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Inclusion Beyond Representation, Belonging, and Symbolic Organizational Membership

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Abstract

Organizations increasingly report demographic representation, belonging initiatives, and inclusive values, yet these signals do not establish that employees participate consequentially or share power. The central problem is conceptual compression: representation, social membership, influence, and structural change are often treated as interchangeable indicators of inclusion. This integrative review examines heterogeneous organizational, psychological, sociological, qualitative, quantitative, theoretical, methodological, and measurement evidence to clarify those distinctions. The review combines transparent targeted searching, relevance-based selection, structured extraction, critical appraisal, and cross-domain synthesis while preserving design differences and contradictory findings. Evidence converges on belonging and valued uniqueness as important experiences of social membership, but it also shows that membership may be conditional, identity-regulating, modality-dependent, or disconnected from decision consequences. Voice research further indicates that speaking opportunities, expression, reception, status, and actual influence should be separated. Structural scholarship shifts attention toward authority, resource allocation, institutional routines, and the capacity to alter rules. The article's original contribution is an Inclusion-Depth Framework that organizes presence, social membership, consequential participation, and structural power as analytically distinct depths connected by conditional rather than automatic transitions. The synthesis does not establish a validated causal sequence, comprehensive measurement system, or universally effective organizational intervention. Its implications are therefore diagnostic and research-oriented: organizations should avoid inferring depth from visibility or sentiment alone, and future studies should trace decisions, resources, network access, and structural change longitudinally and across levels.

Keywords: Inclusion beyond representation, Symbolic organizational membership, Representation is not inclusion, Belonging as social membership, Inclusion-depth framework, Measurement challenges

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Introduction

Organizations can increase the visible presence of historically underrepresented employees without changing how membership, contribution, or authority are enacted. Contemporary workplace-inclusion scholarship distinguishes inclusion from demographic diversity by emphasizing belongingness and value for uniqueness, while identifying leadership as one route through which these experiences may be enacted [1–3]. This distinction matters because a workforce may be compositionally diverse while everyday interactions still communicate who is prototypical, credible, promotable, or entitled to shape collective decisions. Representation is therefore best treated as an access condition: it concerns who is present and visible, not whether presence is socially secure, consequential, or structurally empowered.



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The broader diversity literature also cautions against attributing outcomes to composition in isolation. Reviews characterize diversity and inclusion as related but analytically distinct domains whose effects depend on task conditions, organizational climates, management practices, and the processes through which differences acquire meaning [2]. A representational gain may expand opportunity and disrupt homogeneity, yet it can coexist with unequal information access, selective recognition, informal exclusion, or pressure to assimilate. Conversely, employees may report interpersonal acceptance in settings where advancement criteria, decision rights, and resource allocations remain unchanged. Treating all these conditions as “inclusion” obscures what has improved and what has not.

Visible initiatives add another interpretive difficulty because their announced purpose does not guarantee their enacted effects. Diversity initiatives may produce backfire, negative spillover, or false-progress consequences when their signals, incentives, and accountability arrangements are misaligned [4]. Such possibilities do not imply that diversity programs generally fail; rather, they show why symbolic commitments and observed organizational changes require separate assessment. A program can communicate recognition, increase expectations, or legitimize an organizational identity while leaving employees uncertain about whether dissent will be heard, performance recognized, or decision processes altered.

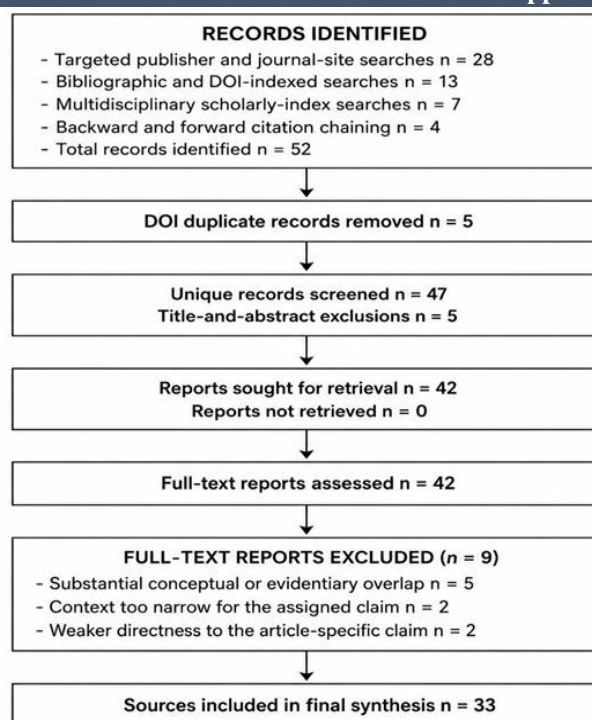
Membership itself can also be granted conditionally. Qualitative evidence shows that organizational inclusion may regulate identities by rewarding forms of membership judged acceptable, admirable, or grateful within a specific institutional context [5]. The implication is not that belonging is inherently assimilative, but that acceptance can carry normative demands about how difference should be displayed. This integrative review consequently asks how evidence on belonging, voice, power, and measurement can be organized without collapsing distinct levels or claiming causal progression. Its contribution is a bounded conceptual synthesis: inclusion is examined as varying in depth from presence, through social membership and consequential participation, to structural power and change.

Integrative review method

An integrative review design was used to compare evidence that differed in method, unit, time horizon, and theoretical purpose. Such a design requires alignment among the review question, selection logic, appraisal, and synthesis rather than adopting procedures associated with a different review type by default [6]. Eligible sources were peer-reviewed journal articles with verified DOIs and direct relevance to representation, belonging, voice, structural power, measurement, or organizational implications. Quantitative, qualitative, longitudinal, cross-sectional, multilevel, theoretical, methodological, and review evidence were eligible when each source supported a defined claim or synthesis boundary.

Search and selection were organized as linked interpretive decisions. Rigorous review writing requires an explicit organizing logic that converts heterogeneous literature into a bounded contribution while retaining differences among evidence types [7]. Searches combined title variants, construct synonyms, mechanisms, competing explanations, moderators, multilevel conditions, measurement terms, and organizational implications. Extraction covered context, unit, design, construct definition, mechanism, moderator, outcome, limitation, transferability boundary, and exact claim permitted. Relevance appraisal emphasized claim fit, design adequacy for the assigned inference, and avoidance of redundant conceptual coverage; unlike designs were compared, not statistically pooled.

PRISMA-compatible elements were used to document record flow transparently [8]. **Figure 1** reports the verified flow of records through identification, duplicate removal, screening, full-text assessment, exclusion, and final inclusion for this integrative review article.



Note. The diagram reports a targeted integrative-review process and does not claim exhaustive systematic-review coverage.

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram for Evidence Identification and Selection

Search reporting documented information sources, strings, dates, limits, DOI checks, and supplementary citation methods to support traceability [9]. The documented search register showed that targeted publisher and journal-site searches yielded 28 records, bibliographic and DOI-indexed searches yielded 13, multidisciplinary scholarly-index searches yielded seven, and citation chaining yielded four. Of 52 identified records, five DOI duplicates were removed. Forty-seven unique records were screened; five were excluded at title and abstract. All 42 reports sought were retrieved and assessed. Nine full texts were excluded for substantial overlap (five), narrow context (two), or weaker claim directness (two), producing the final synthesis. These counts describe the registered targeted process, not exhaustive retrieval.

Belonging as social membership

Belonging concerns experienced social membership: recognition as a legitimate group member, relational acceptance, and the ability to express valued difference without forfeiting membership. The belongingness-and-uniqueness model supports this dual definition while also showing why belonging alone cannot represent the full depth of inclusion [1]. Employees may feel accepted yet remain peripheral to information, influence, or advancement; alternatively, they may be relied upon instrumentally while experiencing weak identification or constrained self-expression. Social membership is therefore analytically deeper than presence but does not by itself demonstrate consequential participation or structural change.

Organizational membership is linked to identification, shared identity, and human or social capital processes, although these constructs and designs are not interchangeable [10–12]. Meta-analytic evidence associates organizational identification with health, while focused review evidence suggests that shared identity can organize support, meaning, and coping during stress or change. Field evidence further connects capital resources with experiences of inclusion and exclusion. These findings converge on the importance of relational embeddedness but leave directionality and causal ordering uncertain. Identification may follow supportive conditions, and individual capital may reflect prior access rather than personal capacity alone; neither should be substituted for inclusion as a whole.

Enacted membership also depends on where and through which channels work occurs. Qualitative evidence indicates that employees interpret inclusive organizational behavior differently across work modalities and social identities because visibility, access, communication, and relational cues vary [13]. This does not establish that remote, hybrid, or colocated work is inherently more inclusive. It instead suggests that equivalent formal policies can be experienced differently when spontaneous interaction, digital presence, scheduling, caregiving, disability, geographic location, or identity salience shape access to recognition and connection.

Belonging is thus necessary to a deep account of inclusion but remains insufficient. Acceptance may be conditional on identity regulation, and relational embeddedness may depend on resources unequally distributed across employees [5]. Such conditions can create symbolic organizational membership: employees are recognized as members and invited to identify with

the collective, yet the terms of membership may discourage dissent or leave authority unchanged. Conditional membership is a plausible boundary rather than a universal feature. The key analytic question is whether belonging enables authentic participation or merely stabilizes attachment without consequence.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for review design, evidence domains, and extraction framework for inclusion beyond representation, belonging, and symbolic organizational membership.

Table 1. Review design, evidence domains, and extraction framework for Inclusion Beyond Representation, Belonging, and Symbolic Organizational Membership.

Evidence domain or review construct	Review question	Eligible evidence type	Extraction fields	Appraisal or relevance criterion	Synthesis role	Main limitation	Interpretation boundary
Representation and access	Who is present, visible, and formally eligible?	Composition studies; diversity reviews; policy analyses	Identity category; access point; level; context	Separates demographic presence from enacted inclusion [2]	Baseline access domain	Headcount omits experience and consequence	Presence does not establish belonging [1]
Belonging and social membership	Who is accepted and valued without erasing difference?	Conceptual, meta-analytic, field, and qualitative evidence	Belonging; uniqueness; identification; capital; modality	Maintains construct distinctions and contextual fit [10]	Social-membership domain	Self-report and correlational evidence dominate	Identification is not equivalent to inclusion
Relational resources	How do networks and resources shape membership?	Observational and qualitative organizational studies	Human capital; social capital; access; recognition	Avoids blaming individuals for structurally patterned access [12]	Explains uneven membership conditions	Reverse causation and selection remain plausible	Resource association does not prove personal deficit
Consequential participation and structural power	Whose input affects decisions, resources, or rules?	Voice, network, structural, longitudinal, and theoretical evidence	Opportunity; expression; reception; decision trace; authority	Proposed review-design domain requiring observable consequence	Distinguishes membership from deeper inclusion	Direct decision-tracing evidence is limited	Proposed category; not yet a validated scale
Cross-cutting method and measurement	How do design, level, and context constrain inference?	Methodological, reporting, psychometric, and multilevel evidence	Design; time; level; measure; alternative explanation	Purpose-method fit and transparent search reporting [6]	Preserves heterogeneity and contradiction	Unlike evidence is not directly commensurable	Synthesis does not establish pooled causal effects

Note. Evidence types are compared for their contribution and limitations; unlike designs are not treated as statistically commensurable. “Consequential participation and structural power” is an original review-design category whose empirical content is evaluated in subsequent sections.

Influence as consequential participation

Influence begins where membership is tested by disagreement, initiative, and claims on collective attention. Voice has distinguishable forms and may alter social status under gendered and evaluative conditions, so the opportunity to speak is not equivalent to consequential influence [14–16]. Promotive voice proposes improvement, whereas prohibitive voice raises concerns about harmful practices; their content and perceived risk differ. Evidence that voice can affect status or leader emergence shows that participation has social consequences, but status is not identical to decision authority. Speaking is an input into participation, not proof that decisions, resources, or rules changed.

Voice should also be separated from silence rather than treated as its simple opposite. Multi-study evidence indicates that voice and silence have distinct relationships with perceived impact, psychological safety, and burnout [17]. Employees may speak on selected issues while withholding others, or remain silent despite feeling included interpersonally. Perceived impact is informative because it shapes willingness to engage, yet it is not an observed record of whether recommendations were incorporated. Similarly, a climate with less silence may indicate safety or efficacy without demonstrating that marginalized speakers receive equal consideration.

The transition from expression to influence is socially filtered. Voice can be interpreted through gendered expectations, assumptions about motive, hierarchy, message quality, and judgments of competence [15]. Theoretical work further suggests that status gains are conditional on evaluators construing voice as valuable contribution rather than threat, self-promotion, or disloyalty [16]. These filters mean that formally equal speaking opportunities can yield unequal reception. They also caution

against transferring responsibility to employees by treating courage, confidence, or communication skill as the primary solution when evaluative arrangements determine whose input is credible.

This review therefore proposes consequential participation as an analytic criterion comprising five separable elements: opportunity to contribute, actual expression, attentive reception, documented consideration, and demonstrable consequence for a decision, resource allocation, procedure, or agenda. The criterion is intentionally stricter than voice frequency or perceived openness. It does not require every contribution to prevail, because disagreement can be considered and rejected for defensible reasons. It does require traceability sufficient to distinguish listening from ceremonial consultation. Consequential participation is an original synthesis informed by the voice evidence; it remains unvalidated and requires direct decision-tracing, longitudinal observation, and comparison across identities, occupations, and hierarchical positions.

Power and structural change

Inclusion becomes structurally consequential when it reaches the routines through which organizations distribute authority, opportunity, recognition, and resources. Organizational inequality is reproduced through interconnected practices and institutional arrangements, including hiring, evaluation, work allocation, promotion, and informal access, even when formal policies appear neutral or inclusive [18]. Structural analysis therefore asks more than whether individuals feel accepted or heard. It examines who can authorize action, define merit, allocate valued work, set agendas, and revise the rules governing participation. These mechanisms vary across organizations and social categories; structural reproduction is not a single process or an inevitable outcome of every routine.

A structural perspective also challenges the assumption that organizational neutrality guarantees equal agency. Racialized-organizations theory proposes that racial schemas can shape the distribution of resources, legitimacy, and capacity for action through arrangements presented as ordinary or universal [19]. The theory supplies mechanisms for examining how formal rules are enacted, but it is not a diagnosis that can be imposed without organization-specific evidence. Visibility, interpersonal civility, or representation at one level may coexist with patterned differences in discretion, sponsorship, exposure to risk, and access to decision forums.

Change can nevertheless emerge from below. Longitudinal qualitative research shows that lower-power organizational actors may alter institutionalized practices through activation tactics that mobilize allies and reshape recurring interactions [20]. This evidence extends voice beyond expression toward coordinated attempts to change practice. Its boundary is equally important: the observed process arose within a professional hierarchy and depended on relational and institutional conditions. It demonstrates possibility and mechanism, not a universal route through which employee initiative produces organizational transformation.

Power also influences whether inequity is recognized as a problem requiring action. Multi-method evidence indicates that structurally powerful actors may perceive less gender and racial inequity and offer less support for diversity initiatives, partly through identification with advantaged groups; targeted framing may attenuate this tendency [21]. These findings connect structural position with interpretation, but a short intervention does not redistribute authority or establish durable reform. Deep inclusion therefore requires examining both the distribution of power and the perceptual processes through which existing arrangements become normalized, contested, or changed.

Table 2 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for cross-study findings, mechanisms, convergence, and conflict in inclusion beyond representation, belonging, and symbolic organizational membership.

Table 2. Cross-study findings, mechanisms, convergence, and conflict in Inclusion Beyond Representation, Belonging, and Symbolic Organizational Membership.

Construct, mechanism, or relationship	Representative context	Reported finding	Evidence design	Convergent evidence	Conflicting evidence	Methodological concern	Review interpretation
Representation to belonging	Diverse workplaces	Presence differs from experienced inclusion [1]	Conceptual review	Context and practice matter [2]	Initiatives may signal false progress [4]	No automatic temporal order	Access is necessary, not sufficient
Belonging to membership outcomes	Organizational identification	Identification relates to health [10]	Meta-analysis	Relational capital shapes inclusion [12]	Membership may regulate identity [5]	Selection and reverse causation	Social membership is consequential but bounded
Voice opportunity to influence	Employee voice	Voice forms have distinct associations [14]	Meta-analysis	Perceived impact relates to voice and silence [17]	Expression may lack decision consequence	Perception often substitutes for outcome	Track reception and decision effects

Influence to status	Work groups	Voice may alter status [15]	Multi-study research	Status mechanisms are conditional [16]	Status is not authority	Gendered evaluation and context	Social reward cannot evidence structural power
Power to inequity recognition	Hierarchical organizations	Greater power can reduce inequity recognition [21]	Multi-method studies	Position shapes interpretation	Intervention durability unknown	Short-term and domain-specific outcomes	Assess power and perception together
Mobilization to practice change	Professional organizations	Activation tactics can change local routines [20]	Longitudinal qualitative study	Allies and conditions enable change	Transferability remains uncertain	Context-specific process evidence	Local change is possible, not assured
Symbolic versus substantive inclusion	Organizational initiatives	Symbols may coexist with unintended consequences [4]	Theory	Routines can reproduce inequality [18]	Symbols may still carry meaning	Limited direct comparative evidence	Distinction is original synthesis

Note. Convergence denotes compatible interpretation, not pooled effect estimation or causal proof. Review interpretations are bounded synthesis rather than validated rankings.

Proposed inclusion-depth framework

Recent inclusion scholarship remains fragmented across constructs, levels, antecedents, and outcomes, supporting the need for a clearer organizing architecture [22]. This review proposes four analytically distinct inclusion depths: presence and representation; social membership through belonging and valued uniqueness; consequential participation through traceable consideration and influence; and structural power through authority, resource allocation, and change to recurring rules. These are layers of analysis, not fixed stages. An organization may be stronger at one depth than another, and movement between depths is conditional, reversible, and empirically uncertain.

Figure 2 presents the original conceptual synthesis for inclusion-depth framework, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected

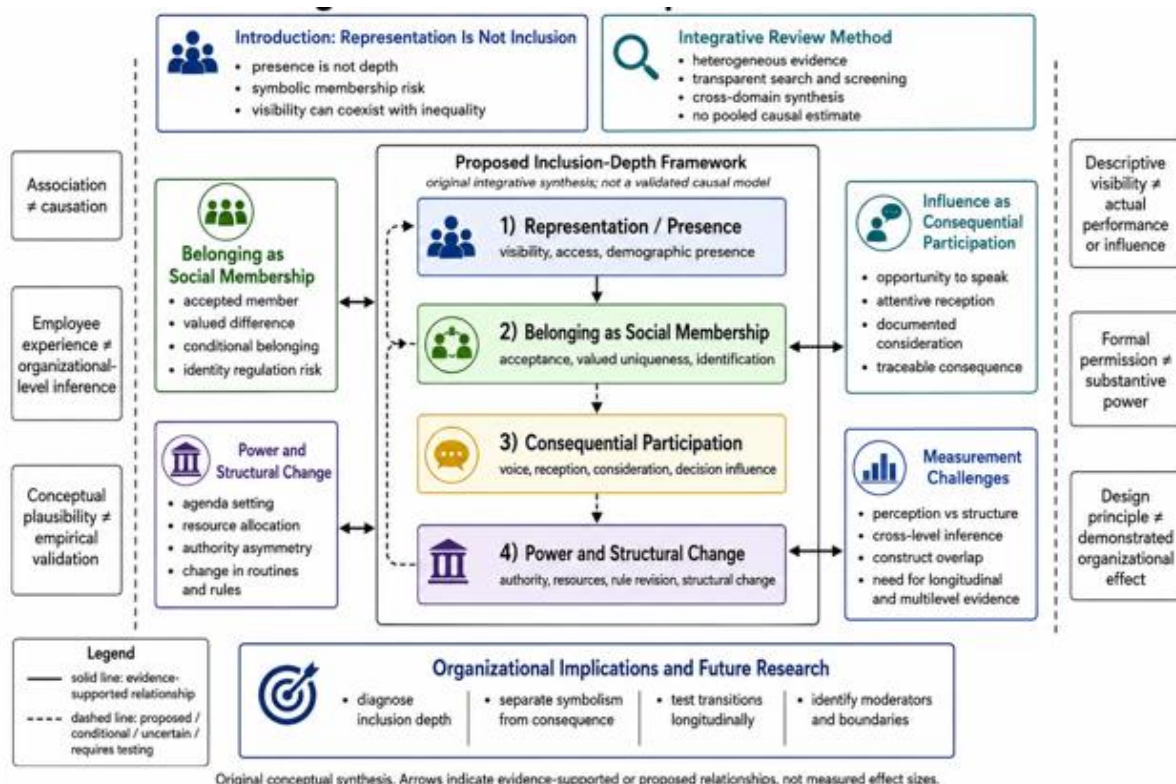


Figure 2. Inclusion-Depth Framework

Leadership operates across the framework as an enactment condition rather than as evidence that depth has been achieved. A systematic review of inclusive leadership identifies heterogeneous definitions, mechanisms, and outcomes beyond belongingness and uniqueness [23]. Leader openness, accessibility, support, and recognition may enable membership or participation, yet employee experience, peer relations, network access, and formal authority remain separate objects of

assessment. The framework therefore resists leader-centric reductionism: supportive behavior can facilitate transitions, but it cannot substitute for evidence that contributions affected decisions or that organizational arrangements changed.

Work modality is another cross-cutting condition. Conceptual evidence suggests that virtuality can alter communication cues, visibility, categorization, and subgroup processes in ways that may support or weaken work-group inclusiveness [24]. The framework treats technology-mediated work as neither progress nor deficit in itself. Digital access can widen participation while simultaneously narrowing informal contact or intensifying selective visibility. The relevant question is how a modality redistributes access to information, relationships, voice channels, and legitimate authority under particular task and identity conditions.

Relational structure further explains why identical formal opportunities can produce unequal inclusion experiences. Social-network evidence associates closure and centrality with workplace inclusion, with affiliation needs shaping some relationships [25]. Network position may provide information, recognition, and channels through which ideas travel, but centrality can also be an outcome of prior privilege. It does not establish decision rights or structural redistribution. The proposed “symbolic-membership trap” occurs when recognition and affiliation are present but participation lacks traceable consequence. This decision boundary is intended to be testable and rejectable, not accepted as a validated organizational classification.

Measurement challenges

Measurement determines which depth becomes visible. A validated work-group inclusion scale captures belongingness and valued uniqueness and offers useful psychometric and multilevel evidence [26]. Its validity for social membership does not make it a measure of consequential influence, decision authority, or structural transformation. Construct coverage should therefore be judged against the inference being made: a suitable perceptual scale can answer whether employees experience membership without supporting claims about resource redistribution or organizational change.

Available instruments also differ in definitions, populations, and psychometric support. A COSMIN-based systematic review found uneven evidence across workplace-inclusion measures, limiting direct comparison and discouraging reliance on a presumed comprehensive score [27]. This does not invalidate all instruments. It indicates that reliability, validity, responsiveness, dimensionality, and contextual relevance must be considered separately, and that differences among measures may reflect distinct constructs rather than measurement error alone.

Inclusion and exclusion additionally require explicit construct boundaries. Critical analysis of workplace exclusion identifies barriers to belonging, mattering, and participation, but low perceived exclusion cannot automatically be interpreted as high inclusion [28]. Absence of mistreatment may represent a minimum condition while leaving uniqueness, influence, or authority unmeasured. Whether inclusion and exclusion are symmetric, asymmetric, or partially independent remains an empirical question requiring designs that measure both rather than reversing one score.

Source and level create a final challenge. Preliminary validation of social drivers distinguishes colleague, supervisor, and top-management inclusion cues [29]. Such differentiation is valuable, yet ratings of these sources remain perceptions and do not establish organization-level structure. Measurement should link individual reports with team practices, network data, decision records, resource allocations, and longitudinal change while avoiding cross-level inference unsupported by the design.

Table 3 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for evidence limitations, unresolved questions, and future research priorities.

Table 3. Evidence limitations, unresolved questions, and future research priorities.

Context or level	Moderator or boundary condition	Organizational implication	Alternative explanation	Transferability limit	Uncertainty	Research need
Individual perception	Identity and status	Proposed: retain layer-specific interpretation	Response style or prior attachment	Occupation and culture	Directionality	Repeated measures with behavioral records
Dyad or team	Leader and peer enactment	Proposed: assess inclusion and exclusion separately	General leader quality	Team composition	Source attribution	Multisource longitudinal intervention
Network	Centrality and affiliation need	Proposed: audit access, not popularity	Prior privilege shapes centrality	Network boundary	Causal order	Temporal network and decision tracing
Organization or structure	Hierarchy and institutional field	Proposed: examine authority and resources	External labor-market inequality	Organization-specific rules	Mechanism prevalence	Comparative multilevel process studies
Virtual or hybrid work	Task and communication design	Proposed: test channel-specific participation	Job autonomy or occupation	Technology and national context	Durable effects	Cross-modality longitudinal comparisons

Marginalized identity	Identity regulation	Proposed: examine authenticity costs	Selection into supportive settings	Context-specific qualitative evidence	Generalizability	Comparative qualitative and survey designs
Voice and participation	Status and evaluator response	Proposed: record consideration and outcomes	Message quality or role expectations	Decision type	Equal reception	Decision-process and audit-trail studies
Power and change	Structural position	Proposed: test accountability and redistribution	Ideology or group identification	Inequity domain	Intervention durability	Field experiments with long follow-up

Note. Organizational implications are proposed design principles for testing, not validated prescriptions. The rows do not rank evidence strength or predict outcomes.

Organizational implications and future research

Organizations should evaluate inclusion rhetoric by the value relationship it communicates, not only by its declared intention. Multi-study evidence indicates that instrumental business-case diversity messaging can reduce anticipated belonging among underrepresented audiences by signaling conditional value or replaceability [30]. The implication is bounded: organizations need not avoid every operational rationale, but they should test whether messages recognize people as legitimate members rather than merely as resources expected to improve performance. Communication effects should also be separated from employees' later experiences of enacted practice.

Assessment should pair inclusion-enhancing practices with mechanisms that prevent exclusion. Conceptual work distinguishes leader behaviors that foster inclusion from processes that interrupt exclusionary treatment [31]. This dual focus discourages the assumption that positive invitations erase barriers. It remains a design principle rather than a validated checklist, and leadership should not become a substitute for examining networks, decision rights, accountability, or resource allocation. Intervention studies should specify the targeted depth, implementation fidelity, relevant comparison, and time horizon.

Symbolic initiatives warrant similarly conditional interpretation. Organizational incentives, legitimacy pressures, and implementation constraints may favor visible commitments over substantive redistribution, creating window-dressing or displacement risks [32]. Symbols are not necessarily empty: they may communicate recognition, establish expectations, or create openings for mobilization. Claims of deeper inclusion, however, require evidence that symbolic commitments alter consideration, authority, resources, or durable routines. Future research should compare symbolic and substantive components rather than classifying initiatives by labels alone.

A balanced research agenda must also retain evidence of meaningful promise and progress from diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives [33]. Neither blanket optimism nor blanket dismissal fits a heterogeneous evidence base. Stronger tests would compare intervention designs, implementation fidelity, identity-specific effects, decision consequences, resource distributions, and durability across organizations. Multilevel longitudinal studies, field experiments, process tracing, network analysis, and qualitative comparison could test whether the proposed depths are distinct, whether transitions occur, and under what conditions the framework should be revised or rejected.

Conclusion

This integrative review argues that representation, belonging, influence, and structural power should not be compressed into a single inclusion label. Representation establishes presence and access; social membership concerns acceptance and valued uniqueness; consequential participation requires traceable consideration and effect; and structural depth concerns authority, resources, routines, and the capacity to change governing arrangements. The proposed Inclusion-Depth Framework organizes these domains while treating transitions among them as conditional, reversible, and dependent on identity regulation, leadership and peer enactment, network position, work modality, structural status, rhetoric–practice alignment, and measurement quality.

The framework clarifies why symbolic organizational membership can be meaningful yet incomplete. Employees may be recognized and attached without gaining equal reception, decision consequence, or authority. Conversely, local influence or structural change may occur without uniform belonging. These possibilities prevent the framework from operating as a simple ladder or maturity score.

The reviewed evidence is heterogeneous, frequently perceptual or context-specific, and uneven across levels and time. It does not validate a causal sequence, universal organizational intervention, or comprehensive measurement system. The principal contribution is therefore a disciplined distinction and a testable research agenda. Inclusion claims should identify which depth is evidenced, which remains inferred, whose experience or authority is represented, and what observations could challenge the interpretation.

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