporate strategy. However, as an approach to managing diversity and inclusion, critics (e.g. Noon, 2010) may challenge the context-specific limitations of this approach. In P.S.F, the sense of inclusion from constructing oneself as a business resource for high-value projects is intricately connected with one’s employer’s current strategic objectives, and raises questions for the relevance of other identity dimensions that may not carry the same ‘business currency’. For example, what are implications for individuals of minority sexual orientation or minority ethnic individuals who have culturally assimilated and do not self-identify as culturally different from the majority white group? What about employees from cultures considered irrelevant to prevailing business strategy (e.g. the Caribbean)? Or junior minority employees who may have limited access to high profile international clients/projects? Such individuals may have limited obvious cultural currency to offer the business. To what extent can gender be utilised in the same way, for men and women to actively leverage from gender differences without raising alarms regarding sexism? Additionally, the risk of essentialising differences is ever-present when advocating another’s inclusion on the basis of their social identity.

*Non-inclusive leadership*

Positive experiences of participation in decision-making and increased access to privileged others contrasted against the less affirming non-inclusive encounters respondents experienced. Even if unintentional, cues can trigger a sense of exclusion that has longer term well-being implications (Deitch et al, 2003; van Laer & Janssens, 2011). Sinita, an Indian woman at a Govt Plc, recorded her experience at a team building exercise in which she noted a homogenous “*high performing team*” image presented in PowerPoint. In the interview, she contrasted our minority ethnic cultural signifiers with the *“smart suits”* worn by people in the photo “*conforming to the western world*.” The image, perhaps deemed merely illustrative by the facilitator, served as a cue that excluded Sinita from aspiring to be part of a *“high performing team”*.

If someone’s going to make it to that level, that’s the image, they wouldn’t have your hair…they wouldn’t dress like you or me.

One recurring theme through the data was the expectation that those in hierarchically privileged/powerful positions, i.e. organisational leaders, ought to ‘know better’ and, in addition, role model inclusion. Respondents often expressed disappointment in senior colleagues’ lack of sensitivity to inclusion. Vivian expected senior colleagues engaged in strategic decision-making to be sufficiently self-aware to recognise business solutions despite their unexpected source.

These are quite senior people…when you’re dealing at a strategic level, I expect that you would always first and foremost put the business first.  ...Irrespective of what your personal views are, you should be able to identify when somebody’s come up with a solution to a business problem....whether you want to give that person credit for it or not is a different matter, but you should be able, at that level, to say ’Hold on a minute, that girl’s got a point, OK, I didn’t expect it to come from her, but now that she’s said it, let’s discuss it’… I thought the higher up I went, the less I would come across that sort of thing… It hasn’t lessened, but it’s become more sophisticated and more subtle.

In a roomful of twenty-odd senior white men, she believed organisational leaders should counter implicit biases they may hold about her gender/ethnic status. Such implicit bias, manifested here as lowered value of her contribution, is likely to happen to ‘out-group’ (i.e. non-dominant group) members (Kandola, 2009). In contrast to Vivian’s expectations, women’s and BME individuals’ experiences of exclusion are often magnified at senior organisational levels which tend to be more homogenous and therefore more clearly defined along in-group/out-group lines (Kanter, 1977; Bell & Nkomo, 2001). Ironically, senior context may thus trigger even more subtle and ambiguous micro-cues regarding their legitimate membership of a given group. Along with other research highlighting the role that those in authority have in sustaining micro-discriminatory practices against minority groups (e.g. Brief, Dietz, Cohen, Pugh & Vashow, 2000), this underscores the significant impact of organisational leaders in creating and challenging inclusive cultures.

*Responses to exclusion: sustaining and refuting*

Journal and interview responses indicated that BME individuals were often acutely aware of being on the margins.

I just laughed along, and I didn’t really know how to respond or join in appropriately….I was very aware that I didn’t fit in. (Bernadette, Chinese female, P.S.F.)

And:

I was so aware that I was not one of them…it was like ‘them and us’ sort of thing, like they are not going to play with me. (Indira, Indian female, Govt Plc)

However, the data also enable insight into their agentic responses to episodes of non-inclusion. Although respondents did not always overtly challenge this exclusion, some respondents demonstrated agency in their sense-making around these events. They often acknowledged they used *“tools”* and strategies to cope, suggesting awareness of having to engage in tactics to assert oneself after being marginalised (however inadvertently) due to one’s social group membership. For example, although Bernadette did not directly refute the invisible position in which her colleagues’ camaraderie and risqué jokes placed her, she weighed up the business and career implications of remaining at the margins of “*male banter”*:

I need to personally gel with this bunch, …even if I can’t gel with them I need to actually do something to demonstrate to a client that I’ve worked with this bunch of people all my life at P.S.F.….So how am I going to, first, get myself psyched, so that I can banter a bit with them? And, secondly, don’t stick out like a sore thumb at the client, and so that they can see that we’ve been working together and I can then fulfil the objective of being there and showcasing that we’re a cohesive team?

However, experiencing direct and indirect messages of exclusion prompted some minority individuals to directly refute these. For instance, Gurditta, an Indian man at Govt Plc directly challenged his exclusion from a meeting, which he discovered had resulted from his non-Western name having been mis-spelt, leading to the organiser subsequently unable to locate him on the internal mail system. Gurditta said to the organiser:

I represent (key function) and (we) have an obvious interest in what you discuss in the policy, why was I not invited?

Additionally, others spoke about engaging mindfully in a series of actions to refute and challenge exclusion as minority ethnic individuals. For example, Ameet regularly prepared his responses to topical diversity issues:

I have my potential answers prepared… I am going to make sure that I get across the positive aspects overlooked or underplayed. And…weigh in (to the debate). Ameet, Asian male, Govt Plc

**Discussion**

Examining BME managers’ everyday experiences of identity-salient episodes revealed a range of positively- to negatively-appraised cues signalling access, or the lack thereof to resources, decision-making and contact with privileged others. It also attuned us to responses ranging from relatively acquiescing to directly refuting exclusive practices.Focusing on interpersonal micro-episodes highlights the ongoing role of privileged others in sustaining or challenging non-inclusive workplace practices. Respondents’ abilities to observe and articulate interpersonal cues support the micro focus, illustrating the significance of others’ small and seemingly insignificant actions interpreted as signalling the extent to which colleagues in positions of organisational privilege enabled their access to information, resources and participation in decision-making.

The notion of ‘Inclusive leadership’ that captures being open, accessible and available to individual followers, regardless of difference, is gaining prominence in education (e.g. Garrison-Wade, Sobel & Fulmer, 2007; Rayner, 2009; Madsen & Mabokela, 2002). Here, assumptions of traditional managerial approaches to leadership are challenged as they support hierarchical relationships that exclude those not privileged to occupy formal positions of authority and who do not have the personal or socially-sanctioned characteristics needed to successfully influence (Ryan, 2006). Although Ryan convincingly argues for the misalignment/incongruence between traditional managerial forms of leadership and inclusion, the findings suggest that these are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The business case of inclusion is not misaligned with the social justice case for inclusion. What has been described as formal and informal practices of inclusion by organisational leaders supports this.

By examining interpersonal encounters between more and less privileged/powerful individuals, the study integrates research on leader inclusion/exclusion and micro-behaviours (micro inequities and micro affirmations). It offers empirical evidence on the nature and focus of inclusive and non-inclusive leadership practices (verbal, behavioural and environmental). Two aspects of inclusive leadership practices – explicitly tied to business objectives versus ‘small’ acts of respect and civility were observed. Additionally, the subtle, nebulous and ambiguous nature of modern racism suggests a degree of difficulty in describing and defining this concept (Sue et al, 2007; van Laer & Janssens, 2011). It is important to make these ‘invisible’ forms of discrimination more visible, as subtle racism may have more detrimental effects on targets than traditional overt forms of racism (ibid.). Additionally, there is much opportunity for empirical and theoretical development, especially regarding adaptive responses to micro-aggressions and suggestions for raising awareness and sensitivity in instigators in this area (ibid.). Cortina (2008) especially advocates focus on BME individuals’ experiences (over gender, for example), considering the greater challenges in conducting this type of research, such as the inherent ambiguities of these events and employees’ reluctance to identify as victims of prejudice. This study goes some way towards addressing the suggestions proposed by such scholars as Sue and colleagues (2007), van Laer and Janssens (2011), and Cortina (2008). In challenging organisational leaders to ‘know better’ and sustaining and refuting exclusion, BME individuals adopted dynamic responses to non-inclusive behaviours by privileged others.

*Implications and future research*

The study draws attention to situations that may hamper the ability of senior BME individuals (and other demographically atypical individuals) to fully engage and connect with colleagues, while also offering pointers for leaders seeking to create affirming cultures. The data suggest that some responsibility for inclusion rests beyond formal leadership positions or those perceived as having the authority to speak to these issues (e.g. HR, Diversity & Inclusion professionals, Diversity Champions, members of minority groups and networks). On average, respondents reported one notable identity – salient encounter a week. Although further research is required to verify this count, this gives a starting indication of the prevalence of these incidents. It may be beneficial for colleagues, line managers and team leaders who are majority group members to just be aware of the frequency and normality of encounters that trigger awareness of difference – positively and negatively. Learning about micro-behaviours may also offer insight into some of the subtle (and low effort) methods of promoting affirming and inclusive cultures. This also suggests practical implications for diversity training. It is important to go beyond traditional focus on addressing individual stereotypes and assumptions to highlighting and training managers on the differential impact of their everyday actions such as the quality of leader-member exchanges (Nishii & Mayer, 2009. Similarly, focus on inclusive leadership behaviour helps shift away from awareness that comes from understanding that one is unconsciously biased (e.g. Kandola, 2004) to thinking about what can actively do about it. This also helps identify what individuals can do rather than what they need to stop doing or what they cannot do, an approach typical of the compliance approach to diversity in organisations.

For future research, while it is recognised that the study did not aim to quantify the frequency of events, journals may be useful for gathering more precise, valid, reliable and quantifiable accounts of experiences of inclusion (compared to interviews or questionnaires). It was beyond the scope of this study to investigate and make any assertions regarding the ‘real frequency’ or ‘real reasons’ behind inclusive and non-inclusive leader behaviours by instigators. While it is important to gain understanding of experiences on the receiving end of non-inclusive practices (van Laer & Janssens, 2011), it will also be useful to investigate experiences of those in positions of privilege that engage spontaneously in inclusive behaviours.

Limitations

This type of study may run the risk that advocating ‘inclusion’ reinforces privilege, by acknowledging asymmetrical access to resources and encouraging dominant and/or majority group members to ‘reach out’ to those at the margins to facilitate integration. True inclusion, however, is about changing the system rather than assimilation or integration, and involves deep reflection on one’s privileged status (Ryan, 2006), rather than a check list of ‘inclusive leader behaviours’ to follow. Additionally, while important to highlight agency in response to experiences of non-inclusion, an overly agent-centred focus ignores the strong role of structures and practices identified in sustaining exclusion (Ryan, 2006). This potentially diminishes the impact of social, economic and cultural context, and the power embedded therein in sustaining inclusion. Undoubtedly, factors at macro-level (e.g. history, legislation), meso-level (e.g. organisational policy) and micro-level (individual agency) influence issues of diversity, and ethnicity within it (Syed & Özbilgin, 2009). It is thus important to remain cognisant of both agency and structural dimensions, even if one chooses to focus on one.

*Conclusion*

This study adopted a micro-level and agent-centred perspective on experiences of leader inclusion. The findings confirm the significance of informal practices that may sustain exclusion or encourage inclusion of certain groups at work. This study contributes to understanding the nature and prevalence of micro-inclusive and non-inclusive behaviours at work. Inclusive leader behaviours appear to be driven by business and personal grounds, and minority ethnic individuals inadvertently sustain or directly refute non-inclusive experiences, while holding organisational leaders to higher standards in maintaining inclusive cultures. The helps advance the conception of inclusive leadership by understanding the nature of cues that may signal belonging and the effort that goes into individuals’ response to managing these.

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