Inclusion and diversity in Public Administration: Where are we now and how far are we on the path to an inclusive society?

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to preliminarily explore definitions and nuances within the definition of concepts such as inclusion, diversity, disability, normalization, and to try and highlight how the binary meanings implied into these definitions (i.e. inclusion/exclusion, diversity/conformity, disability/ability) are significant to understand how these are used in management and governance strategies. This will be done mainly by reviewing previous academic contributions, then by pointing at some possible practitioner experiences already studied or indicated as hypotheses in specialized literature concerning Organization Studies. Collecting the possible perspectives about "inclusion and diversity" is instrumental to a "field definition", and to acknowledge the "state of art" of these concepts within different contexts, such as academic scholarship, private and corporate business, public administration, and ultimately society as a whole. This is part of a larger research project on public administration that aims to investigate whether the "inclusion turn" in open public debate does factually provide a ground for changes in organizational practices, rather than staying on paper as a mere normative scenario that HR departments and lawmakers feel compelled to comply with. Relating this issue to the wider context of society means questioning the effectiveness of inclusion strategies as a systemic effort. The ideal contribution of this paper would be to suggest some possible directions for inclusivity research in terms of scholarships and case studies.

1.   Introduction

In recent years expressions such as "inclusivity/inclusion", "inclusive employment", "diversity", "integration", have entered both business and institutional debate prominently, both from a point of view of high and low-wage employment in private sectors (a comprehensive review can be found in Ferdman and Deane, 2014; specific contributions in Nishii and Rich, 2014; Nkomo, 2014; Pelled et al., 1999; Van Eck et al. 2021), public employment and civil rights regulations (among many studies about public employment see Dobusch, 2017; Dobusch et al., 2021; as for civil rights regulations some official documents are worth acknowledging for the European scenario, such as Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Europe, 2011; Equal Rights Trust, 2008), and as a social buzzword within the public debate (CIPD, 2019; Riordan, 2014; Sherbin and Rashid, 2017; Adamson et al., 2020)

By this and other means, efforts in coherently mapping subject-relevant literature have been made extensively, in the field of Organization Studies regarding workplaces, both in business and public (a well-structured recognition can be found for example in Shore et al., 2017; relevant studies include Mor Barak et al., 2000, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2008, 2014; a comprehensive

review is also found in Van Eck et al., 2021; Bizjak, 2019), as well as from Critical Theory's (for example Alvesson and Wilmott, 2003) and Gender Theory's perspectives (Acker, 1990; Alvesson and Billing, 1997; Bambara, 1970; Butler and Scott, 1997; Martin, 2003; Mohanty, 198). As Martin (2003) acutely suggests— and that could be applied to all contributions classifiable as "inclusion research"—different approaches to Critical Theory and so-called Gender studies, although presenting significant differences in perspectives, share important root goals.The author insists that, if the potential of the different visions could be activated, for example by promoting synergic approaches, comprehension of diversity and alterity within modern society would be significantly implemented.

> Although both critical and feminist theory focus on social and economic inequalities and both have an agenda of promoting system change, these two traditions have developed largely independently, with little deep intellectual exchange. In part, this divergence has occurred because feminist theorists use sex and gender as the fulcrum of their analyses (usually, but not always, with secondary emphases on class, race and ethnicity). In contrast, critical theorists often place class at the crux of their analyses, with sex, gender, race and ethnicity being less emphasized. […]. The commonalities between critical theory and the more critical versions of feminist theory are many and important. To the extent that there are differences between these two traditions, these differences carry the potential for each to enrich the other. (Martin, 2003, 66-67).

Of course these approaches take cues from much wider fields (*Frankfurter Kreis* thinkers such as Adorno, Horkeimer and Marcuse, Marxist criticism and post-structuralism such as Benjamin or Foucault, seminal philosophical and political authors such as Habermas or Polanyi all constitute a fundamental inspiration for Critical and Gender theory as for Organization studies alike). Another important stream of studies that gained volume during recent years, regarding "Disability studies", has more and more contributed to fill the gap in understanding inclusion dynamics of historically marginalized groups such has sensory impaired or what the general public perceives as "disabled" (for a comprehensive recognition about studies in recent years see Siebers, 2008; Barnes, 2016; Sterne, 2021). Besides contributing in deconstructing the binary tacit disability/ability, which is implicitly discriminatory, "Disability studies" have contributed to re-open a public debate on "Ableism" itself, on how discrimination and derogatory practices in what used to be called "equal opportunities" are still alive, on what could be—and how to shape—possible inclusive tools offered by new medias and technology (Napolitano, 2022).

One of the aspects, that is commonly highlighted throughout different sources of debate, is the precise historical consciousness of a much needed emancipation, from a culturally and historically rooted starting point, consisting of a recorded history of exclusion or general non-consideration of marginalized groups. A history of discrimination both in society and on the workplace, ultimately an history of what we may call "colonialist approach" (Banerjee and Linstead, 2001; Lammer, 2003; Moane, 2009; Prasad, 2003) to the Other (Forester, 2021; Habermas, 1996)—colonialist as in imperialist, patriarchal, racist or sexist, ableist and so on. It goes without saying, this occurrence may very much be variable from different national and/or working scenarios, and the reception range of diverse theories in States' governance—whether law regulations remain on paper or boost a factual change—has to be further investigated case

by case. As in every ongoing process, failures and progresses are natural and all contribute, in the eyes of the scholar, to advances in scientific development.

Referring to the above-mentioned studies, it is possible to argue that, when trying to understand how really inclusion works or should work, be it in employment or social perception in general, first thing to do is a recognition about meanings, in order to find shared definitions that can be valuable for as many cases as possible, and to which all the actors involved may refer. Reading through a wide and deepened academic literature, consisting of already cited works and a much larger literary landscape, is crucial to operate this preliminary assessment of the problem.

Another fundamental aspect to understand is that, far from being *just* a question of definition and meaning, inclusion—having access to a specific job works here just as "being included" in decision-making or being equally safeguarded in the legislative process—translates actually as a continuous practice, in which not just the practitioner but also the critical scholar's perspective and—most important—the subject who suffers these practices should be concerned . Theoretical study and case specific investigations must constantly move mutually, which is equal to say that, in an academic context, literature study and case studies always have to complement each other, not only as a means of dialectical coherence, but also a methodological means to collect evidence.

Proceeding from particular aspects to general, first problems are encountered when trying to define the terms themselves. As Deetz and Alvesson repeatedly point out (Deetz, 1995, 2003; Alvesson, 1997, 2003), the question of terms may not only be a mere linguistic or academic problem rather help shaping the substance itself of the questions around these problems. Questioning what we mean as "inclusion", be it that of the disabled, sensory impaired, women or non-binary, people of color, poor or racially perceived as disadvantaged, within a living or working context—ultimately within sociological and anthropological (mis)conceptions— not only questions the critical scholar, but also how the general public perceives management and work organization within the frame of our sharply "economized" conception of society. In other words, trying to understand what governments, academics, newspapers, corporations and all the actors who present themselves as the voice of the general collectivity mean, when talking about "inclusion" in the context of our societies—where economical processes often seem totally *dis-embedded* from human life—may be crucial to structure an understanding and a counterpoint, not only from an ideologically critical point of view, but also as a possible contribution to a more balanced yet substantially equal conception of processes in governance and decision-making.

By raising such observations, the main goal of this paper is to draw a preliminary assessment of the problems in defining what is scholarly meant as "Inclusion studies", to try and highlight possible nuances within the meaning of oppositions such as inclusion/exclusion, diversity/conformity, disability/ability, academically, politically and in the employment field – as for private, corporate and public administration employment. Authors from very different approaches and fields have extensively contributed, throughout recent years, to expand an already vast literature on these arguments, in which also the continuously evolving normative landscape must be included: within such a wide amount of studies and contributions, this paper more precisely aims at unfolding a map on the table, as a part of a larger research project, to try and highlight specific methodological points and cases referring more specifically to

inclusion in public administration – especially in Europe and Italy – and in public debate in general.

2.   Inclusion between Critical Theory and Organization studies: where are we?

Some authors have noticed how efforts towards inclusion currently represent an improved step from what was before called "equal opportunity" approach in diversity management (Bizjak, 2019: Jonsen et al., 2019; Oswick and Noon, 2014). Many efforts have been made, both by scholars and practitioners, to clearly distinguish between diversity management and inclusion (Nkomo, 2014). For instance, Nkomo (2014) tends to distinguish diversity and inclusion by repeatedly picturing inclusion as a dimension where organization meets optimal conditions for the vastest possible variety of persons from different groups. Other inclusion scholars (Holvino et al., 2004; Ferdman, 2014; Nishii and Rich, 2014; Shore et al., 2018) insist on how inclusive processes both in hiring, decision-making and career opportunities need to be integrated in everyday processes but also in structures and norms regarding private and public workplaces. Important notations have then been made by Van Eck and others (Van Eck et al., 2021; but also Salerno et al., 2012; Van Den Borre and Deboosere, 2018; Wright and Clibborn, 2019) about the different consideration inclusion tends to register between relatively high-wage labour (i.e. academics, public and private management, finance and security, cultural sectors) and low-wage contexts (i.e. cleaning jobs, supermarkets, seasonal work, tourism, many entry level positions in very different contexts, jobs done by migrants), or as well differences in the same working context between entry level and management positions.

As elsewhere precisely formulated, "the term 'inclusion' itself seems to have augmented the term 'diversity', resulting in the emergence of 'diversity and inclusion' as a standing term, with other terms, such as 'equality' and 'equity' currently less frequently used" (Adamson et al., 2020), bringing to the emerging of questions whether the "inclusion turn"—especially in corporate business and public administration—is effectively providing a ground for changes in organizational practices, rather than a mere normative scenario that human resources departments and lawmakers feel formally obliged to comply with. For instance, Winters (2014) significantly notices how "perhaps the most salient distinction between diversity and inclusion is that diversity can be mandated and legislated, while inclusion stems from voluntary actions."

Apart from questioning the actual reality of these practices and the legitimate basis on which managerial and governmental actors put these definitions to work (Roberson, 2006), critical scholars have repeatedly highlighted how such rosy indications often remain on paper, or utilize the normative frame just to further regulate and constrain practices of normalization rather than effective inclusion. This perspective has significantly tried to implement Critical Theory methods to the field of Organization studies, unlocking a series of core themes which interrogate the substance and meaning of terms in the game of what we can shortly refer to as "Inclusion studies". These investigations incorporate not only Critical Theory writings as a methodologically opposite device to interrogate politics in a wide sense, but also include an always ongoing series of case studies (for example Dobusch et al. 2021) and concrete experiences that aim to overcome classical work organization facing the challenges of a digitally evolved economic scenario (Butera, 2017; 2020).

More at large these problems emerged already in recent years (Ferdman and Deane, 2014; Mor Barak, 2014), both as diversity research in management and Organization studies, predominantly focusing on biases and discrimination different individual groups may encounter, especially for those historically disadvantaged in specific societies (Jacques, 2016; Zanoni et al., 2010; but also Butler, 1990; Martin, 2020; Siebers, 2008), and as for the notion of "inclusion" in a more substantial way (Shore et al., 2011, 2018) – here the term "substantial" is to be meant as "universal". As Siebers insists in this regard, the issue of disabled people's inclusion is gaining growing attention, with particular reference to the way disability studies is binding it to issues of equity, social justice and minority identities (Siebers, 2008).

Another, more "critical" perspective is the one provided by authors such as Deetz (2003), Alvesson and Wilmott (2003), who further and deeper interrogate the range of notions implied by inclusion in the range of Organization Studies. In the Italian context, significant efforts have been made by Butera and others (Butera,2020), to positively integrate the challenges practitioners, lawmakers and institutions may encounter when designing inclusive workplaces in an increasingly digitized context, with a consistent focus on public administration and universities. Particularly, Sicca has extensively studied the possible correlations between economic crisis, occupational rates, welfare and inclusion, trying to highlight how a persistent effort to link "research, teaching and services" (Sicca, 2016) would be crucial to boost inclusion, especially in a context – Southern Italy and, by extension, Southern Europe – where important steps have been missing, in recent years, to translate theory and practice when it comes to inclusion.

3.   Inclusion in Public Administration: how far are we?

When talking about business and corporate, all of the cited authors notice that cultures based on the idea of a predominance of markets or market-oriented decision processes sometimes uncritically accept a specific way of conceiving human development and behaviour, hence providing a specific vision of human processes as a whole definitory system. The subdued model could be synthesized in what Polanyi (Polanyi, 1944; 1987) already called *homo oeconomicus,* where economy is not here to be meant as a natural projection of human activities (i.e. Domestic economy) but more as an anthropological vision where human behaviour is ultimately featured as a profit-oriented, market-minded individual in a context where economy is not an *embedded* process rather than *the* process itself defining human interaction (Polanyi, 1944). In this vision, what lacks is an objective problematization of the logic that regulates management organization, failing to question the linearity of the economic logic and thus the working chain/process in its social aspects. If growth, referred to as mere corporate's, stakeholder's and higher management's profit and privileges growth, is not questioned in its rights and legitimacy, every solution is accepted within the frame of mere necessity, thus syllogistically influencing what terms as inclusion, or employees well-being, or corporate balance mean.

If we take as samples some of the practices taking place in the world of Human Resources Management (HRM) we may start addressing some of the problems encountered when studying diversity management or inclusion cases.

In this frame, as Deetz brilliantly summarizes, "modern human resources management (HRM) is clearly in the culture and meaning business, its focus is on the production of a specific

type of human being with specific self-conceptions and feelings" (Deetz, 2003). In the same stream, with reference to Foucault's vision of "Disciplinary power" (Foucault, 1977), human resources are somehow merely seen as a disciplinary device, or as Townley insists:

> In HRM, connotations of goal-directed activity, inputs and outputs, stability, adaptability, and systems maintenance predominate. From this perspective HRM is the black box of production, where organizational inputs – employees – are selected, appraised, trained, developed and remunerated to deliver the required output of labor. (Townley, 1993, 519).

By this means, inclusion may risk being just a form of normalization or forced conformism to specific corporate-oriented standards, rather than a process of improving healthy working and living conditions. The best such an unproblematic conception can offer is a forced and fake equality, where it really doesn't matter if the employee is disabled, non-binary, a person of color, until productive necessity is met. This becomes even more problematic when nations themselves utilize the same corporate policy, ultimately failing to incarnate what is then referred to as a philosophical conception of the State, especially in democratic republics.

Nevertheless, this vision, which is realistic but rather unilateral, must be challenged, or at least improved by suggestions, highlighting "cracks in the wall" of management as a disciplinary mentality, where the discipline itself can be often looked at as a "profit-oriented faith" (Benjamin, 1986). These fractures must be explored, to try and shift conceptions in management and organizing whenever is possible. In last years, both digitalization and a supposed new capacity to influence the public debate has created—face to many anthropological dramatic problems—also some new opportunities in claiming a voice for marginalized people in the dawn of a new perception of work and the workchain, which has necessarily overcome taylor-fordism but still has to struggle to settle with new, "inclusive" and "equal" conditions both for managers and employees, with specific regards for public administration (Butera, 2017).

Last but not less important, it is also worth mentioning how Covid-19 Pandemic has further changed and dramatically shaped inclusion dynamics, and in this case it has served as a turning point not only for private and public employment but also for re-shaping the way our societies think about the balance between economic growth and social well-being (Banerjee et al., 2021). This scenario opens up to a whole new series of much needed investigations in terms of case studies, for example in jobs of high public relevance, such as transports, administration, healthcare and teaching: in these contexts, which are crucial to social well-being and to governments' accountability, the pandemic has made clear how new mechanisms must be collectively thought over, in order to balance the management of more and more recurring "emergencies" (Elcessor, 2022) in a much more democratically balanced way.

Nonetheless, critical literature before the pandemic already had started to acutely argue whether "real inclusion" could be realized by just mandating norms and law frames, especially in public employment. Very significantly, cases such as the ones investigated by Dobusch et al. (2021) regarding the "diversity management" between Danish/Greenlandic Police force, were able to highlight how examples of formally described "happy inclusion"—based on a well-conceived normative frame—could then come out as partial, in terms of inclusion. Despite very significant efforts had been made, both from the point of view of normative devices and involved actors, a real inclusion appeared not capable of overcoming rooted cultural gaps.

Such dynamics, which are—not just in academic studies—highlighted as omnipresent in our global society and thus in inclusion literature, are better observed interrogating specific scenarios and specific diversity-related cases, be it the case of race, sex or sexual orientation, disability or impairment, class, personal history in general, both in private and public sectors (as an example for Public institutions see Ahmed, 2012) . Public administration seems to be a research field worth being privileged, because it can somehow offer more transparent data and project a clearer and fairer representation of society (Dobusch, 2017).

4.   Conclusions: envisioning future research developments

In conclusion, what can be defined in a very wide, yet sufficiently precise sense, as "inclusion studies" is seeking to establish ways in which organizations can create inclusive environments and promote practices such that diversity is not a disadvantage and can in fact provide an organizational advantage. What reviewing relevant literature suggests—which is always an ongoing process this paper tries to start with—, is that this means not only investigating how inclusion efforts are proceeding in business, public administration and society, but also trying not to lose track of what could be future developments, pushing through governance mechanisms, ultimately trying to guarantee a better life for the greatest possible number and variety of persons. As problems emerging when studying the meaning of "inclusion" indicate, this effort must be done even questioning supposedly given truths, such as some of the values that drive economy and society as we've experienced it especially in last decades (i.e. growth at all costs), paving the way for managers to factually build different paths of development, rather than applying formulas that revealed to be self-destructive and based sometimes on the sole political or economic ideological perspective. This kind of research also aims at providing a lead for political agenda and administrative personnel, to ensure a shift towards social sustainability rather than religiously fostering such ideologies. By this means, as many scholars argue, orienting decision-making towards effective inclusion can be a powerful means of social and human growth, considering diversity of a workforce only provides the opportunity for greater innovation, but without inclusion such a benefit is unlikely (Offerman and Basford, 2014). As pointed out by Winters (2014), diversity is much more easily achieved than inclusion, and to overcome this paradox seems to be the main goal of more recent studies. Addressing all of these problems and further investigating cases and studies, thinking about models to balance innovation and build a more and more livable society starting from the occupational frame, could be one of the most meaningful purposes for scholars in the next decades. This can of course only be achieved through global contribution and scientific efforts and not only by means of technological improvements: the next steps we take as society should rather be guided by research and understanding - which represent the hard path - than be oriented to blind acceleration.

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