Research Article

Hans Erik Næss*

Leave Me Alone. A Process Model Exploring how Excessive Socializing can Contribute to More Exclusionary Workplaces

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Abstract: This theoretical article examines the unintended consequences of workplace inclusion efforts, arguing that excessive socialization can paradoxically lead to exclusion. Utilizing Robert K. Merton's theory of unintended consequences as a conceptual framework, the study critiques the assumption that collective social activities inherently foster inclusivity. While such initiatives aim to promote collective well-being and personal growth, they may inadvertently alienate individuals who prefer to opt out of energy-intensive interactions. To flesh out that claim, this article introduces a theoretical process model that challenges the homogeneous view of employees that underpins existing inclusion strategies, advocating for a more flexible, individualized approach that moves beyond collective enforcement. The findings offer a novel perspective on the importance of flexible organizational scripts, encouraging organizations to adopt more nuanced workplace inclusion strategies that respect diverse employee preferences and needs.

Keywords: socialization; organizational script; unintended consequences; narrative theorizing

1 Introduction

In workplace research, inclusion has emerged as both a moral norm and a business case, bridging individuals' need to feel unique while also belonging to a group (Shore and Chung 2024; Veli Korkmaz et al. 2022). A less explored aspect, however, is how organizational inclusion efforts can sometimes diminish employees' sense of being

***Corresponding author: Dr. Hans Erik Næss**, Professor in Sport Management, Department of Leadership and Organization, School of Communication, Leadership and Marketing (SCLM), Kristiania University College, Oslo, Norway, E-mail: hanserik.naess@kristiania.no. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5757-1988

included. Riegel (2019) highlights this issue in the *Harvard Business Review*, stating that "Although they might pretend to enjoy playing foosball, catching up on TV shows, and socializing in the office, most employees would prefer to just do their work without distractions, and keep their private lives private." The assumption that inclusiveness must involve collective socializing is not surprising, given that social activities and "play at work" can, under certain conditions, enhance productivity and workplace satisfaction (Taormina 2009; Mercanoğlu and Şimşek 2023; Michel et al. 2019). Birmingham et al. (2024) even argue that employees need to feel a certain level of emotional closeness and intimacy in their work relationships (strong work ties) to build trust, discuss work matters openly, and view colleagues as more supportive, which can reduce workplace stress (p. 886).

However, while social bonds are essential to all employees (Courpasson et al. 2021), different preferences for bonding complicate the justification for enforced workplace socialization (Boss and McConkie 1981; Spreitzer and Hwang 2019; Kearslake 2024). Fleming (2005) found that a majority of employees saw the organization's attempt to bring fun into the workplace as condescending, inauthentic, and calculated – creating cynicism instead of engagement. Shore and Chung (2024) thus suggest that research on workplace inclusion should consider whether all employees desire inclusion, and if so, under what circumstances and in what form (p. 4). Instead of addressing the "decisional" elements of inclusion, this article focuses on the "social" elements of inclusion – such as respect, acceptance, dignity, and trust (Randel 2025, p. 145) – especially for those who are uncomfortable with the social dynamics often promoted in many organizations. Traditionally, this topic has been discussed in organizational studies in terms of the introvert-extrovert personality debate (Herbert et al. 2023). However, a truly inclusive workplace should not impose expectations based on where employees fall on the introvert-extrovert spectrum. Instead, this article seeks to explore how rethinking the social aspects of inclusion can liberate an organization's behavioral framework, or "schema-based knowledge of behavior" (Gioia and Poole 1984, p. 449). Although the concept of "scripts" has been part of organizational research (Zohar and Luria 2004; Draga and DeCelles 2024), its relevance to inclusion and exclusion has been underexplored.

To bridge this gap, we apply Robert K. Merton's theory of unintended consequences (Merton 1936, 1968) to workplace inclusion. Paraphrasing Leslie et al (2025, p. 3), more research is needed to understand how the value of inclusion initiatives depends not only on their intended outcomes but also on their potential negative unintended effects. While sociology offers numerous theories on organizational dysfunctions, the selection of Merton's work is based on three main reasons. Firstly, Merton is a pivotal figure in the development of middle-range theories. These theories provide a foundation for examining paradigmatic examples such as the placebo effect, investment bubbles, and self-fulfilling prophecies (Bouvier 2023). Merton's

approach also introduced a logic of sociological discovery, emphasizing that the explanatory power of sociological phenomena should be considered in probabilistic rather than deterministic terms (Brint 2025). Secondly, despite advancements in organizational theory and various strategies to improve organizational effectiveness, Merton's theory offers a distinctive critique of this engineering mindset, which has recently influenced inclusion studies (suggesting that diversity benefits business if certain actions are taken). His middle-range approach to social phenomena allows for a critical analysis of the "level-free" statements identified as problematic in organizational inclusion research (Nishii and Leroy 2022). Additionally, the theory sheds light on the interaction between formal systems and informal actions, challenging the myth of linear models of organizational development. Thirdly, Merton's exploration of mechanisms, as elaborated by Brint (2025, p. 13), differs from those posed by analytical sociologists by viewing mechanisms as "features of social life whose effects, when operating unimpeded, produce probabilistically predictable results." Specifically, mechanisms in this context are seen as "both substances and processes", a necessary distinction to avoid the critique that substance-based theories often rely on reification. Institutionalized categories, as enduring methods of organizing personnel and practices, exert influence only when the institution is continuously supported, enforced, and widely accepted (Brint 2025).

Thus, the research question of this article is: How can workplace inclusion scripts be *expanded by addressing their unintended consequences?* To answer this question, we propose a process model for inclusive workplaces, using a narrative-based theorizing approach (Cornelissen 2017a). This approach focuses on uncovering the underlying mechanisms behind unintended consequences. Merton's theory, at its core, explains that unintended consequences are effects that differ from what was intended when the action was initially carried out (Merton 1936; Baert 1991). While Merton's theory has been applied in various organizational contexts, including cultural initiatives (Harris and Ogbonna 2002), change management (Balogun and Johnson 2005), communication strategies (Jian 2007), health promotion (Powroznik 2017), and diversity programs (Portocarrero and Carter 2022), it has not yet been applied to workplace inclusion studies. This article revives Merton's theory by integrating its core principles with recent developments in psychology and sociology to advance research on workplace inclusion.

The article begins with a brief review of workplace inclusion and exclusion research, followed by an examination of Merton's theory of unintended consequences. This will address criticisms of Mertonian studies, such as questions of who has the intentions and what consequences arise (Campbell 2011). The theory's components will then be integrated into a process model. As this model responds to scholars' calls for identifying "event-based contingencies that redirect pathways over time" rather than suggesting causalities or correlations (Cloutier and Langley

2020, p. 5), it is presented through argumentative reasoning. This reasoning, based on narrative theorizing, focuses less on a sequential description of events and more on detailing how the underlying conceptual model connects them to explain the phenomenon (Cornelissen 2017a, p. 6). Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of limitations and implications for further research.

2 Literature Review on Workplace Inclusion

Whereas the diversity and equality components in the DEI (Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion) paradigm for workplace wellbeing, fairness, and performance had been widely researched by the end of the 1990s, inclusion then came forcefully into the picture. A wealth of review articles, conceptual discussions, and empirical studies (Nishii and Leroy 2022; Shore and Chung 2024; Veli Korkmaz et al. 2022) highlight a key distinction between diversity, equality, and inclusion. While diversity and equality focus on demographic fairness and the representation of different groups in decision-making or organizational functions, inclusion is defined as "the degree to which an employee perceives themselves as a valued member of their workgroup through experiences that fulfill their needs for belonging and uniqueness" (Shore et al. 2011, p. 1265; see also Roberson 2006; Shore and Chung 2024). Consequently, diverse perspectives on inclusion and exclusion have been applied across various organizational levels, distinguishing between "first- and second-stage relationships between inputs, intrapersonal and interpersonal processes, and (proximal) outcomes at individual, workgroup, and organizational levels of analysis" (Nishii and Leroy 2022, p. 685). Organizations typically recognize the importance of these dimensions either from a business perspective (as a factor positively impacting the bottom line) or from a humanistic standpoint (as a moral obligation) (Hellerstedt et al. 2024).

A critical prerequisite for fostering these relationships, processes, and outcomes in a structured manner is the establishment of an inclusive organizational climate – one that is rooted in fairness and equality. Nishii (2013) suggests that achieving this can lead to two key outcomes. First, by dismantling arbitrary status hierarchies, "a particular identity characteristic can lose its psychological significance, preventing it from triggering the negative social categorization processes that lead to conflict" (Nishii 2013, p. 1755). Second, an inclusive climate must address structural and power dynamics within an organization, as these "determine whether a particular cultural identity holds significance and are essential to understanding how identity groups interact, ultimately influencing whether identity differences trigger negative group processes" (Nishii 2013, p. 1766). While this approach focuses more on "preventing negative interpersonal dynamics rather than fostering a synergy that leverages employees' unique knowledge and expertise to enrich the

organization's knowledge base" (Li et al. 2024, p. 228), cultivating such a climate requires "diversity-specific practices that eliminate bias" (Nishii 2013, p. 1756). In this context, "challenging dominant assumptions is not perceived as a threat, but rather as a value-enhancing proposition that helps break down barriers that might otherwise sustain organizational silence" (Nishii 2013, p. 1757).

However, even when organizations strive to balance business objectives and ethical considerations through an inclusive climate, good intentions may lead to unintended consequences if they fail to critically examine the underlying definition of inclusion (Leslie et al. 2025). As an example, Montani et al (2019) found that "intense organizational divestiture tactics can prevent the expression of newcomer's self-expression and creativity (…) thus working against the stated goal of improving newcomers' adjustment" (p. 506). This leads us to revisit the concept of "organizational script". Beyond the description of "organizational script" introduced earlier, Gioia and Poole (1984) explain it as "a cognitive schema stored in memory that outlines expected events or behaviors (or sequences of events or behaviors) within a specific context" (p. 450). While Gioia and Poole (1984) argue that such scripts "enable understanding of situations" and "provide guidance for appropriate behavior" (p. 450), they also suggest that scripts may have the opposite effect – potentially creating a sense of meaninglessness in social interactions among employees, particularly if the script encourages excessive socialization. Especially when norms taken for granted are questioned, scripts can be dissonant, as underlined by a later study:

> Situations that have previously been accomplished through 'automatic' script enactment may subsequently require the negotiation of script events to realize accommodation. Awareness of, and attention to, script dissimilarity may also lead to a reduction of anxiety typically associated with organizational change. Finally, organizational conflict may result from the lack of appropriate interactive scripts for the parties involved in a conflict (Poole et al. 1990, pp. 229–230).

While dissonant scripts are not alien to workplace research in general (Kunda and Van Maanen 1999), three reasons why they are relevant to pursue further in this study can be outlined.

First, standardized definitions of inclusion and exclusion often oversimplify human complexity. Nishii and Leroy (2022) argue that neutral leadership strategies should be abandoned, as they risk "perpetuating unequal societal structures that demand assimilation from those with non-dominant identities" (p. 690). This highlights the fact that inclusion and exclusion can be experienced differently by individuals and groups. For instance, while extroverts may benefit from the personality preferences embedded in modern work environments – especially in leadership roles (Spark and O'Connor 2021) – research on socialization (Ellis et al. 2015) and personality (Heine and Buchtel 2009) suggests that cultural and social factors shape how introversion and extroversion are perceived. Similarly, Card and

Skakoon-Sparling (2023) point out that much of the existing research implies that social connection is less important to introverts. This assumption likely stems from rational choice models of social behavior, which frame an individual's social life as a reflection of the value they place on social connections. However, such models overlook the complexity of person-environment interactions that shape unique facilitators and barriers to social inclusion (p. 2). Moreover, personality categories themselves are evolving, with the introvert-extrovert spectrum facing criticism for being outdated. McCord and Joseph (2020) note that introversion is often reduced to "low extraversion" and unfairly associated with negative traits like social awkwardness and low self-esteem (Blevins et al. 2022, p. 78). As a result, perceptions of inclusion can vary significantly depending on how inclusion is defined (Larsen et al. 2024). Additionally, because much workplace inclusion research focuses on U.S.-based knowledge economy organizations (Rezai et al. 2023), cultural and sectoral differences across countries may yield vastly different outcomes (Fujimoto and Uddin 2020; Sener 2024; Vu and Burton 2023).

Second, there is a tendency to assume that striking a balance between belonging and uniqueness is the ultimate goal of inclusion, rather than a means to creating inclusive workplaces (Randel et al. 2018). While earlier studies suggest that leadership is necessary for balancing these two factors (Veli Korkmaz et al. 2022), Shore and Chung (2024) emphasize that "inclusion is not merely a result of a group's willingness to include an individual but is also influenced by the individual's motivation to be included" (p. 4).

Riegel (2019), in the abovementioned Harvard Business Review essay, references a Udemy report that describes modern workplaces as "fraught with questionable behaviors and crossed boundaries, from oversharing personal information and gossiping to far worse offenses, such as condoning or ignoring body-shaming and bullying" (Udemy 2019, p. 3). This creates a "silent majority" of employees across all age groups who prefer to focus on their work and keep their personal lives private. However, "their highly social coworkers set the tone" (Udemy 2019, p. 6). In such environments, organizational expectations around dress codes, work ethic, and social behavior exert control over employees (Smith 2002; Minnotte and Minnotte 2021). Addressing communication apprehension requires cultivating a workplace culture that values different communication styles, rather than favoring extroverted tendencies (Cardon et al. 2023). Research on workplace misfit further illustrates how work demands that conflict with an individual's traits can be socially constructed (Wanberg et al. 2024).

Third, studies on workplace inclusion often base their frameworks on a Western, white-collar conception of "the individual." Optimal distinctiveness theory, which defines inclusion as a balance between belonging and differentiation (Leonardelli et al. 2010), has been widely applied in workplace research. However, a

crucial aspect of this theory has been overlooked. Leonardelli et al. (2010) state that "individuals resist being identified with social categorizations that are either too inclusive or too differentiating but will define themselves in terms of social identities that are optimally distinctive" (p. 68). If an organization's culture imposes a definition of inclusion that does not align with employees' self-perceptions, there will be a disconnect between theory and reality. Brewer and Gardner (1996) further emphasize the distinction between interpersonal and collective identities. While both are "social extensions of the self," interpersonal identities are formed through personal attachments, whereas collective identities emerge from a shared affiliation with a symbolic group (p. 83). However, workplace inclusion frameworks often fail to account for this complexity. Concepts of "bringing your authentic self to work" frequently rely on oversimplified views of identity (Varga 2011; Li et al. 2024). As Bailey et al. (2017) argue, when organizations attempt to manage authenticity as a tool for meaningful work, they risk making employees' identities feel increasingly inauthentic. Finally, in a workplace socialization context, existing research rarely questions whether "work-embedded play produces positive outcomes without the risk of harm, or whether the literature has been built on an implicit (or invalid) theoretical assumption" (Celestine and Yeo 2021, p. 265). This oversight underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of workplace inclusion – one that goes beyond rigid models and acknowledges the complexity of human experiences.

3 Theoretical Framework: Merton's Theory of Unintended Consequences

The dominant organizational framework in workplace inclusion discussions often adopts a rigid approach to organizational behavior, failing to fully capture the complexity of human diversity. To broaden this framework – especially for those who choose when to participate in collective activities as an act of inclusion – this article turns to Merton's theories on how individuals rationalize their actions based on assumed clarity of purpose. However, such clarity, even if present, does not necessarily indicate a position on a rationality-irrationality scale tied to success or failure. Nor does it depend solely on empirical evidence, as intuitive judgments, or "hunches," frequently shape decisions (Merton 1936, p. 896).

When considering actions based on purpose and available means, we can categorize them into two types: (a) unorganized and (b) formally organized. Merton (1936) describes the former as individual actions that may eventually lead to collective organization when like-minded individuals unite around a shared goal (p. 896). While analyzing unorganized actions is beyond of the scope of this study,

formally organized actions, which explicitly state their purpose and procedures (Merton 1936, p. 896), are particularly relevant to contemporary workplace inclusion strategies as they are intentionally designed for utilizing DEI initaitives in the best interest of the organization and its employees (Nguyen et al. 2024). Merton (1968) further distinguishes between manifest and latent functions. Manifest functions are intended and recognized consequences that support system adaptation, while latent functions are unintended and unrecognized (p. 105). De Zwart (2015) notes that both types can explain behavior, but latent functions do so regardless of an individual's conscious intent (p. 289). For instance, Merton (1968) cites the Hopi rain dance, whose latent function is fostering social cohesion rather than causing rainfall (pp. 118–119). However, as De Zwart (2015) points out, this explanation is incomplete. While the dance may indeed promote social cohesion, if the Hopi do not acknowledge this effect, it cannot explain their participation unless a mechanism of selection or reinforcement is identified. Since no Hopi informants are cited as participating to reinforce group identity, the function remains latent only so long as it is unrecognized (p. 289).

This illustrates that the relationship between purposive actions and unintended consequences is neither random nor easily predictable – at least not without incorporating the perspectives of those involved. For workplace inclusion debates, this creates a warning to those assuming that there will be positive changes to organizational behavior as long as the plan is good without considering potential side effects (Nittrouer et al. 2025). To refine this aspect of Merton's theory, further discussion is needed before empirical research can fully operationalize an inclusive work environment. One challenge is that unintended consequences can be categorized into several subtypes. According to Mica (2017), the first is the "unanticipated-perverse effects interpretation," which explores why individual actions sometimes lead to unintended and even contradictory outcomes (p. 548). Another is the "externalities-side effects stream," which examines how external factors shape social actions despite initially being unaccounted for (Mica 2017, p. 548). Finally, the "invisible hand-(aggregate) emergent effects perspective" considers social institutions as unintended consequences of interdependent individual actions – emerging organically rather than by deliberate design (Mica 2017, pp. 548–49).

While these categories may intersect, this article employs the framework of unanticipated-perverse effects interpretation, as determined by workplace inclusion as a social phenomenon. Baert (1991), categorized by Mica (2017) within the initial theorization category, identifies four challenges in analyzing unintended consequences. The first challenge pertains to determining which events should be considered as consequences of a prior event, given that effects are theoretically not temporally bound, and for certain phenomena, the further Y is from X, the less apparent their connection becomes (Baert 1991, p. 202). The second challenge

involves deciding which events to include within this timeframe and justifying the connection between scope and relevance. The third challenge concerns the fact that "purposes and motivations are often more fully understood retrospectively. Consequently, they are subject to ongoing reassessment and, particularly, to rationalization" (Baert 1991, p. 202). This results in a blurring of cause and effect due to the disparity between individual experiences and researcher observations. Although Merton (1936) emphasizes that "the consequences of purposive action are limited to those elements in the resulting situation which are exclusively the outcome of the action, i.e. those elements which "would not have occurred had the action not taken place" (p. 895), Baert (1991) contends that given the element of reconstruction, many past intentions might be reconstructed so that the unintended consequences are experienced as intended ones" (p. 202). Despite the empirical gaps and conceptual complexities inherent in this theory, unintended consequences do occur. While the theoretical implications for research on workplace inclusion will be addressed in the Discussion section below, Merton's (1936) framework outlines five reasons for these unintended consequences, which can be theorized without empirical data.

The primary reason for failing to anticipate the consequences of actions is the extent of adequate knowledge. However, complete information is arguably never fully attainable, and it necessitates the individual acting to interpret that information as a means to implement a solution. In discussing this aspect of the theory of unintended consequences, Zingerle (1998) argues that there are various cognitive failures in the assessment by actors. The first pertains to the lack of knowledge necessary for correctly anticipating consequences, while the second involves the use of incorrect information. Another variety concerns actors who do not utilize the information available to them, either because they are constrained by immediate needs and interests or because they are so dominated by values and convictions that rational use of information is precluded (p. 179). Furthermore, according to De Zwart (2015), there is a theoretical distinction between unanticipated and unintended consequences, although Merton (1968) uses these terms interchangeably. De Zwart (2015) notes that unanticipated consequences can only be unintended, whereas unintended consequences can be either anticipated or unanticipated (p. 286). Even in the absence of complete knowledge, some consequences might be anticipated. For instance, De Zwart (2015) contends that anticipating the undesirable effects of bureaucratization is within the capability of an educated performance manager; to assume they are unforeseen indeed seems naive. They are more likely unintended but anticipated.

The second reason for the failure to anticipate the consequences of actions is error. Merton (1936) posits that errors are prevalent in any stage of purposive action, with the primary issue being the "too-ready assumption that actions which have in the past led to the desired outcome will continue to do so" (p. 896). While certain social actions are deeply rooted in tradition, such as behaviors, rituals, or ceremonies

"invented" for specific political or religious purposes (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992) or as means to serve the organization's social vision (Montani et al. 2019), Sparks and Ehrlinger (2012) contend that, from a psychological perspective, errors may occur even in situations where success is expected based on prior experience. This can partly be attributed to the biased manner in which individuals process information, as memories shape future expectations. Additionally, "dispassionate cognitive biases" offer further explanations (Sparks and Ehrlinger 2012, p. 417). Contrary to De Zwart's (2015) assertion that public officials should anticipate consequences beyond the most desired ones, Sparks and Ehrlinger (2012) argue that.

> in the rare cases that individuals recognize that unintended consequences are possible, anchoring first on the intended effects of their actions is likely to result in predictions that still overweight the possibility of the intended and underweight the possibility of the unintended consequences (p. 422).

The third reason for the failure to anticipate the consequences of actions is the conflation of short-term effects with long-term effects, or "instances where the actor's paramount concern with the foreseen immediate consequences excludes the consideration of further or other consequences of the same act" (Merton 1936, p. 901). This issue is particularly evident in organizational contexts where there is a desire for quick results following policy changes, as seen in debates concerning the DEI backlash (Nittrouer et al. 2025), where Leslie (2019) identified backfire, spillover effects, and false progress from diversity initiatives (pp. 539–540). However, the time dimension is not incorporated into this typology, which, alongside its conceptual foundation in signaling theory, complicates the investigation of the claim that "the signals that diversity initiatives send, together with individuals' reactions to those signals, are mechanisms that drive unintended consequences" (Leslie 2019, p. 546). Addressing this is essential, as Tsoukas (2017) contends that the absence of time considerations represents a theoretical shortcoming in organizational studies. For instance, research has shown that "positive effects of diversity training on attitudes toward diversity decline with time" (Dover et al. 2020, p. 157), and there is a possibility that "positive outcomes of diversity training might not translate to changes in sincere beliefs, changes that last once the participants return to the organizational setting, or changes in behavior toward members of disadvantaged groups" (Dover et al. 2020, p. 158).

The fourth reason for the failure to anticipate the consequences of actions pertains to what Merton (1936) describes as "instances where there is no consideration of further consequences because of the felt necessity of certain action enjoined by certain fundamental values" (p. 903). This concept elucidates the discrepancy between text-oriented practices and action-oriented change implementation within organizations. As examined by Jian (2007), although a top-down change directive was

expected to align with employees' best interests, or at least be met with neutrality, it inadvertently fostered a counterculture that was previously nonexistent (see also Courpasson et al. 2021). Efforts to reframe the meaning of change through an all-employee meeting exacerbated this gap by creating new opportunities for rumor-spreading, distrust, and mobilization. In essence, while the company's fundamental values, such as employee loyalty during disruptive times, were assumed to be a given, this assumption backfired because leadership failed to recognize the skewed power structures within the organization and the loss of control over the narrative (Jian 2007). According to Merton's theorization, this phenomenon can be explained by "the essential paradox of social action – the 'realization' of values may lead to their renunciation" (1936, p. 903). For instance, Gilmore et al (1997) discovered in their study of "unanticipated side effects" (p. 174) that cultural transformations might be undermined if the implementation is not perceived as trustworthy and honest but rather as a disguise for reasserting hierarchy.

The fifth reason for failing to anticipate the consequences of actions is the occurrence of self-defeating predictions, where a prediction or belief ultimately leads to an outcome opposite to what was originally expected. Merton explains that "public predictions of future social developments are frequently not sustained precisely because the prediction has become a new element in the situation, thus altering the initial course of events" (Merton 1936, p. 896). In practice, and in contrast to Merton's later work on self-fulfilling prophecies, where "a false definition of the situation evokes a new behavior, which makes the originally false conception come true" (Merton 1948, p. 195), this means that, for example, fear of a certain outcome may drive people to take actions to prevent a situation that may never actually occur. As a result, "the prediction fails because of the renewed intentions of the individuals, who adjust their behavior in response to their new awareness, thus preventing the predicted outcome from materializing" (Sabetta 2019, p. 51). While organizational studies have largely focused on self-fulfilling prophecies, the opposite phenomenon – where "some of the consequences of behavior are shaped by the ascribed meaning" (Merton 1938, p. 194) – has received less attention. One study found that "employees who perceive greater levels of desired coworker belonging than actual levels of coworker belonging were more likely to engage in interpersonally harmful behaviors and less likely to engage in helpful behaviors" (Thau et al. 2007, p. 840). Failing to address this dynamic can create the illusion that everything is fine because the feared prediction did not come to pass – yet, in reality, the intervention itself may have prevented the anticipated outcome.

In summary, Merton's framework suggests that unintended consequences can arise regardless of how well we prepare for change or try to maintain the status quo. Completely eliminating these consequences would require perfect foresight of all possible outcomes and a full explanation of why they occur in advance – which is

impossible in social analysis (Fine 2006). However, there is untapped potential in addressing the reasons why unintended consequences occur in specific organizational contexts (Nittrouer et al. 2025), such as inclusion, by theorizing the unexpected outcomes of leadership actions and organizational policies. To explore how Merton's theories can help with this, the next section introduces a process model in the form of a heuristic device (cf. Cornelissen 2017a), designed to provide a fast, easy, and reliable way to solve problems of a given type (Williamson 2024, p. 39).

4 A Process Model

According to Cloutier and Langley (2020), process modeling is best understood by defining its purpose. The nature of process model knowledge in organizational studies takes different forms. First, there is a distinction between process theory and variance theory. Variance theory explains relationships between variables, while process theory focuses on how phenomena emerge, evolve, or end over time through activities and events (Cloutier and Langley 2020, p. 3). Second, knowledge can be categorized into narrative and logico-scientific modes. Narrative knowledge captures temporality, human emotion, meaning, and plot, whereas logico-scientific knowledge provides generalized, objective representations of the world. Third, process theory can be classified as strong or weak. Weak process theory acknowledges change and evolution over time while maintaining the distinct identity of entities. In contrast, strong process theory views everything as a continuous process, where entities are temporary manifestations of ongoing change (Cloutier and Langley 2020, p. 3).

The process model in this paper integrates elements from process theory, logico-scientific modes of knowing, but trespass the dualism of strong and weak process theory through what Pina e Cunha et al. (2024) describe as a non-dualistic hybrid approach, arguing that dualism is pointless as organizational life consist of both stable dynamics and fixed entities as well as subjective experiences of flow and space. In a similar vein, Brunet et al. (2025) advocate for a "moderate" approach to process theorizing by distinguishing processual modeling from other conceptual frameworks. Complementing top-down approaches such as practice-driven institutionalism, they accomplish this by "starting with the phenomenon" (p. 4), i.e. employing bottom-up explorations of specific events, situations, or even crises to understand emergent organizing in the management of temporary projects. Within this composite framework, the use of narrative theorizing, introduced earlier, is relevant because, as Cornelissen (2017a) emphasizes, narrative theorizing extends beyond the stories people tell – it also involves the broader storyline from which theories emerge. To further clarify the positioning of narrative process model

theorizing in this paper, it is important to determine whether it follows a linear, parallel, recursive, or conjunctive structure (Cloutier and Langley 2020). In line with Merton's positioning of unintended consequences as middle-range theory, that is abstractions "close enough to observed data to be incorporated in propositions that permit empirical testing" (Merton 1949, p. 39), this article follows the logic of conjunctive reasoning, as it challenge conventional distinctions and dualisms in mainstream literature – such as the divide between agency and structure – to make strong theoretical contributions (Cloutier and Langley 2020, p. 14).

Rather than merely adopting these frameworks as they are, scholars construct their own contributions by demonstrating how these conceptual tools can reshape our understanding of organizational phenomena, offering a more nuanced perspective than traditional process approaches (Cloutier and Langley 2020, p. 17). Each category has its advantages and limitations, as well as implications for our "onto-epistemological perspective" (p. 17). Therefore, selecting a framework requires justifying its relevance to the research topic. Given this paper's reliance on Merton's theory, with its interrelated and iterative characteristics, the conjunctive approach is the most appropriate. This approach not only integrates perspectives from outside organizational studies but also relies on language-driven reasoning rather than rigid models or diagrams. Moreover, it advocates for an argumentative stance that fosters ongoing discussion rather than reaching definitive conclusions (Cloutier and Langley 2020). Applying this perspective to workplace inclusion, envisioning a new inclusion initiative within the organization studied necessitates a discussion of five key Components (C1–C5). These components serve as foundational principles, offering starting points for anticipating and managing unintended consequences before they arise.

C1: The more knowledgeable leaders are about their employees in the context of inclusion efforts, the more precise their approach will be.

Many leaders assume they understand their employees well, but this is not always the case (Cvenkel 2018). At worst, this misunderstanding can lead to employee resentment toward leadership (Sharma and Kulshreshtha 2023). For employees to feel safe being their authentic selves at work, there must be no implicit pressure for nontraditional employees to conform to cultural norms set by favored employees (Nishii and Rich 2014, p. 334). A key factor in this is the varying strength of identity needs, where "the extent to which members of majorities and minorities value and identify with their respective groups should be moderated by the relative importance of the needs for distinctiveness and the maintenance of positive self-esteem" (Leonardelli et al. 2010, p. 101). Drawing from Durkheimian theory in a neoliberal workplace context, Courpasson et al. (2021) argue that solidarity can emerge "even in the most uncongenial of circumstances," sustained through acts of collective resistance in response to anomie (p. 2). Conversely, individuals can also contribute to

exclusion by demanding preferential treatment, which can lead to workplace incivility – low-intensity behaviors such as condescending remarks, dismissiveness, and belittlement (Schilpzand et al. 2016, p. 57). To effectively navigate inclusion efforts, leaders must distinguish genuine identity needs from unwarranted entitlement claims.

C2: Leaders who focus on inclusion based solely on past actions are less likely to succeed, as they prioritize "the best case" rather than "the next case."

Many leaders rely on best practices and conventional wisdom when implementing inclusion efforts (Roberson and Perry 2022). However, this approach is not always effective. Research on shared identity theories highlights that a leader's influence depends on their ability to engage with a social identity shared by both leaders and followers (Steffens et al. 2021, p. 36). At the same time, striking a balance between shared identity and individual uniqueness is essential. Studies emphasize that inclusive leadership involves creating diverse teams while valuing varied experiences, skills, and perspectives (Roberson and Perry 2022, p. 766). Rather than simply replicating past best practices, leaders should explore new approaches tailored to their specific organizational context. Instead of focusing on "best practice," they should prioritize "next practice." For example, Bradley et al. (2024) found that how non-LGBT individuals perceive diversity initiatives depends on their Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) – a measure of an individual's preference for hierarchical social structures (p. 1036). This suggests that leaders must adapt their inclusion strategies based on the social and psychological dynamics within their teams.

C3: Leaders who carefully consider the short-term and long-term effects of inclusion efforts will create initiatives that are less confusing.

Many leaders expect inclusion initiatives to show immediate results, but this is rarely the case. Informal change takes time, and even long-term efforts will not transform an organization overnight. A foundational study by Mor Barak (1999) introduced a framework linking diversity to both short- and long-term organizational and individual behavioral outcomes (p. 58). However, this framework does not address the perception of time – how inclusion efforts can feel slow or rapid regardless of their duration. Inclusion initiatives often lack clear start and stop points, making it difficult to define inclusion as an aim, process, or goal (Næss and Svendsen 2025). Leaders must recognize how perceptions of inclusion evolve over time (O'Keefe et al. 2020). The process is fluid, similar to what diversity studies have described as a "tropical depression" – a phenomenon that can escalate into a disruptive force or dissipate into a positive outcome over time (Srikanth et al. 2016, p. 453). Understanding these dynamics can help leaders set realistic expectations and design more effective inclusion strategies.

C4: Leaders who underestimate the fragility of fundamental values in inclusion efforts will be less effective in motivating inclusivity.

Many leaders mistake passive agreement with organizational values for deep, lasting commitment. This is not necessarily the case. One way to understand this distinction is through signaling theory, which examines how organizations communicate their commitment to diversity and inclusion. Bradley et al. (2024) differentiate between two types of diversity signals:

- **Activating signals**, which demonstrate a company's genuine commitment to diversity through concrete actions (e.g. establishing an LGBT employee resource group).
- **Pointing signals**, which merely indicate diversity without active engagement (e.g. a CEO statement supporting LGBT rights).

An experimental study found that both types of signals positively influence perceptions of diversity climate, but activating signals have a stronger impact (Bradley et al. 2024, p. 1033). This suggests that leaders who merely state their commitment to inclusion without implementing meaningful initiatives may struggle to foster true inclusivity within their organizations.

C5: When leaders separate the prediction of inclusion effort outcomes from their actual impact, they receive less credit for those outcomes.

Many leaders overestimate their role in inclusion efforts, either by exaggerating their contributions or failing to recognize their unintended negative impact. Effective inclusive leadership helps minimize power and status differences, fostering relationships that make team members feel like valued insiders (Roberson and Perry 2022, p. 770). However, some leaders unknowingly contribute to exclusion by engaging in ostracizing behaviors, such as ignoring or dismissing employees in social and professional settings (Zhao et al. 2019). This can have broader implications for inclusion efforts across the organization. Suyono et al. (2024), drawing on Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll 1989), found that employees who feel ostracized by their leaders are more likely to withhold information and disengage from their work (p. 15). Leaders must therefore be aware of their unintended behaviors and recognize how they influence the overall inclusion climate.

5 Discussion

When leaders examine C1-5, which collectively represents a model for critical thinking rather than a visual representation of the process, the narratives shared by employees might reveal an aspect of human existence that is often overlooked in mainstream inclusive workplace research. Traditionally, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts have been driven by urgent organizational responses to systemic issues, such as racial bias and inequities, often spurred by societal and

employee pressure (Nguyen et al. 2024). Recognizing this urgency, DEI strategies, plans, and change initiatives have become central to the responsibilities of most HRM managers, even in the face of recent backlash against DEI efforts (Nittrouer et al. 2025). However, the journey from well-intentioned initiatives to meaningful outcomes is complex within organizational behavior. As discussed in this paper, one key challenge is that some employees feel more included when left to work autonomously rather than being subjected to enforced socialization. In certain cases, the concept of inclusion has evolved into a "moral technology" that, rather than fostering true diversity, reinforces existing forms of normative violence and rigid majority/minority constructs (Vu and Burton 2023, p. 150). This unintended consequence raises important questions about how organizations implement DEI initiatives and whether they genuinely serve the diverse needs of employees.

The "story" in this article, therefore, is one of mobilization in defense of employees who are united by a view on workplace socialization as contrary to the aim of inclusion efforts. To systematically advance this perspective, the processual, narrative, and conjunctive model based on Merton's theory highlights five risks of implementing a mainstream workplace inclusion narrative. On the surface, this view has parallels with the process-based approach to inclusion, which "refers to a normative goal and consists of various management measures as a process of condition where people gain access to areas from which they were formerly un/intentionally excluded" (Nguyen et al. 2024, p. 341). Unlike dominant approaches in organizational research that focus primarily on stability and predictability (Tsoukas 2017, p. 140; see also Hanisch 2024), this discussion however demonstrates that the development of inclusive workplaces does not follow a linear progression from low to high inclusion, nor does it necessarily balance uniqueness and belonging in a straightforward manner. As such, the theory of unintended consequences must be revised accordingly. Any appearance of C1-5 as chronological propositions is purely coincidental; while they are structured for analytical clarity, they must be understood and examined as interconnected. The main reason is that the model's explanatory power as social mechanism can only grow with coherent applications of it on relatively stable organizational workplace arrangements. As such, it poses an addition to Brint's (2025) development of Merton's theory-building into "high-leverage sociological concepts", the intention of which is "to identify structures and processes that contribute to the explanation of important outcomes across a wide range of settings, subfelds, and levels of analysis" (p. 17). At the same time, as "the extent to which they are consequential will vary based on conditioning factors" (p. 17), each component of the process model introduced here must be – as illustrated above – challenged by its internal factors and as well as relationally defined factors *conditioning* the social phenomenon. While open to speculation and conceptualization, these factors are difficult to identify precisely unless we get more empirical

studies of how organizational inclusion efforts can lead to exclusionary practices and whether this can be explained by the model proposed here. Yet to achieve this empirical insight, the model poses a way of connecting key reflections on unintended consequences into a imaginative tool to remedy underexplored themes in workplace inclusion studies.

Consequently, this article's theoretical contribution is a process model that examines how perspectives on workplace inclusion can be both restrictive and empowering, challengening the linear epistemology that has been identified as a barrier to addressing unintended consequences in organizational practices (Conbere and Swenson 2020). Consistent with narrative theorizing, which focuses less on explaining specific outcomes, this model is not represented visually or schematically. Instead, it explores "the enabling conditions and processes through which something emerges" (Cornelissen et al. 2021, p. 9). As a result, the model offers a framework for studying individuals who voluntarily opt out of inclusion efforts that, while well-intentioned, may inadvertently cause harm. At the same time, there must a line, which any workplace can draw as they please, between catering to employees' individual socialization preferences and letting them be "prima donnas" on the expense of the collective (Empson 2017). The practical implication is the potential for a more inclusive and supportive workplace by mitigating the "normative violence" embedded in organizational behavioral scripts. Rather than emphasizing the inclusion of employees based on socio-demographic, biological, or identity-based characteristics, the key takeaway for leaders is the importance of giving employees more freedom to determine which aspects of the organizational framework enable them to be both productive and authentic at work. This is especially relevant for middle managers, department heads, and HR leaders, who are responsible for implementing inclusion policies (Ashikali et al. 2021). In some cases, "leaving people alone" may help reduce the pressure to conform, preventing employees from concealing their identities to fit in or avoiding social stigmas that could diminish their sense of purpose and engagement in their work (Goffman 1963; Hewlin et al. 2017).

6 Conclusions

This article has argued that for organizations to align their vision of workplace inclusion with the diversity of personalities, they must better understand the phenomenon of unintended consequences. To this end, a model of reasoning about its key mechanisms is introduced in the context of workplace inclusion. By classifying the model as processual and narratively grounded, as opposed to diagram-based, it aligns with process ontology and incorporates narrative elements such as emotions, meaning, and plot within the context of enforced socialization, rather than

generating abstract conceptualizations (Cloutier and Langley 2020; Brunet et al. 2025). Although C1-5 in the model manifest or coexist in stable patterns within organizations, understanding the mechanisms of unintended consequences, as proposed here, does not entail identifying clockwork regularities. Instead, consistent with conjunctive theorizing (Tsoukas 2017) and in accordance with middle-range theory (Brint 2025), C1-5 are structured in this manner to facilitate further systematic exploration of their susceptibility to narrative diversity. A key reason for this choice of model and how its moving parts must be narratively explored to make sense, is the backfire effect, where some employees perceive excessive socializing – intended as a means of fostering organizational cohesion – as overwhelming rather than inclusive. To avoid reinforcing divisions between those who prefer social interaction and those who do not – regardless of their placement on the introvert-extrovert spectrum or the uniqueness-belongingness continuum – this article emphasizes the need to recognize potential unintended consequences in defining organizational behavioral scripts. Without such recognition, these scripts may be experienced as repressive rather than enabling. For scholars, this sociological perspective offers a new way to examine workplace inclusion – both as an analytical framework with distinct opportunities and limitations compared with the dominating organizational psychological approach and as a means of generating empirical insights about individuals typically excluded from inclusion studies: those who feel most included when given the freedom to be left alone. The practical implication is that organizations can foster higher levels of employee well-being by allowing individuals to define their own balance of belonging and uniqueness within the behavioral scripts of the workplace. By explicitly acknowledging and accommodating those who thrive in solitude – such as by ensuring they do not feel pressured to attend company social events – organizations can create a more genuinely inclusive culture.

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