The Perpetuation of Exclusion Through Inclusion: How Can We Solve the Problem of Exclusion in Public Administration in The United States?

One of the prevailing assumptions in U.S. public administration is that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) approaches are the most effective means of fostering an inclusive environment. While DEI strategies may appear practical and well-intentioned, they often overlook the ways in which inclusion policies can inadvertently perpetuate exclusion within the workplace. This raises several important questions: Are these policies always reflective of true inclusivity? How can public managers create an inclusive environment without unintentionally marginalizing other groups? And can DEI approaches truly achieve their goals if exclusion can still be reproduced through the very rules designed to prevent it? This paper explores these questions and examines the structural challenges embedded in inclusion policies across public organizations.

Creating an inclusive environment is far more complex than it initially appears. Leaders in public institutions must thoroughly understand their employees and the diverse identities, experiences, and needs they bring to the organization. Administrators must ask: What demographic groups do employees belong to? How do their challenges differ? What unique attributes do they contribute to the organization? These questions are essential because they help managers collect relevant data to inform policy design. However, the challenge emerges when certain groups are intentionally or unintentionally prioritized at the expense of others. To understand this dynamic, it is important to examine how inclusion and exclusion intersect within the broader context of diversity management. Although inclusion ideally seeks to embrace everyone, such an outcome is often difficult—if not impossible—to achieve in practice.

Consider real-world examples of family-friendly workplace policies that, while intended to promote inclusion, inadvertently excluded certain groups. In *Intersectionality and Family-Friendly Policies in the Federal Government*, Hamidullah and Micucci highlight how such policies were designed with the needs of white women in mind, unintentionally overlooking the unique challenges of women of color. The authors note that 55% of African American children live in single-parent homes compared to 19.9% of white children and 31% of Latino children, and that most of these homes are headed by women. These statistics reveal the different structural burdens placed on workers of color and underscore why public managers must ensure inclusion policies account for the varying realities of employees' lives.

This dynamic is illustrated through a documented case involving the Department of Defense's (DoD) telework expansion initiative. Between 2012 and 2016, telework opportunities increased significantly for professional and managerial employees—positions disproportionately held by white women. However, Black women, who were overrepresented in administrative and lower-graded civil service positions, were often excluded from telework eligibility because their roles were labeled "mission-critical" or "operational." Although the policy was advertised as gender-neutral and family-friendly, it reinforced racialized occupational segregation, limiting Black women's ability to utilize flexibility designed to improve work-life balance. The case demonstrates how inclusion policies can unintentionally privilege the dominant group—white women—while marginalizing women of color whose structural conditions differ.

However, designing truly inclusive policies becomes increasingly challenging as organizational diversity grows. Policies aimed at assisting the largest group will inevitably leave

out smaller groups, while policies intended for underrepresented groups can make majority groups feel excluded. Dover et al., in *Mixed Signals: The Unintended Effects of Diversity Initiatives*, argue that diversity initiatives may unintentionally reinforce perceptions of discrimination among majority groups, even when the intention is fairness. This dynamic exemplifies how diversity can complicate inclusion by creating new forms of exclusion. Because of this, it is nearly impossible to implement inclusion initiatives without simultaneously producing some form of exclusion. Still, one benefit of DEI initiatives is their ability to push managers to learn more about the complexities employees face, particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds. Dover and colleagues also emphasize that workplaces perceived as fair and supportive of diversity tend to foster higher morale, productivity, and organizational commitment. Thus, although DEI initiatives are imperfect, they can generate meaningful progress when implemented thoughtfully and deliberately.

The concept of diversity management became prominent as affirmative action policies lost political support during the 1980s. Unlike affirmative action, which focused primarily on race and gender, diversity management attempts to consider a broader range of differences, including age, disability, religion, and ethnicity. Köllen's work acknowledges this progression but also notes that race and gender continue to dominate diversity discourse, especially in the United States. While expanding the definition of diversity is beneficial, it can also lead managers to underemphasize the ongoing challenges related to race and gender—two of the most salient dimensions of inequality within organizations.

Even with diversity management, structural shortcomings persist. Avery Gordon points out that diversity management often claims to move beyond affirmative action but still fails to ensure the promotion and long-term advancement of minority employees. Worse, diversity efforts can unintentionally reinforce stereotypes, particularly when managers rely on cultural assumptions rather than individual knowledge of employees. Gordon warns that managers may unknowingly embed their own biases within diversity programs, resulting in practices that reinforce rather than dismantle inequity.

Tokenism is another barrier to effective inclusion. Tokenism occurs when organizations superficially include members of underrepresented groups without meaningfully integrating them into decision-making structures or leadership pipelines. It is widespread across all sectors and undermines genuine diversity efforts. King et al. show that token individuals often feel socially isolated, overly visible, and pressured to conform to stereotypes, particularly in male-dominated environments such as the military. These dynamics directly contradict the goals of inclusivity and reinforce organizational inequities.

Janice Yoder's research further demonstrates that tokenism is closely tied to gender discrimination. In male-dominated workplaces, women often experience heightened scrutiny and marginalization, which undermines their opportunities for advancement. Token men, by contrast, often benefit from gendered expectations that lead to quicker promotions. This asymmetry reveals how tokenism is fundamentally incompatible with DEI objectives.

The statistics are similarly troubling. Although women make up nearly half of the U.S. workforce, they hold only a small percentage of executive leadership positions. Thuma's research illustrates this gap clearly, showing that women hold just over 6% of Fortune 500 CEO

roles. Such disparities reflect organizational cultures in which tokenism and gender bias remain deeply embedded.

To move beyond tokenism, organizations must cultivate environments that genuinely welcome and value employee feedback. However, as Bess et al. caution, creating such environments requires deep organizational reflection and sustained commitment. Public institutions must confront uncomfortable truths about power imbalances and be willing to redesign policies and practices accordingly. Without authentic engagement and accountability, DEI efforts will continue to fall short.

Given these challenges, what practical steps can organizations take to strengthen DEI practices and reduce exclusion? One promising approach is the adoption of feminist embodied ethics, as proposed by Dobusch. This framework recognizes that all individuals experience vulnerability and interdependence, and it encourages organizations to treat each employee as a unique individual rather than a representative of a demographic category. By moving away from one-size-fits-all policy design, public institutions can create more responsive and equitable systems.

In conclusion, DEI approaches remain complex and often contradictory. Diversity itself is inherently messy and can either enhance or hinder organizational inclusivity depending on how it is managed. This paper does not argue against diversity but instead highlights the necessity for more nuanced, reflective, and individualized approaches to inclusion. DEI initiatives must be designed with a clear understanding that inclusion and exclusion operate simultaneously. Only through deliberate, responsive, and research-informed efforts can public administrators create truly equitable workplaces. In expanding this analysis, it becomes clear that

the pursuit of inclusion within public administration requires more than policy adoption or surface-level diversity initiatives. It requires a sustained interrogation of institutional arrangements, embedded norms, and structural power dynamics that shape the lived experiences of employees. The complexities detailed throughout this paper demonstrate that exclusion is not merely the absence of diversity, but often the byproduct of oversimplified inclusion frameworks that fail to meaningfully account for lived differences across race, gender, class, and occupational status.

True inclusion demands that public administrators move beyond symbolic gestures and adopt policies grounded in empirical evidence, intersectional analysis, and cultural humility. Agencies must recognize that employees do not enter the workplace on equal footing; they are situated within broader societal structures that influence their access to opportunity, flexibility, and workplace dignity. Without this recognition, inclusion efforts risk reinforcing inequities by centering the experiences of the already privileged while unintentionally marginalizing those whose circumstances diverge from institutional norms. n sum, the work of inclusion is neither linear nor simple. It is an iterative process requiring intentionality, critical reflection, and structural awareness. DEI initiatives possess the potential to transform public organizations, but only when crafted with an understanding that equity requires more than equal access—it requires differentiated support that acknowledges the distinct challenges faced by marginalized groups. Public administration must embrace this complexity if it seeks to genuinely embody its democratic obligation to serve all members of society with fairness, respect, and integrity. Only then can inclusion cease to be an ideal in name alone and instead become a substantive reality within the institutions that shape public life.

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