The role of societal privilege in the definitions and practices of inclusion

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to focus on the work of those with societal privilege in the practice of inclusion. It outlines the experience of privilege, obstacles raised by the study of women in cross-race relationships, and offers guidance for those with privilege in how to use it in relationships and organizational inclusion efforts.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper takes lessons from varied literatures about privilege, social justice, and organizational inclusion/diversity and applies them to the work of inclusion for those privileged by race in the USA.

Findings – The paper offers guidance to those with race privilege in the USA. It suggests ways to problematize privilege, how to become a social justice ally, reframe what white means, develop awareness about race dynamics, use empathy cautiously, create a "third culture," balance multiple identities, and acknowledge numerous power differentials.

Research limitations/implications – Given the specific contexts and social identities chosen here, the conclusions may not generalize. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to extend the experience, obstacles and guidance for those with other kinds of privilege in other contexts.

Practical implications – Because of global demographics, organizations have incorporated a wide range of workforce diversity and now need to maximize practices of inclusion so talent can be fully utilized. This paper provides specific practices that can cause those with privilege to create a truly inclusive environment.

Originality/value – There is very little exploration about the role of those with societal privilege in the definitions and practices of inclusion. This paper's contribution is to outline the work to be done by those privileged.

Keywords Diversity, Inclusion, Race, Privilege, Inclusive leadership

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Demographers predict a browner, grayer, and more culturally diverse population and workforce for the USA based on the 2010 census (Johnson *et al.*, 2011). The management of diversity continues to be a business imperative, and because the success of heterogeneous organizations involves more than hiring difference there is interest in the process and practices of inclusion as a way to maximize the benefits of diversity (Ferdman, 2014) and how social identity may be a factor in the attainment of workplace authority and power (Elliott and Smith, 2004).

Concomitant areas of study have included a focus on diversity as demographic difference among members (McGrath *et al.*, 1995), differences in perspectives based on identity differences (Cox, 1993), organizational approaches to diversity (Thomas and Ely, 1996), patterns of interaction between group members (Jackson *et al.*, 1995), diversity climates (Mor Barak *et al.*, 1998) and some foundational work on workplace inclusion (Pelled *et al.*, 1999). It has been noted that more conceptual and practical

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clarity is needed regarding the construct of inclusion (Ferdman, 2014) and there is a call for a focus on practices and attributes of organizations that effectively practice inclusion (Roberson, 2004).

Early conceptualizations of inclusion define it as "the degree to which an employee is accepted and treated as an insider by others in a work system" (Pelled *et al.*, 1999), practices for structurally including or excluding people from diverse backgrounds (Mor Barak *et al.*, 1998), being treated with a focus on uniqueness and belonging (Shore *et al.*, 2011), and mutual investment by both parties (Shore *et al.*, 2006). There is very little exploration about the role of those with societal privilege in the definitions and practices of inclusion.

Workplace relationships are an appropriate place to start because policies and procedures are created by employees in work groups (Shore *et al.*, 2011). Given that race is a socio-politically constructed identity, cross-race relationships become an important context where meanings are formed, negotiated and resisted; and introduce avenues to inclusive behavior (Mor Barak, 2011). This paper will assume that authentic inclusivity is the goal of these work relationships.

In the work focussing on women, there have been frequent references to distrust, betrayal and suspicion between white women and women of color in the USA as a result of a lack of awareness or acknowledgment of racism and privilege (E. Bell and Nkomo, 2001):

> White females discriminate against and exploit black women while simultaneously being envious and competitive in their interactions with them. Neither process of interaction creates conditions wherein trust and mutually reciprocal relationships can develop (hooks, 1984, p. 52).

This paper will consider inclusion in a US-American context and reflects the observation that "racial inequality still exists, however, and it remains a troubling issue in the American psyche and political landscape" (DiTomaso, 2013, p. 2). Racial inequality causes a moral dilemma for white Americans because the American creed of "liberty, equality, justice and fair opportunity" for all is incompatible with the reality of racial inequality (Myrdal, 1944, p. lxxx).

Furthermore, we will focus on inclusion as it is experienced by those with societal privilege, particularly, white women in the USA. We acknowledge that lines of privilege associated with social identity are multiple and complicated, and that examination of only one (race) may seem to essentialize people and not consider gender, ethnicity, age, disability, class, sexuality, culture, etc. (Aulenbacher and Innreiter-Moser, 2013; Fearfull and Kamenou, 2010). However, each type of privilege may offer lessons to learn so we have chosen to limit ourselves for that purpose. We will first examine the experience of privilege, then offer obstacles for white women in cross-race relationships as a microcosm of organizational inclusion practices, and end with guidance for those with societal privilege for using that privilege in relationships and organizational inclusion efforts.

The experience of race privilege

Invisibility

Race has been largely kept invisible in organizational studies along with a mistaken assumption of universality resulting from the absence of race as a variable, creating a limitation in theories arising from these studies (Nkomo, 1992). Scholars must also watch for bias in research questions and methodologies resulting from assumptions around theoretical, political and social meanings around race that are dominant at the

time they are asked and answered. Additional underlying mental models are those around capitalism which lead us to assume that individual opportunity is widely available and race is simply a demographic variable. These observations often mirror how race is made invisible in organizational life, hiding behind unsaid assumptions around merit and performance.

The most significant result for those who have societal privilege is the freedom to ignore that privilege. This freedom translates into the luxury of dismissing racial identity (hooks, 1981, p. 138), opting out of struggles against oppression (Wildman and Davis, 1997), and:

> […] the privilege to ignore the reality of a white supremacist society when it makes us uncomfortable, to rationalize why it's not really so bad, to deny one's own role in it (Jensen, 2005, p. 10).

McKinney's (2005) research found that whiteness was a "prompted identity" meaning that most of her white respondents had not considered whiteness until prompted by her research process and while "we're all in the race game […] either consciously or unconsciously" (Jensen, 2005, p. 17), those with race privilege can both construct and experience whiteness by keeping it invisible (Altman, 2006). In fact, the delay in the emergence of "Whiteness studies," when theorists finally began to study whiteness as a social construct, reflects this same choice (McKinney, 2005).

The choice to notice race

The paradox of constructing and experiencing whiteness as invisible leads to a second result. This invisibility is socialized within the society or institution and leads to the freedom to choose whether or not to notice differences and inequality. This is evidenced in the early feminist movement where white feminists used the word "women" to refer solely to white women (hooks, 1981). This created a false illusion of alliance among all women and left the racism that was shared by white women and white men unacknowledged. When confronted with the reality of privilege; previous entitlement to invisibility can lead to surprise, acknowledgment, discomfort or denial. And when collusion in the solidarity of whiteness and being a beneficiary of whiteness is realized, there can be shame and "racial melancholia" (Suchet, 2007). These dynamics may occur in a cross-race relationship.

Subscribing to the myth of meritocracy

The myth of meritocracy is one of the assumptions underlying capitalism and proposes that those who succeed are the most qualified, without acknowledging the advantages that come with privilege. In fact, Sue (2003) defined white privilege itself as "the unearned advantages and benefits that accrue to White folks by virtue of a system normed on the experiences, values, and perceptions of their group" (2003, p. 137):

> According to the ideology of the American Dream, America is the land of limitless opportunity in which individuals can go as far as their own merit takes them […]. Getting ahead is ostensibly based on individual merit, which is generally viewed as a combination of factors including innate abilities, working hard, having the right attitude, and having high moral character and integrity. Americans not only tend to think that is how the system should work, but most Americans also think that is how the system does work (McNamee and Miller, 2004, p. 1).

In this scenario, those privileged become invested in the notion that it is only their hard work, ingenuity and skills that have earned their success (Zane, 2007). This combination

of earned strength and unearned power (McIntosh, 1988) or social credentials (Kanter, 1977) confuses excellence and exclusivity (Minnich, 2005). This myth then serves as a powerful source of resistance to the idea of unearned privilege for those who have it because it threatens their world view, egos and bases for success.

Obstacles for white women in cross-race relationships

The literature on cross-race relationships has reflected diverse perspectives of social location, site of focus and type of study. It was written by scholars, activists, poets and writers (with many duplicating roles) who provided a useful combination of theory, practice, reflection and spirit. Amid this wide range of perspectives and approaches, some common themes emerged about the obstacles that must be overcome when beginning to work across race.

Unproblematic solidarity

The first obstacle that emerged is some white women's desire for "unproblematic solidarity" (Thompson, 2003) and personal reassurance. This impatience for solidarity from shared gender and supposed shared victimhood actually works to silence differences with women of color and can paradoxically "render the history and structure of racial experience invisible" (Brown and Grande, 2005, p. 237). In fact, the "concrete ceiling" for African American women leaders represents a significantly different experience of corporate life and is attributed to six factors: daily doses of racism, black women being held to a higher standard, invisibility, exclusion from the formal and informal network, more frequent challenges to their authority and hollow commitment by corporate leaders to the advancement of minorities (E. Bell and Nkomo, 2001, p. 140). Unproblematic solidarity prevents an open discussion of these differences which would lead to new understandings and can unconsciously disallow disagreement and difference of opinion (Wyatt, 2004), therefore providing a weak foundation for inclusive behavior. Brown and Grande (2005) examined the possible motivations for this behavior and concluded that it is tied up with socialization of many white (middle-class) women:

> Their assertion […] that "I can only do this if I'm in relationship" is the ultimate White middle-class woman's condition–asserting the primacy of closeness and comfort, genuine relationships or real conversation, even as she gets to name the parameters of what makes a relationship genuine or a conversation real […] They fear "being close-minded," "thoughtless," "having someone angry at you," "being wrong," "being disliked," "being seen as the bad guy," "causing discomfort," "oppressing others," and "separation" (p. 241).

Politically correct language, defensiveness, overpersonalization or expressing guilt about privilege (Ely *et al.*, 2006) often keeps the focus on the speaker's agenda and may block the unity white women may seek:

> For People of Color, an encounter with a white person who knows what is right but has not processed it emotionally can be frustrating and exhausting. Every word, every signal breeds confusion. Whites busily guarding a politically correct posture are impossible to reach on a human level, because they have an image to protect (Rose, 1996, p. 33).

Unconscious perpetuation of dominance

Another obstacle between some white women and women of color can be an unacknowledged and persistent perpetuation of dominance on the part of the white women (Breines, 2006). This can appear in the form of "white solipsism" (Rich, 1979) generated from assuming that one's view as a white person is universal, thereby

preventing a connection with others' experience. An example would be using "we" and "us" without realizing this is an assertion of racial privilege (Brown and Grande, 2005). Coming from the US dominant racial culture, white women can assume this same dynamic in cross-race relationships and while it may be unconscious, it perpetuates the intention of domination and communicates a lack of awareness or understanding to those with whom they are working:

> Historically and to some degree today, racial discourse in the United States is governed by the cultural parameters of the dominant White population. Consequently, when discussing race and racial issues, White people tend to engage from a place of certain authority, even though they have quite often been remiss in conducting their own racial introspection (Singleton and Linton, 2006, p. 121).

Discomfort when the real work begins

There also may be unease and discomfort on both sides when the "real work" begins. For white women, this discomfort can result when women of color resist "the order, coherence, authority and concept of white superiority" (Jordan, 2011), when judgments are permitted to surface, when the fact emerges that the denial of racism works against the desire to become allies (E. Bell and Nkomo, 2001), and when they realize that their experience, perceptions and economic position have been profoundly affected by being constituted as white (Alcoff, 1998). This disequilibrium and cognitive dissonance are to be expected and can be a source of significant learning:

> If we go back to the understanding that we live in a system that uses whiteness as the standard and hold white people as normal, then we see that others are being assessed as not normal, as less than the standard. If we sit quietly for a moment with that level of clarity, without throwing up roadblocks of resistance, we might get to a deeper understanding of the costs of maintaining the system as it is: the costs to others and the costs to ourselves (Kendall, 2006, p. 40).

Yet another obstacle some white and black women face when working toward an authentic relationship is that their deeply held values must be surfaced and negotiated if the relationship is to be authentic. In this way, individual authenticity creates the ground for an inherent set of conflicts that must be navigated. If their focus areas, cultural values, type of activism differ given their social positions, how each person defines social justice can be a point of tension in the relationship:

> The differences between the concerns of white feminists and those of feminists of Color are indicative of these distinct political grounds. White feminists' concerns about the unhealthy consequences of standard for feminine beauty, their focus on the unequal division of household labor, and their attention to childhood identity formation stem from a political consciousness that seeks to project private sphere issues into the public arena (Hurtado, 1996, p. 18).

Differences in cultural values

Another difference may exist between the cultural values of individual advancement and responsibility for the collectivity:

> [In communities of color] there is a linkage between obtained privilege of individual ethnic/racial group members and the political struggles of the group. Therefore, group responsibility is assumed, and its absence has to be justified […] whereas in the white women's movement individual advancement is assumed, and collectivity has to be socialized (Hurtado, 1996, p. 27).

For black women, resistance buoyed by the support of other black or non-black leaders in the organization (Jordan, 2011) also reflects this collectivity.

A third difference is in the size and shape of the web of support for their activism:

> White feminists by definition have a more circumscribed community than feminists of Color because to include their community *as a whole* would entail including the white patriarchal order. Feminists of Color can, in fact, include their entire communities because their communities have also been subordinated by white patriarchy (Hurtado, 1996, p 27).

There may also be a consistent difference between some women across lines of privilege in how they express their activism and how they discuss race. "Women of Color have more urgency in their political activism; White women have become more academic" (Hurtado, 1996, p. 29). When discussing race, "White women are more verbal, impersonal, intellectual and task oriented while women of Color tend to be more nonverbal, personal, emotional, and process oriented" (Singleton and Linton, 2006, p. 123). These differences may in fact express-related differences in ways of knowing but also are an interesting commentary about how privilege may emerge in behavior. Collins (2000) laid out the distinguishing features of a black feminist epistemology which prioritizes experience as a source of knowledge, resistance to the dominant power structure; and the dialogic relationship between changed thinking, changed action and therefore a changed consciousness. While early feminist movement epistemologies have become more inclusive of non-white perspectives, it is worth checking on communication patterns and purposes so issues around ways of thinking can be surfaced early in a working relationship.

Resistance on the part of those marginalized

Another factor to consider in workplace relationships between those with and without privilege is the resistance on the part of people of color as a reaction to being defined by those privileged. Jordan (2011) points out that it is not always overt and aggressive, is action toward self-definition, and is a response to organizational systems and structures of gendered and raced domination. She further states that:

> They may also resist inequities not at an individual level, but with the support of a collectivity of other Black women leaders or non-Black leaders in the organization, thereby participating in politics of revolution (Jordan, 2011, p. 55).

This resistance can be expected and incorporated into workplace relationships across lines of privilege.

These obstacles are significant, challenging, personal and require great patience and courage to overcome. As Breines (2006) stated, "Crossing the color line is messy, not just theoretical; it is snail-like in its pace; it is infinitely difficult; it requires personal interaction and risk" (p. 14). Working through these obstacles on both sides brings up a wide range of emotions to manage at the same time as widely differing agendas are negotiated. And given that the struggle involves anxiety, discomfort, courage, vulnerability, trust, disappointment, compassion, pain and honesty, it seems easier said than done to engage in these relationships where it requires strength and willingness to devote scarce time and energy to a variety of struggles (E. Bell and Nkomo, 2001):

> When we expand our individual and collective boundaries to incorporate new and different voices and therefore to consider possibilities beyond those we are already accustomed to or comfortable with, we need to deal not only with the possible discomfort of adapting to something new and unfamiliar, but also with the unease brought on by uncertain parameters and seemingly fluid boundaries that must continually be renegotiated (Ferdman, 2007, p. 15).

Guidance for those with race privilege

Problematize privilege

The field of white critical studies emerged in the late 1980s as a child of critical race theory. It represented "an effort to get beyond received wisdoms and ask basic questions about race, power, and society" (Delgado and Stefancic, 1997, p. xviii) particularly focussing on what it means to be white. This field assumed a social constructivist ontology, taking for granted that individuals ascribe meaning to race and by making practices visible will work toward antiracist white behavior, and problematized the dominant group instead of the more common focus on those marginalized:

> What is new and unique about "Whiteness studies" is that it reverses the traditional focus of research on race relations by concentrating attention upon the socially constructed nature of white identity and the impact of Whiteness upon intergroup relations (Doane, 2003, p. 3).

This field created a private dialogue for those with race privilege and a naming of what is typically invisible in society's practices. Understanding how whiteness came into existence (Allen, 1997), how it is lived (Wise, 2008), how white people sustain it through the dynamics of power and privilege (Hurtado and Stewart, 2004) and learning about issues such as trust, guilt, defensiveness, denial, dualistic thinking, blame and how they are viewed by others (Low, 2004) provides an intrapsychic space to process these difficult issues before engaging in interaction.

Become a social justice ally

The literature on social justice ally development (Kendall, 2006; Wise, 2008) delineated behavior allies should demonstrate in order to create the kind of authenticity that is empathic and open to difference. Some of the actions they recommend for those with privilege can be used as organizational inclusion practices for those with privilege:

- seeking out critique (Kendall, 2006, p. 52);
- paying attention to the public interactions between both people, "because you can be sure that others are keeping a close watch" (Kendall, 2006, p. 146);
- in response to problems that arise, taking a matter-of-fact approach and assuming it is a result of negative results of socialization rather than a moral judgment on one's personhood (Bunch, 1990, p. 52);
- trying (but never truly succeeding) to see and hear from other vantage points (Caraway, 1991, p. 172);
- demonstrating empathy, "encouraging individuals to respect and appreciate cultural differences instead of simply erasing or ignoring them, and encouraging communication that is non-judgmental and accepting of others" (Dace and McPhail, 1998, p. 435);
- challenging one another with the assumption that change is possible (Bunch, 1990, p. 55);
- being clear about outcomes both need from the relationship (Bunch, 1990, p. 55);
- resisting white racism, "planting seeds of doubt in other Whites" (Wise, 2008, p. 105) and creating discomfort for other whites (Ignatiev, 1997); and
- coaching and educating each other on non-inclusive behaviors (Jordan, 2011, pp. 221-2).

Reframe what it means to be white

White people working across race can learn to reframe what it means to be white. For example, whites can develop a "traitorous identity" (Bailey, 1998) where they can explore their identities in ways that do not depend on the subordination of people of color and Giroux (1997) suggests establishing a "new ethnicity" pedagogy which allows white students to "mediate critically the complex relations between Whiteness and racism not by repudiating their Whiteness, but by grappling with its racist legacy and its potential to be rearticulated in oppositional and transformative terms" (p. 301). Whites can learn to realize how race affects them powerfully and to do the work of "interrogating their Whiteness" (Brown and Grande, 2005, p. 249) before engaging in building a relationship.

Develop awareness about race dynamics

If interracial communication is defined as:

> The transactional process of message exchange between individuals in a situational context where racial difference is perceived as a salient factor by at least one person. If racial differences are not central to the interaction, these individuals' communication may be more interpersonal than interracial (Orbe and Harris, 2008, p. 6).

Those with privilege in workplace relationships can self-identify with regard to race and to pay attention to whether and/or how race becomes a salient factor in that relationship.

Use empathy cautiously

There are complications in considering empathy which would seem to be a natural requirement for an effective relationship in this context. Any conceptualization of empathy across social groups must "cautiously consider dynamics of power," and that "the primary race and class difference among women, like the primary gender difference, is power" (DeTurk, 2001, p. 379).

Participants must realize that "cultural difference is ultimately unknowable" (p. 894) and describes how the two extremes of empathy and "unknowing" must be moderated:

> It would surely be useful to forging a common purpose if members of a cross-race alliance could understand each other to a degree–and identify with one another to the extent of being able to perceive things from the other's standpoint. The trick is to put into practice the idea of identifying and understanding "to a degree" (Wyatt, 2004, p. 894).

Create a "third culture"

Casrnir (1999) named the new space that is created by two people with different cultures as a "third culture":

> The construction of a mutually beneficial interactive environment in which individuals from two different cultures can function in a way beneficial to all involved, represents my attempt to evolve [...] a continuous, evolutionary process, focused on communication between human beings, not on etic categories which can be the result of preconceived paradigms (pp. 92-93).

Breines (2006) hinted at this when she described the "journey from idealistic interracial community to separation and identity politics, to new definitions of identity and home" (p. 193). In this way, relationship across privilege can be redefined.

Balance individual, social and organizational identities

There is a tension that emerges in cross-race relationships: the individual need for identification and the need to identify with the group. The individual need for

identification supports the expression of difference while the social version of identification can turn into an "ethos of solidarity" (Wyatt, 2004, p. 896) which may unwittingly reduce the expression of difference. This is a good reminder for organizational life – that group solidarity which often emerges out of a social need for identification can work against the acknowledgement of individual difference.

Time and trust are significant in the development of an authentic relationship in this context and need space to build in the workplace:

> Women from different racial/cultural groups are more likely to invest energy and time in such cross-race conversations if they know they will be continuing to live and/or work together for an extended period of time (Wyatt, 2004, p. 898).

This may be a challenge in workplaces where cross-race working relationships are temporary and limited in time.

Acknowledge numerous power differentials

Additional areas of study that can inform organizational inclusion efforts are found in multicultural counseling (Pedersen *et al.*, 2008), cross-race developmental relationships/mentoring (Schippers, 2008); cross-race supervisor-subordinate relationships in organizations (Davidson and Proudford, 2008), non-profit board member inclusion practices (Bernstein and Bilimoria, 2012), cross-race issues in teacher training (McAllister and Irvine, 2000), organizational subgroup demographics (Lau and Murnighan, 2005), and an emerging area that focusses on cross-race friendships, although this one tends to focus largely on students, adolescents and children with some exceptions (Tochluk, 2006). These areas of scholarship hint at many dynamics that prove significant given their context, including tools in creating "inclusive empathy" (Pedersen *et al.*, 2008), the importance of establishing clear expectations and honoring individual complexity (Toporek *et al.*, 2010), and laying out cross-cultural competencies (Sue, 2001). Most of them involved a structural power differential in the relationship (such as mentor-protégé, supervisor-subordinate, teacher-student or counselor-client) which is additive to the dominant/subordinate hierarchy in the US race relations.

Additional elements that were described in a study of a feminist project organized in the Netherlands were:

> *Visibility* is being oneself fully, openly, undefensively, and expressively.
> *Pride* is self-acceptance and self-respect; in particular, respect for one's identity, one's heritage, and one's right to self-determination.
> *Solidarity* is knowledge of, respect for, and unity with persons whose identities are in certain essential ways common with one's own.
> *Alliance* is knowledge of, respect for, and commitment between persons who are in essential ways different but whose interests are in essential ways akin. For dominant groups, alliance is a process of sharing power and resources with others in society in order to create structures equally responsive to the needs and interests of all people. This process requires giving up one's drive to superiority, giving up one's prejudices against others, and embracing a more flexible relation to oneself, to others, and to society as a whole (Pheterson, 1986, pp. 148-9).

Conclusion

The ongoing search for a set of practices that can create inclusion and better maximize the benefits of diversity is enriched by focussing on the work that needs to be done by those who carry systemic privilege. It compels those with privilege to resist tendencies

to be politically correct, avoid conflict and perpetuate dominance, be willing to experience disequilibrium, expect resistance that is a result of the hegemony of racism, demonstrate patience and courage, manage emotions, negotiate agendas, surface and manage power dynamics, and hold the paradox of belonging and uniqueness. Geiger (2010) outlined three categories of work resulting from participant data for those engaging in cross-race work relationships: intrapsychic, interpersonal and actions outside the relationship. For those with privilege; intrapsychic work includes maintaining a learning orientation and being continually curious about dynamics around privilege in the workplace, reflecting on an ongoing basis about how one's racial story affects one's current thinking, resisting the tendency to speak for others or assume universality, and understanding that the societal context outside the workplace is working on everyone all the time. Interpersonal work for those with privilege includes making race visible both in relationships and in the system, problematizing privilege, seeking critique, and examining unconscious assumptions about the relationship of race to merit. Actions outside the relationship include becoming allies to those marginalized by society, building one's own network to include difference, modeling the ability to talk about race across race, and creating structured and safe settings to bring up race.

Time is also a factor in making this work, and organizations can utilize this to structure teams and their time boundedness consciously so that enough time is given to build trust and safety. In addition, organizations can examine their parameters for success to see if they mirror those of the dominant white group. For relationships to be authentic and for inclusion to be fully inculcated, practices for those privileged must be made visible and consciously carried out. The term "inclusion" infers a relationship between actors and recipients, and because those doing the including are often privileged, here the focus is on the work involved in helping them prepare to do the challenging work of inclusion.

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