Talking inclusion into being: communication as a facilitator and obstructor of an inclusive work environment

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to examine the communicative factors that facilitate or hamper the development of an inclusive work environment with an emphasis on the communication about equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), while taking diversity characteristics of employees into account.

Design/methodology/approach – In total, 84 persons employed in Austria and Germany, who feature various observable and non-observable diversity characteristics, were interviewed following a problem-centered approach.

Findings – The results indicate that employees with (observable) diversity characteristics, who tend to feel less included, observe more excluding and marginalizing communication and practices in their organizations. Moreover, formal interpersonal communication appears to be more important to develop a highly inclusive workplace than informal interpersonal communication and other forms of communication about EDI.

Research limitations/implications – The sample was rather imbalanced and comprised only employees in Austria and Germany, which limits the study's explanatory power. However, the findings stress the significance of formal interpersonal communication as the cornerstone of an inclusive workplace, which should be followed up in future research.

Practical implications – In terms of the development of an inclusive work environment the findings suggest that strategic (i.e. formal) organizational communication about EDI issues is key to increase the perception of inclusion.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the literature by demonstrating the importance of interpersonal communication as a key factor that facilitates, but also hampers an inclusive work environment.

Keywords Diversity management, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), Organizational communication, Problem-centered interview

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In increasingly heterogeneous and diverse societies equality, diversity, and inclusion (hereafter, EDI) have become central issues not only for politics but also for many organizations. In May 2020, the public attention on EDI increased once more when George Floyd was killed by a policeman in Minneapolis propelling the Black Lives Matter movement, which calls attention to systemic racism. Increased refugee movements, spurred by the Arab Spring, turmoil, or the poor economic state in countries in Africa and the Middle

East, also drew attention to issues of EDI. And finally, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed a threat to numerous organizations and their employees, as many employees have to work remotely or were dismissed, and parents (mostly mothers) need to take care of their children when schools are closed. All of these events and developments emphasize the relevance of EDI for organizations, which are expected to consider the increasing heterogeneity by setting up respective personnel strategies coping with the inclusion of diverse members of society.

The *inclusion/exclusion* dichotomy in the workplace is at the heart of this article, where the "perception of inclusion-exclusion is conceptualized as a continuum of the degree to which individuals feel a part of critical organizational processes" (Mor Barak, 1999, p. 52). In order to make sure that every employee feels included, organizations have to care for all employees, whether they are members of the sociodemographic majority or a minority. The findings of various studies indicate that an inclusive workplace has a positive impact on (1) the perception of a climate of trust (Downey *et al.*, 2015), (2) affective commitment (Ashikali and Groeneveld, 2015), (3) organizational commitment and (4) job satisfaction (Hwang and Hopkins, 2015), (5) perceived procedural and distributive justice (Le *et al.*, 2018), and (6) employee well-being (Jaiswal and Dyaram, 2020).

However, what has been neglected in many studies dealing with inclusion is the role of communication in creating and maintaining an inclusive work environment. This can be traced back to the fact that quantitative methods, which have been employed in most studies, are limited in their ability to investigate communication aspects in-depth. Therefore, those studies were not able to describe and explain how climates of trust and high levels of job satisfaction, or well-being had been accomplished through communication and interaction among members. Thus, the question as to what kind of diversity management and communication practices lead to perceived inclusion or exclusion is not yet answered satisfactorily. Although several communication scholars have addressed diversity (management) in their studies (e.g. Allen, 1995; Caidor and Cooren, 2018; Okoro and Washington, 2012; Trittin and Schoeneborn, 2017), the concept of inclusion/exclusion has mostly been overlooked. Thus, the research presented in this article aims to investigate the role of (internal) communication as a facilitator and/or obstructor of an inclusive work environment.

In the following, we first give a brief overview of the concepts of diversity (climate) and inclusion since the two terms have repeatedly been used interchangeably. We then discuss the role of communication as the cornerstone of diversity management that aims at making employees from all walks of life feel included, but also as a means to exclude and marginalize specific persons or (minority) groups. After delineating the main research questions, the methodology, and sample composition, the results of 84 problem-centered interviews with employed persons in Austria and Germany are presented, followed by a discussion and concluding remarks.

Diversity and inclusion in the workplace: not the same at all

The first deliberations about the management of diversity emerged in the USA in the 1950s due to the civil rights movement, beginning with the concepts of *affirmative action* and *equal employment opportunity* leading to different approaches such as *positive action* or *positive discrimination* (Hansen and Seierstad, 2017; Mor Barak, 2017). The establishment of such initiatives, which, over time, have partly been cast in a legislative mold, "has helped more women, members of ethnic and racial minorities, members of sexual minority groups, older workers, people with disabilities, and members of other marginalized groups become part of the labor force" (Mor Barak, 2015, p. 84). As a result, modern diversity management in

organizations was born and has been institutionalized especially in large corporations, which must deal with a vast number of employees with different backgrounds.

Importantly, the concepts of diversity and inclusion need to be differentiated. Diversity, generally speaking, deals with organizational demography, whereas inclusion addresses "the removal of obstacles to the full participation and contribution of employees in organizations" (Roberson, 2006, p. 217). Thus, diversity in organizations is about the differences between persons within an organization on grounds of observable (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity) and (mostly) non-observable (e.g. education, sexual orientation, religion) characteristics (Kochan et al., 2003; Mor Barak, 2015; Roberson, 2006). Despite the moral obligation of organizations to foster EDI (Köllen et al., 2018), the assumed economic advantages (i.e. the business case for diversity) have been the reason for establishing diversity management programs in many organizations with increased regularity (Hansen and Seierstad, 2017). As claimed by Mease (2012), however, emphasizing the business case for diversity should rather serve as a "can opener" to convince top management of the benefits of implementing EDI initiatives. This proposition makes sense in that the impact of diversity management on an organization's bottom line is multicausal and usually implies psychological factors (Ravazzani, 2018; Van Dijk et al., 2012), which indicates the importance of establishing a pro-diversity climate and inclusiveness – two concepts that highlight the positive aspects of EDI matters in organizations (Shore et al., 2009).

Various research findings indicate the positive effects of a pro-diversity climate, which "refers to the aggregate member perceptions about the organization's diversity-related formal structure characteristics and informal values" (Gonzalez and DeNisi, 2009, p. 24). For example, research by McKay et al. (2008) indicates a positive influence of pro-diversity climate on sales performance in that Blacks and Hispanics performed significantly better in stores that cherish diversity compared to their counterparts in less diversity-supporting work environments. To pursue the question as to whether workforce diversity has a positive impact on an organization's effectiveness, Gonzalez and DeNisi (2009) identified pro-diversity climate as a moderator of the relationship between organizational diversity and productivity and return on profit, respectively. Noteworthy, however, is the fact that psychological variables such as organizational commitment and organizational identification play a decisive role in those relationships. Another study detected a positive correlation between pro-diversity climate and customer satisfaction if the service climate was high, and members of minorities were part of the sales force (McKay et al., 2011). Companies in the service industry in particular hire staff with different backgrounds and skills to better understand their customers' needs and meet their varying expectations (Janssens and Zanoni, 2005). Yet, following a business-oriented *access-and-legitimacy* approach, which solely aims to increase market shares "by matching the demographics of the organization to those of critical consumer or constituent groups" (Thomas and Ely, 1996, p. 5) can backfire tremendously, as the findings of the case study of a US retail company demonstrate (Bendick et al., 2010). The study revealed that the diversity management strategy to match employees and managers with customers based on a single diversity characteristic (mostly African American store managers in "minority-dominated" neighborhoods) led to lower salaries and fewer promotion opportunities for managers of stores located in low-income, minority-dominated neighborhoods. Based on their findings, the authors advocate for a business case for inclusion and not for diversity only. Taking the same line, Ely and Thomas (2001) urge organizations to follow an *integration-and-learning* approach, which considers all employees' unique skills, competencies, and experiences valuable resources that enrich individuals, groups, and the organization. This diversity management approach ultimately promotes the development of an inclusive work environment where diversity is valued, encouraged, and integrated into business processes.

With a focus on the (potential) economic benefits of a diverse workforce, Friday and Friday (2003) define diversity management as "an active phenomenon, which involves supervising or coordinating and directing the diversity or differences individuals bring to the organization to ensure the organization's strategic goals are being fully and effectively met" (p. 865). Since the study at hand, however, highlights the communicative aspects of inclusive work environments, we rather follow Mor Barak's (2017) notion of diversity management as "the voluntary organizational actions that are designed to create greater inclusion of employees from various backgrounds into the formal and informal organizational structures through deliberate policies and programs" (p. 209). Thus, Mor Barak (2015) considers diversity management as a proactive management task and defines inclusion, which is deemed the ultimate goal of authentic diversity management (Winters, 2014), as "employee perceptions that their unique contribution to the organization is appreciated and their full participation is encouraged" (Mor Barak, p. 85).

The creation of an organizational climate for inclusion, the adoption of an inclusive leadership style at all hierarchical levels, and the implementation of inclusive practices (i.e. practices that satisfy both employees' belongingness and uniqueness needs) are the key elements that contribute to the development of a sense of inclusion and belongingness among all organizational members. (Shore *et al.*, 2011). In terms of the (potential) economic benefits of a diverse workforce, greater attention to the *business case for inclusion* is also called for by Pless and Maak (2004) since an inclusive work environment "allows people with multiple backgrounds, mindsets, and ways of thinking to work effectively together and to perform to their highest potential in order to achieve organizational objectives" (p. 130).

Highlighting the communication aspects of the inclusion concept, Mor Barak (1999) claims that inclusion points to an "individual's sense of being a part of the organization system in both the formal processes, such as access to information and decision-making channels and the informal processes, such as 'water cooler' and lunch meetings where informal information and decisions take place" (p. 52). In other words, taking part in acts of communication is vital to engendering belongingness and inclusiveness in the workplace.

Communication as antecedent and descendent of inclusion and exclusion

Inclusion, in a narrower sense, refers to an individual's sense of belongingness, uniqueness, and empowerment, which is mainly engendered by formal and informal communication among organizational members. Interestingly, the communication aspect of EDI is usually reduced to a rather functionalist cross-cultural communication management approach, including its challenges and assumed potentials to ensure or increase success in international business (e.g. Guirdham, 2005; Mor Barak, 2017; Okoro and Washington, 2012). Indeed, cross-cultural communication is an important topic in a globalized economy because different cultures have different views on the importance and understandings of EDI (Farndale *et al.*, 2015). Yet, the cultural background is only one diversity characteristic among others such as gender (identity), age, or sexual orientation.

Notwithstanding, recent studies have dealt with the communication aspects of diversity management from an interpretive perspective. For example, Caidor and Cooren (2018) demonstrate that the appropriation of diversity initiatives has to be negotiated among organizational members through the invocation of various "figures" such as values, principles, or absent people in the course of those negotiations. Concerning the diversity of voices, or "polyphony", Trittin and Schoeneborn (2017) encourage organizations to listen to all internal and external voices to develop effective diversity management. Referring to inclusion, the authors argue that "diversity management practices that rely on a constitutive-polyphonic viewpoint require organizations to implement explicitly communicative

mechanisms that emphasize an *inclusive environment* in which their members feel comfortable and accepted when speaking out" (Trittin and Schoeneborn, p. 316, italics added). Thus, an inclusive work environment features a fair communication climate in which all organizational members, as well as external stakeholders, are encouraged to speak up and different or even contrary perspectives and opinions (i.e. voices) are appreciated, openly discussed, and eventually taken into account in decision-making and problem-solving processes (Pless and Maak, 2004).

In a study on employees' responses to mistreatment in the workplace, Meares *et al.* (2004) found that members of minority groups are muted more often when voicing mistreatment than their "privileged" counterparts (i.e. European Americans, scientists, or men in general). The authors identified two muting strategies: (1) muting through repeated mistreatment and (2) muting through ambiguity. In the first case, employees repeatedly, but unsuccessfully tried to raise their voice after they had experienced mistreatment leading to disengagement and resignation. In the second case, lacking definitions of mistreatment and its consequences caused frustration and anger among the mistreated subordinates. A sense of being heard seems to be one key to inclusion while the muting of employees' voices ostensibly leads to the emergence of a feeling of exclusion. Excluding practices are especially pervasive in highly competitive work environments (Solebello *et al.*, 2016).

The literature review on communication and inclusion indicates that the frequency and form of communication among organizational members are of vital importance to foster an inclusive work environment. Mor Barak's landmark work on inclusion highlights the significance of communication as a major antecedent of inclusion. She identified three dimensions of inclusion, which exclusively address communication. Mor Barak (2017) claims that included employees (1) are *involved* in decision-making processes, (2) have access to relevant *information*, and (3) have the opportunity to *participate* in various activities. Aside from interpersonal communication, mediated communication may also contribute to establishing an inclusive workplace, because of textual agency, which means the capability of written words to make a difference (Brummans, 2007; Cooren, 2010). However, documents such as codes of conduct rather set the rules of the game while interpersonal communication ultimately determines whether inclusion may be engendered or not. In this sense, Mor Barak (2017, p. 302) claims that a climate for inclusion

> refers to shared employee perceptions of the extent to which organizational policies and practices encourage and reward acceptance of demographically diverse employees by (1) recognizing their unique attributes; (2) providing them with a sense of belonging; and (3) encouraging their involvement in organizational communication, decision-making processes, and informal interactions.

While communication *always* entails the transmission of information from a sender A to a receiver B via a medium C (Cooren, 2020), in this study mediated communication is conceptualized as communication that takes place employing "man-made" media such as the Internet and the concomitant devices, written documents, and other signifiers *without* the possibility of *simultaneous verbal exchange*. By contrast, interpersonal communication is considered an act of communication in which "information is transmitted in situations where mutual influence is possible" (Price, 1997, p. 349), which means *simultaneous conversation and turn-taking*, regardless of whether the conversations take place at the same location or via telephone or video conferencing tools. In the course of interpersonal communication, formal and informal turns of talk can be distinguished. While formal interpersonal communication refers to the exchange of *exclusively work-related information in an official context* (Price, 1997), informal interpersonal communication refers to "*off-record talk* that is generally not perceived as 'real' work, such as small talk, humor, and supportive feedback" (Holmes and

Marra, 2004, p. 395, italics added). Informal interpersonal communication takes place mostly horizontally on a peer level, whereas formal interpersonal communication usually – but not exclusively – occurs vertically among leaders and subordinates (Fay, 2011).

The study: research questions, methodology, and sample composition

The literature review shows that several questions about the relationship between communication practices and inclusion/exclusion are still unanswered. With this study we aim to answer the following three research questions:

RQ1. To what extent do diversity characteristics play a role in whether and how employees perceive excluding and marginalizing organizational communication and practices?

RQ2. To what extent does the type of interpersonal communication (formal or informal) about EDI have an impact on the perceived degree of inclusion?

RQ3. Do differences in expectations and demands regarding organizational communication about EDI depend on the perceived degree of inclusion and, if so, in what way?

Methodology

The goal of this study was to investigate the perception of inclusion in the workplace. As qualitative methods are designed openly and thus allow for reflexivity in the research process, this is an appropriate way to consider various differences between participants (Flick, 2014).

The interviews were conducted based on a problem-centered approach according to Witzel (2000). By means of problem-centered questions and re-questioning during the interviews, socially relevant problems and individual perceptions of the respondents can be analyzed. Problem-centered interviews make use of a short interview guide to ensure a semi-structured but still flexible communication situation. The guide was developed based on an extensive literature review and adjusted after a pretest with 21 interviews.

Interviewees were employed persons. To ensure diversity in the sample, nine sociodemographic categories were formed to represent diversity in society. These categories were mainly based on the core diversity dimensions defined by the German Diversity Charter (2015), namely age, physical and mental handicap, ethnic origin and nationality, gender (identity), religion and worldview, and sexual orientation (we added "education" representing the social background). However, "white males" without diversity characteristics were also interviewed to investigate possible differences between them and interviewees with diversity characteristics.

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked for their informed consent to participate and record the interview. The main part of the interview dealt with perceived inclusion/exclusion in the workplace and the interviewee's awareness and evaluation of EDI measures and communication in their organizations. After the evaluation, a subsequent section contained questions about expectations and demands on the communication about EDI. Interviews were conducted and transcribed by a group of 21 trained master's degree candidates. Thematic qualitative text analysis according to Kuckartz (2013) was applied to analyze the transcripts. Kuckartz proposes seven phases as the basic procedure of thematic text analysis: (1) highlighting important text passages and writing memos that might be relevant for the analysis, (2) deriving the main thematic categories from the research questions and category system, (3) initial coding of all the data along the main categories

which were conducted in the first phase (4) compiling all text passages belonging to one main category, (5) inductive development of sub-categories based on the data, (6) coding of the material a second time using the category system including the defined sub-categories, (7) category-based analysis and presentation of results. The software MAXQDA was used to support the analysis.

Development of sub-categories
To answer the first research question, we analyzed statements concerning the presence of *excluding and marginalizing communication and practices*. This category was developed inductively as explicit questions on exclusion were not part of the interview guide, but almost half of the respondents (40) referred to the existence of excluding communication and practices. Within this category, we identified the sub-categories (1) formal communication (e.g. meetings, e-mails, policies), (2) informal (peer) communication, and (3) practices (recruiting; promotion; training; physical barriers; organizational structure and appreciation).

To answer research questions two and three, the participants' *perceived degree of inclusion* was ascertained by seven sub-categories. Following Mor Barak's (2015) definition of inclusion two sub-categories were *appreciation from employer* and *belongingness*. Based on Mor Barak's (2015, 2017) dimension "involvement and participation" a third sub-category focusing exclusively on the communication aspect was termed *involvement and participation in discussions*. Moreover, *influence in decision-making processes* (Mor Barak, 2017) and *using skills and talents* (Roberson, 2006) formed further sub-categories. Based on the narratives of the interviewees, we inductively developed two additional sub-categories: *support from the employer* and *fair treatment*. Participants' perception of inclusion, which resulted from the coding of these seven sub-categories, was used to classify participants into five groups; those with a high (6–7 sub-categories fulfilled), rather high (5 sub-categories fulfilled), medium (4 sub-categories fulfilled), rather low (2–3 sub-categories fulfilled), and low (one sub-category fulfilled) degree of perceived inclusion.

The *perception and assessment of interpersonal communication about EDI* are segmented into 7 sub-categories: (1) existing formal interpersonal communication, (2) non-existing formal interpersonal communication, (3) existing informal interpersonal communication – positive assessment, (4) existing informal interpersonal communication – negative assessment, (5) non-existing informal interpersonal communication – positive assessment, (6) non-existing informal interpersonal communication – negative assessment, and (7) existing formal hybrid (combination of interpersonal and mediated communication) communication. The *expectations and demands on the communication about EDI* were sub-categorized into (1) interpersonal (e.g. meetings, conversations with peers), (2) mediated (e.g. newsletters or e-mails), and (3) hybrid communication (e.g. diversity training and events).

Sample
In total, 84 employees were interviewed. Each interviewer conducted four interviews with people from their environment, who were employed in organizations in Austria and Germany. Data were collected in May and June 2020. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were mainly conducted via video chat or telephone. Overall, 39 participants were males, and 45 participants were females. The age of participants ranged from 19 to 62 years, their tenure from two months to 42 years. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample composition concerning gender, position in the organization (i.e. part of the workforce or management), and non-observable/observable diversity characteristics. Respondents featured one non-observable/observable diversity characteristic, two non-observable/ observable diversity characteristics, or a blend of non-observable and observable characteristics.

Diversity characteristics	Male		Female	
	Workforce	Management	Workforce	Management
None	2	7	8	4
Non-observable				
Migration background	3	2	5	1
Sexual orientation	2	1	2	1
Low education level	2	1	1	1
Disease/invisible disability	1	0	0	0
2 non-observable D.C.	1	1	1	0
Total	9	5	9	3
Observable				
Migration background	2	0	5	3
Age	4	1	0	1
Disability	1	0	0	0
2 observable D.C.	1	0	0	1
Total	8	1	5	5
Non-observable + observable D.C.	5	2	10	1
Grand total	24	15	32	13

Note(s): $n = 84$; D.C. = diversity characteristic

Overall, nine participants were "white males" without diversity characteristics; twelve participants were "white females", who exhibited no other diversity characteristics. Regarding the work function, 15 males and 13 females were in a management position while 24 males and 32 females were part of the workforce. As listed in Table 1, invisible migration background, sexual orientation, a rather low education level (no high-school diploma), and unrecognizable disease/disability were treated as non-observable characteristics. A migration background was considered observable if the interviewer noticed an obvious ethnic origin, for example, if participants were people of color or had a foreign accent. Apart from gender and recognizable migration background, participants with observable diversity characteristics were 55+ years old or were physically handicapped.

Results

In a first step, we determined the perceived degree of inclusion among participants using the seven sub-categories described above. The results of the analysis reveal that more than half of the sample (44) perceive a high degree of inclusion, while 22 participants perceive a rather high degree of inclusion. The remaining 18 cases comprise ten interviewees with a medium, three with a rather low, and five with a low degree of inclusion. Moreover, the findings show that all white males (9/9) and almost all white females (20/21) feel highly or rather highly included, while the degree of inclusion tends to decrease with the presence of diversity characteristics – especially if they are observable (13 out of 18 participants who perceived a medium or (rather) low degree of inclusion featured at least one observable diversity characteristics).

To answer the first research question, we analyzed the statements of the 40 respondents who observed excluding and marginalizing communication and practices in their organizations with respect to their diversity characteristics. As depicted in Table 2, the main difference between male and female participants is to be found in promotion practices as only two men mentioned unequal promotion opportunities in their organizations whereas seven women observed such practices in their workplaces. The following statement by a woman with a first-generation migration background, lower education level, and severe

Gender	Diversity characteristics	Organizational communication		Practices				
		Formal communication	Informal (peer) communication	Recruiting	Promotion	Training and workshops	Physical barriers	Organizational structure and appreciation
Male (n = 20)	None (6)	2	2	2	1	1	1	1
	One or more non-observable (6)	3	2	3	0	0	1	1
	One or more observable (4)	1	0	2	1	0	2	1
	Non-observable + observable D.C. (4)	3	3	2	0	1	1	0
Total (male)		9	7	9	2	2	5	3
Female (n = 20)	None (3)	0	1	3	1	0	0	1
	One or more non-observable (7)	4	1	3	3	2	3	1
	One or more observable (5)	1	2	3	2	1	0	2
	Non-observable + observable D.C. (5)	2	2	2	1	0	2	0
Total (female)		7	6	11	7	3	5	4
Grand total		16	13	20	9	5	10	7

Note(s): D.C. = diversity characteristics. Figures in italic indicate the key findings: Biased recruiting practices and marginalizing organizational communication (formal = mostly the lack of gender-sensitive language, informal = mostly the ubiquity of derogatory language) are the main factors that engender exclusion. Further, more females report unfair promotion practices than males

Table 2.
Excluding and marginalizing communication and practices

illness (medium degree of inclusion) illustrates the observed unequal promotion opportunities:

> Of course, you have to achieve something in order to be promoted, but there is also this backscratching, so to speak. That is, people who are being liked better are given preference. There are no rules at all.

Even though she does not mention who is being privileged, it is obvious that they have good connections to the "elite". The phenomenon of "backscratching" suggests that particularly (informal) interpersonal communication within the "clique" may lead to unequal promotion opportunities and thus to the exclusion of out-group members.

Regarding formal communication, the topic mentioned most often (9) was the lack of gender-sensitive language, which is a much-debated issue in German-speaking countries. While all four women, who feature (one or more) diversity characteristics complained about the lack of gender-sensitive language, three out of the five males welcome the lack of gender-sensitive language – all three men are white males. The following excerpt is drawn from an interview with a white male (high degree of inclusion) with a lower education level, who works for a large public institution:

> Yeah, gender-sensitive language is not implemented because it would simply be too tedious to read. Posters and information sheets are hanging in the corridors, and this is also too tedious for the clients who pass by and want to read it. Instead, it's simply written normally, briefly, and clearly.

Similar arguments were expressed by the other two white males. In all three cases, the participants emphasize the burden of reading and using gender-sensitive language. Furthermore, the use of the term "normal" when referring to the use of the generic masculine also indicates that the use of gender-sensitive language is considered rather odd.

Excluding and marginalizing recruitment practices (e.g. neglect of diversity) were mentioned most often by participants; yet, there are no salient differences based on diversity characteristics. Besides unfair recruiting practices, formal and informal communication emerged as the main factors fostering exclusion. Concerning informal communication, ten out of the 13 statements addressed the vilification of minorities mainly based on stereotypes and prejudices. Eight out of the ten interviewees, who observed such vilifications featured diversity characteristics. A young woman with a visible migration background (low degree of inclusion) described a situation where she experienced racism:

> We hired a woman of color for the first time and other employees did not like it. They always said that she does not fit into our company.

In this case, informal communication among peers has led to the exclusion of a member of a minority. Obviously, the skin color of the new hire encouraged already established employees to create an "inclusion/exclusion paradox" (Solebello *et al.*, 2016) in that they communicatively drew an artificial borderline between them and the "outsider". Interestingly, about half of the respondents (7/13), who observed excluding and marginalizing informal communication feature observable diversity characteristics.

Taken together, we detected several sociodemographic differences in the observation of excluding communication and practices. Gender differences are particularly evident in the areas of promotion and gender-sensitive language. Concerning informal communication as an excluding mechanism, particularly people with (one or more) diversity characteristics noticed this type of marginalizing communication more often than people without such characteristics.

To answer the second research question, we looked at the relationship between the presence of formal and informal interpersonal communication about EDI and the perceived degree of inclusion (see Table 3). Because the analysis revealed no substantial differences

Degree of inclusion	Informal interpersonal communication				Formal interpersonal communication		Hybrid communication
	Existing negative assessment	Existing positive assessment	Non-existing negative assessment	Non-existing positive assessment	Existing	Non-existing	Existing
High (44)	2	24	12	6	*23*	*21*	*24*
Rather high (22)	1	11	4	6	9	13	10
Medium/ (rather) low (18)	1	10	5	2	*2*	*16*	6
Total	4	45	19	14	34	50	40

Note(s): Figures in italic indicate the key findings: Employees who feel moderately or rather not included report a lack of formal interpersonal and hybrid communication about EDI issues more frequently than participants who feel (rather) highly included

Table 3.
Perceived types of interpersonal organizational communication about EDI per degree of inclusion

between persons with (rather) low and medium degrees of inclusion concerning their experiences with the interpersonal communication about EDI we merged them into one group.

More than half of the participants (49) reported that there is informal interpersonal communication about EDI (e.g. chats with colleagues during lunch breaks) and almost all of them perceive this positively, regardless of their degree of inclusion. Somewhat more than one-third of the participants stated, however, that informal communication about EDI does not exist in their organizations. While most of the participants with a high or medium/(rather) low degree of inclusion assess this absence negatively, six (all white males or females) out of ten persons with a rather high level of inclusion perceive this lack of communication positively. Formal hybrid communication (e.g. workshops or events) is relatively more common in organizations where people feel highly included.

The most striking finding is to be found in the relationships between formal interpersonal communication about EDI (e.g. official meetings) and the perceived degree of inclusion. While more than half of the participants with a high degree of inclusion said that formal interpersonal communication is in place in their organizations, this changes as the degree of inclusion decreases. Only two out of the 18 participants that perceive a medium/(rather) low degree of inclusion, reported the existence of formal interpersonal communication about EDI. Thus, it seems that formal interpersonal communication is more important to enhance employees' degree of inclusion than informal communication.

Although "white males" and "white females" do not differ in their perceived degree of inclusion they differ in their perceived necessity of interpersonal communication on the topic, as the following quotes illustrate. A white woman (highly included), who is a mother of two and works for a medium-sized event company, stated:

> When there's something going on somewhere, or we've done a great event and I've received a lot of praise from the guests, then I go and say, 'hey, we did a great job together', and not like 'you're a Serb and I'm a Muslim and so I'm not talking to you'. No, you must respect and appreciate your colleagues and listen to them.

The next statement by a white male manager (highly included) in a very large organization illustrates the observed gender difference regarding the necessity of interpersonal communication about EDI, which we identified various times:

I do not think that there'd be an advantage when you bring that topic up internally, because I've never heard anything about someone being unhappy just because we do not have transsexuals at work ... Our strength is this international diversity. We do not have other [diversity] aspects. You cannot see them on the surface, they're not talked about, and no one should be interested in them.

While the woman highlights the role of deferential informal communication about EDI issues in a diverse team to create an inclusive and fair work environment, the man rather assumes that nobody should talk about EDI matters because it does not seem necessary. Meaning, as long as nobody complains about mistreatment everybody is "happy and content".

Thus, formal interpersonal communication is more likely to contribute to a feeling of inclusion than informal interpersonal communication as almost all people with a medium/ (rather) low degree of inclusion report the absence of formal interpersonal communication about EDI, while only less than one-third of these people claimed that they are dissatisfied with the lack of informal interpersonal communication. In contrast, more than half of the participants with a high degree of inclusion stated that formal and informal interpersonal communication about EDI is in place.

The third research question asked for the differences in expectations and demands on communication about EDI depending on people's degree of inclusion. We, again, merged cases with a medium/(rather) low degree of inclusion due to negligible differences. As shown in Table 4, participants expect and demand more formal rather than informal interpersonal communication about EDI. Relative to participants with (rather) high perceived inclusion, interviewees with a medium/(rather) low degree of inclusion expect and demand more formal and informal interpersonal communication, with more importance ascribed to formal communication. Concerning mediated communication (e.g. e-mails, videos) there are no major differences between the three inclusion levels. Yet, proportionally more participants with medium/(rather) low degrees of inclusion demand more formal hybrid communication (e.g. training, events) compared to those with (rather) high perceived inclusion. Unsurprisingly, more highly included participants have no expectations and demands than interviewees with a rather high or medium/(rather) low degree of inclusion.

The following statement of a young woman (low degree of inclusion) with a visible migration background, who works in a very large company in the hospitality industry illustrates the demand for more formal interpersonal communication about EDI to increase employees' job satisfaction:

My employer could arrange a feedback meeting or the like once a month. A meeting between the managers and the employees so that we can contribute something. That could be a possibility to obtain employee satisfaction.

A young man (low degree of inclusion) with an invisible migration background and a rather low education level stressed his wish for a combination of formal interpersonal and mediated communication about EDI:

My company should, at least once a year, have a longer meeting where we discuss the topic of diversity and inclusion. Or also send out e-mails to draw attention to it because it's a pretty important topic.

Altogether, people with a medium/(rather) low degree of inclusion demand proportionally more formal, hybrid, and informal communication about EDI, whereas people with a high degree of inclusion tend to have fewer or no expectations and demands. Thus, the degree of inclusion affects the expectations and demands on the communication about EDI.

Discussion

Our findings show that the development of an inclusive work environment not only depends on fair recruiting and promotion practices but also on the way EDI issues are addressed and

Degree of inclusion	Informal interpersonal communication	Formal interpersonal communication	Mediated communication	Hybrid communication	More communication in general	No expectations and demands
High (44)	8	*12*	8	*10*	11	*15*
Rather high (22)	2	7	4	3	6	5
Medium/(rather) low (18)	6	9	3	8	6	2
Total	16	28	15	21	23	22

Note(s): Figures in italic indicate the key findings: Employees who feel moderately or rather not included demand further informal, formal, and hybrid communication about EDI issues more frequently than (rather) highly included persons. Further, significantly more highly included employees report no further demand for organizational communication about EDI issues, compared to individuals who feel moderately or rather not included

Table 4.
Expectations and demands regarding organizational communication about EDI per degree of inclusion

discussed in organizations. The data suggest that it is particularly the lack of formal interpersonal communication about EDI that leads to lower degrees of inclusion. While mediated communication is necessary to inform all employees about an organization's EDI initiatives, informal interpersonal (peer) communication is of importance to build relationships and a climate of trust (Holmes and Marra, 2004). However, it seems that formal interpersonal (and hybrid) communication about EDI issues in official meetings and conversations with executive personnel eventually facilitates the development of a sense of inclusion and belonging. Thus, open-minded and dialogue-oriented leadership (i.e. formal interpersonal communication), and diversity-related training and events (i.e. formal hybrid communication) appear to be pivotal for fostering an inclusive work environment.

In terms of equal opportunities in the workplace, our findings indicate that employees who feature (observable) diversity characteristics tend to feel less included in contrast to white males and females without (further) diversity characteristics. The former observe and experience excluding and marginalizing communication and practices, as well as a lack of formal communication about EDI, more frequently in their organizations; these observations and experiences may give them the impression that management does not veritably care about their needs. An explanation may lie in an organization's missing or deficient diversity management practices, which involve a lot of communication and interaction. A study by Ashikali and Groeneveld (2015) indicates that effective diversity management can lead to the development of an inclusive organizational culture and subsequently to affective commitment and organizational citizenship behavior, regardless of whether employees are "natives" or non-natives (with diversity characteristics). Thus, it does not surprise that a lack of genuine communication about EDI issues and/or the omitted intervention from management when marginalizing acts of communication occur, may lead to lower degrees of inclusion among employees who are members of minority groups, which, eventually, hampers the development of an inclusive work environment and the concomitant culture.

Theoretical implications
The article at hand contributes to the theorization of inclusion and inclusive work environments in two respects. First, it has been shown that not all forms of communication about EDI issues create inclusion to the same extent, which has not been considered in the scholarly literature yet. Even though Mor Barak (2017) highlights the importance of communication in the development of a climate for inclusion since it features employees' "involvement in organizational communication, decision-making processes, and informal interactions" (p. 302), the study of different forms of communication – interpersonal, hybrid, mediated; formal, informal – regarding their contribution to creating a sense of inclusion, has been neglected as of yet. Our findings thus enrich the theoretical approaches to the study of inclusion and inclusive work environments by considering communication and interaction in a more nuanced way, that is, no longer as a mere measurable variable, but as omnipresent constitutive elements and processes (Brummans *et al.*, 2014; Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2019); which leads to our second contribution.

As our research findings demonstrate, the theorization of and research on organizational (climates for) inclusion may derive benefit from taking the body of knowledge of communication science into account. Aside from theories or models from social psychology such as Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) or Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which are oftentimes used to research inclusion and exclusion at the workplace at the micro (i.e. individual) level (Mor Barak, 2017), taking a communication as constitutive of organization (hereafter, CCO) approach into consideration might be a fruitful avenue for studying the emergence and features of inclusive work environments and their interpretation by employees at the micro and meso-level (i.e. individuals, teams,

organizations). Although different streams of the CCO perspective exist, the common denominator is the assumption that organizations of all sorts should no longer be understood as objectified entities in which human communication takes place but rather "as ongoing and precarious accomplishments realized, experienced, and identified primarily ... *in* communication processes" (Cooren *et al.*, 2011, p. 1150, italics in original). The adoption of a CCO approach for studying inclusive work environments seems expedient if scholars want to get to the bottom of the communicative (re-)production of climates for inclusion or exclusion. Even though we did not follow a CCO approach ourselves, our findings, which demonstrate the significance of formal (and partly informal) interpersonal and hybrid communication about EDI issues in developing a sense of inclusion, show that theorizing and research from that vantage point can reveal further and deeper insights into the dynamics and features of inclusion and exclusion in organizations, which first and foremost emerge on the *terra firma* of interaction (Cooren, 2006).

Practical implications
A look at the literature on internal communications might help organizations establishing an inclusive work environment that embraces diversity. According to Welch and Jackson (2007), who advocate a stakeholder approach to communicate successfully, internal communications is "the strategic management of interactions and relationships between stakeholders at all levels within organisations" (p. 183). In their internal communication matrix, the authors distinguish between four dimensions: (1) internal line management communication, (2) internal team peer communication, (3) internal project peer communication, and (4) internal corporate communication. Especially a focus on the first three dimensions as part of strategic (i.e. formal) communication about EDI can help organizations to be successful in their effort to establish an inclusive culture. While *line management communication* about EDI stands for formal meetings in which members' roles and access to resources are discussed, *internal team peer communication* focuses on discussion about team tasks, which, in the realm of EDI, involve discussions about involvement and participation. Referring to Caidor and Cooren (2018), *project peer communication* comprises the meetings of the team that develops diversity management initiatives, in which goals and their attainments are discussed. These three dimensions comprise mainly formal and hybrid two-way communication but also informal communication, which still plays a vital role in everyday practice.

The fourth dimension, *internal corporate communication*, stands for mediated top-down, one-way communication, which builds upon the aforementioned three dimensions with the aim to increase employee commitment, to promote a positive sense of belonging, to develop an awareness of changes in the organization's external environment (e.g. the increasing diversity of society), and to increase employees' understanding of why the organization has to adapt to those changes (Welch and Jackson, 2007). Thus, internal corporate communication stands at the intersection of the three dimensions of internal communications and the external environment, with the latter partially predetermining an organization's decisions and actions.

As our findings show that formal interpersonal communication has the most significant impact on employees' sense of inclusion, the establishment of an open-minded *inclusive leadership style* across all hierarchical levels is essential to create an inclusive work environment. Leading inclusively means that managers continuously cultivate behaviors that facilitate group members' perception of belongingness in the team while maintaining their uniqueness (Randel *et al.*, 2018). Hence, executive personnel who appropriate an inclusive leadership style generally appreciate different opinions and viewpoints, delegate competencies, listen carefully to and motivate all team members, and mediate in conflicts – all of which are inherently communicative tasks.

Several research findings identified significant positive correlations between inclusive leadership and (1) inclusive climate (Ashikali *et al.*, 2020), (2) psychological safety, (3) innovative work behavior (Javed *et al.*, 2017), as well as (4) creativity, (5) work engagement, and (6) affective organizational commitment (Choi *et al.*, 2015). These findings thus suggest that inclusive leadership fosters an inclusive climate and consequently an environment in which members feel safe and committed, thereby increasing engagement and creativity. To achieve these positive effects, HR and diversity managers are advised to (1) recruit open-minded leaders-to-be, (2) offer appropriate training that deals with issues such as unconscious bias, conflict resolution, or communication skills in general, and (3) build a speak-up culture in which all employees feel safe to address their concerns and grievances.

Recommendations for future research
Based on our research findings, we strongly advocate further scholarship on inclusion/exclusion in organizations that foregrounds communication and interaction. Although communication has mostly been taken into consideration in past research endeavors, it has oftentimes been treated as one of several variables that foster or hamper a climate for inclusion. We, however, conceive communication as the sine qua non for the development of inclusive or exclusive work environments, since organizations would not emerge, endure, or change without acts of communication (Kuhn, 2008). While numerous quantitative studies dealing with the positive effects of (pro-diversity) climates for inclusion have already been conducted (e.g. Ashikali and Groeneveld, 2015; Hwang and Hopkins, 2015; Jaiswal and Dyaram, 2020; Le *et al.*, 2018), studies applying qualitative methods to investigate the emergence and characteristics of inclusion and inclusive work environments more in-depth are scarce (e.g. Tang *et al.*, 2015). Thus, we particularly advocate for further research from an interpretive perspective that applies qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, observations, or action research. However, mixed-methods research designs that combine qualitative and quantitative methods (e.g. surveys, experiments) may also be a fruitful strategy to gain insight into the interpretations and meaning-making processes of the persons involved.

Furthermore, since inclusion is a rather complex social construct that does not emerge overnight, we believe that performing longitudinal (participatory) studies might be a proper approach to searching into the communicative emergence (or hindrance) of inclusive work environments over time. Also, conducting cross-cultural research may be a fruitful avenue for future scholarship, since cultural customs and (communication) practices have a substantial impact on managers' and employees' understanding of, and attitudes towards issues around equality, diversity, and inclusion (Farndale *et al.*, 2015).

Lastly, we encourage scholars to enrich their research projects by performing content analyses of EDI-related documents such as anti-discrimination policies or codes of conduct due to their textual agency (Brummans, 2007; Cooren, 2010) and their consequential capability to bolster the emergence and maintenance of an inclusive organizational culture as soon as organizational members invoke them in their interactions (Bisel *et al.*, 2010; Keyton, 2014).

Conclusion
Although the study has some limitations due to the imbalanced sample and the fact that only employed persons in Austria and Germany were interviewed, which might also be the reason why the use or lack of gender-sensitive language in organizations was particularly frequently addressed, our results show that employees with (observable) diversity characteristics tend to feel less included than individuals without or with few (non-observable) characteristics as the

former seem to be more sensitive to excluding and marginalizing communication and practices. At the same time, the data show that people who feel less included perceive a lack of formal interpersonal communication about EDI matters in particular. Moreover, employees with a medium/(rather) low degree of inclusion demand more formal hybrid communication with a high degree of interpersonal communication in the form of training or events where people can learn (from each other) and exchange views on EDI issues. While management's mediated communication endeavors to establish a veritably inclusive work environment are of vital importance, our study's findings distinctly demonstrate that deferential interaction among people – beyond hierarchical levels – still seems to be the most promising recipe for the development and maintenance of an inclusive work environment.

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