



Review 2023-2024

Research on Inclusion and Diversity

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Table of Contents

Executive summary.....	3
Introduction	3
Aim.....	3
Review of Literature	4
Inclusion	5
Diversity.....	6
Conceptualisation of diversity	6
Diversity is a complex and multidimensional concept which leads to ambiguous results	6
Personnel selection systems and diversity.....	7
The diversity-validity dilemma	7
DEI Initiatives and Training	7
Recommendations	8
Conclusions and practical implications.....	8
References	9

Executive summary

This literature review presents and examines recent research on inclusion and diversity (studies published 2023-2024). Themes found cover team diversity, inclusive leadership, inclusive workplaces, DEI initiatives/training, and the diversity-validity dilemma in personnel selection. The results emphasize the positive impact of inclusion on work performance, whereas diversity effects remain inconclusive.

The main observations are:

- Diversity remains complex and difficult for researchers to study as it has so many dimensions. The demonstrated effects of diversity per se are inconclusive.
- Inclusion is generally perceived as a more straightforward concept that research indicate as valuable for performance.
- Inclusion (and so in the end diversity) can be enhanced by recruitment and training processes.

The review thus highlights the need for prioritising inclusion to enhance organizational outcomes, promoting inclusive leadership and inclusive workplaces to successfully reap the benefits of diversity.

The MU stance on inclusion and diversity, as well as the conclusions from the previous review on research on inclusion and diversity (Jonsson, 2023b), find support in this review.

Introduction

In recruitment and selection assignments the prioritised task for MU is to contribute to client result through finding the candidates that will be successful in a specific position in a specific context. An important precondition for a successful recruitment process is to ensure the inclusion of a large group of plausible candidates in the candidate pool that in the selection process can match the requirements for success in the specific position in the specific context. Such an inclusive recruitment process will both increase the base rate in the candidate pool and have a positive effect on diversity (Jonsson, 2023a). Inclusion is in this context a necessity for successful leader recruitment, and it also brings diversity in the candidate pool and among the selected leaders (Mercuri Urval, 2022).

Studies have shown that there is a relationship between inclusion, deep-level diversity, and work performance. In this report, recent research in the topic is summarised. It explores the relationship between inclusion, diversity, and performance, and similar to the previous review (Jonsson, 2023b) the recent studies show that diversity alone is not enough. While a workplace or organization may be diverse, it might not be inclusive. Organizations that have representation from different groups but only value or empower the perspectives of certain groups may be diverse but lack true inclusivity. The scientific studies, just like MU state that inclusion should come first. When inclusion takes precedence and is coupled with equitable treatment, diversity naturally follow (see e.g., Russen & Dawson, 2024).

Aim

This literature review updates the publication "Research on Inclusion and Diversity, 2020-2022" (Jonsson 2023b) with what has been published the last two years (2023-2024).

Review of Literature

The literature review focused on inclusion and diversity in scientific, peer-reviewed journals published between 2023 and 2024, and emphasized contexts related to work, business, management, leadership, and recruitment.¹

Most articles found in the review (834 articles with 124 marked as relevant) concentrated on board diversity, team diversity, inclusive leadership and inclusive workplaces. After reading abstracts, the articles were classified based on perceived relevance. Articles on team diversity, inclusive leadership, inclusive workplaces, DEI initiatives/training, and the diversity-validity dilemma in selection were perceived as most relevant and make up the themes of this study.

Until 2024, there was a yearly increase in the number of publications on both inclusion and diversity. This is particularly notable for articles on inclusion. For example, the number of peer-reviewed articles with “includi*” as identifier (cf. keyword) in the PsychArticles database doubled from 2023 to 2024 and viewed from a ten-year perspective the number of publications has doubled six times.

Many of the literature reviews mention the increase in publications. For example, Zattoni et al. (2023) reviewed 184 studies and found a growing literature since 2007, likely due to the increasing impact of social movements and the diffusion of quota laws or good governance codes’ recommendations promoting board (gender) diversity.

The timing of this review is critical as it precedes the potential effects of the Trump administration’s ban on DEI initiatives and studies. Under the Trump administration, programs designed to increase the representation of underrepresented groups have been cancelled and recruitment initiatives have been modified or discontinued. The New York Times (Yourish et al., 2025) compiled over 200 words that the Trump administration is actively trying to erase from federal documents, websites, and communications, including DEI terms like “diversity,” “equality,” “inclusion,” alongside basic scientific and demographic concepts such as “race,” “ethnicity,” “minority,” and “women.”

The language cleansing particularly impacts universities and research institutions. Research applications containing words from the prohibited list are automatically flagged for special review, potentially leading to rejections based on word choice rather than scientific quality (Yourish et al., 2025). It has also been mentioned that published works may be withdrawn from databases.

¹ includi* OR divers* were searched as keywords, in titles, or in abstracts. The asterix enable different endings to the words, such as inclusion, inclusive. The primary focus was on reviews (systematic literature reviews) and meta-analyses/studies. Seven databases were scanned, with most relevant articles found in PsychArticles, Web of Science, and Wiley (other databases scanned were Political Science Complete, Sage, Science Direct, and Taylor & Francis). The review was conducted in February-March 2025.

Inclusion

Inclusion is about the degree to which a person feels a sense of belonging to groups as well as feeling unique relative to other group members (Shore et al., 2011). Inclusion is defined as occurring when "individuals of all backgrounds - not just members of historically powerful identity groups- are fairly treated, valued for who they are, and included in core decision-making" (Nishii, 2013, p. 1754, in Randel, 2025). Workplace inclusion can be defined as being accepted, treated equally, integrated in decision-making processes, and being able to express oneself authentically (Dhanani et al., 2024).

As stated above, the literature on inclusion in the workplace and inclusive leadership has increased over time. During 2023-2024 several articles examined the relation between inclusive leadership and performance (or other outcomes) (e.g., Cin & Sönmez, 2024; Eshete & Birbirssa, 2024; Hundschell et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024; Nitttrouer et al., 2025; Russen & Dawson, 2024; Shafaei & Nejati, 2023; Woods et al., 2024).

Inclusive leadership has been found to impact:

- Task performance
- Team performance
- Team resilience
- Organizational citizen behaviour
- Creativity
- Work engagement
- Retention (negative relation with turnover intention)
- Psychological safety
- Openness to diversity

The relation between inclusive leadership and the above factors may be influenced by:

- Psychological safety
- Psychological empowerment
- Perceived inclusion
- Organizational identification
- Leader-member exchange

Several of the studies suggest that inclusive leadership is important for developing psychological safety and diversity (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2024; Woods et al., 2024). Randel (2025) presents a holistic framework for inclusion, incorporating a feedback loop from output back to input and context for inclusion, which serves as new stimuli.

In a review of inclusion in the workplace, the authors (Nguyen et al., 2024) suggest that hiring and training leaders with characteristics of inclusive leadership can facilitate a culture of inclusion. Hiring, educating, and coaching leaders to be inclusive will also lead to more successful (Nguyen et al., 2024) and attractive (Satzger & Vogel, 2023) workplaces.

The literature on the effects of inclusion has generally been overwhelmingly positive. However, efforts to conceptualize and consider inclusion from a more comprehensive perspective are emerging (e.g., Nguyen et al., 2024; Randel, 2025), and to unpack the concept of inclusion as a multi-layered, multi-faceted approach just as the conceptualisation of diversity (Nguyen et al., 2024; Shore & Chung, 2024). There is also criticism on DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) research for not separating the three variables in studies (Russen & Dawson, 2023). They are different concepts and should be addressed as such (Roberson, 2006).

Diversity

Conceptualisation of diversity

Unlike inclusion, diversity has long been seen as a multidimensional concept. The numerous definitions and sometimes the lack of definitions have led to ambiguous results when studying the effect of diversity (see more in Jonsson, 2023b and below).

This review examines if the concept and definition of diversity has changed from the previous report (Jonsson, 2023b) and finds that it remains quite stable. The separation of surface-level and deep-level diversity is still widely used in the literature, while some studies use the concept of demographic diversity to describe surface-level diversity (e.g., Behlau et al., 2024; Traylor et al., 2024; Wallrich et al., 2024) and cognitive diversity to describe personality traits, education level and the variety of experiences and qualifications (cf. deep-level diversity) (e.g., Behlau et al., 2024; Wallrich et al., 2024).

The terminology of Harrison and Klein (2007) with diversity as separation, variety, and disparity is used as a framework in studies as Wallrich et al. (2024), which include studies of variety and separation, and in Zlattoni et al. (2023). Zlattoni et al. categorized 184 articles and found that many studies only focus variety, and that the most common category in studies is gender (Zlattoni et al., 2023).

Diversity is a complex and multidimensional concept which leads to ambiguous results

The multidimensional characteristic of diversity leads to mixed and ambiguous results regarding the outcome of diversity. The causes of these mixed, ambiguous and insubstantial results are often attributed to methodological limitations, such as neglecting the intersection between surface-level and deep-level diversity (Tonoyan & Olson-Buchanan, 2023) or using a singular theoretical perspective (Laique et al., 2023). Some researchers also suggest non-linear relationships, usually an inverted U shape² (see e.g., Traylor et al., 2024; Wallrich et al., 2024).

Wallrich et al. (2024) provides a possible explanation to the ambiguous results; they write that the diversity-performance nexus has been shaped by two competing theories: social identity theory (in-group, out-group) and approaches that focus on cognitive resources. These conflicting expectations may lead to conflicting results, where social identity theory may expect more conflicts, and the focus on cognitive resources may expect increased performance due to the broader range of ideas. Wallrich et al. (2024) criticize many previous meta-analyses for failing to distinguish where diversity should have a positive impact from those with a negative impact, leaving boundary conditions unclear.

Wallrich et al. (2024) summarise the literature in a reproducible registered report meta-analysis on the relationship between diversity and team performance (615 reports, 2638 effect sizes). They found an average linear relationship between three different types of diversity (demographic, job-related and cognitive), and team performance. The results were significant and positive but insubstantial. They also found that context matters; the correlations were more positive when the tasks were higher in complexity. They conclude that diversity does not substantially improve team performance, but it is more likely that diversity provides (minimal) benefits rather than harms on average. Likewise, Roberson et al. (2024) summarize the literature on top management teams and diversity as complex, and noting it comes with challenges but generally it is beneficial.

² Meaning that until a certain level the performance increase with an increased diversity, but beyond that level the performance decrease with an increased diversity.

Zattoni et al. (2023) who reviewed 184 studies on board diversity and firm outcomes, found that despite a growing body of literature the results are still partial and inconclusive. The mixed empirical evidence has led scholars to argue that board diversity is a double-edged sword producing both positive and negative effects. The lack of conclusive results may be attributed both to the complexity of the board diversity concept and to the theoretical and methodological choices.

The double-edged sword phenomena was reported in the previous review (Jonsson, 2023b) and partially explained by different operationalizations and definitions of diversity. Zattoni et al. (2023) found that most research focuses on a specific type of diversity, such as gender diversity. Since diversity is multidimensional, considering only one of few diversity dimensions may bias the results. The review of Zattoni et al. (2023) showed that most studies have explicitly or implicitly viewed diversity as variety, using the categorisation of Harrison and Klein (2007).³ The majority of studies explore the surface-level demographic diversity of directors, with gender being the most common (51% of all studies).

Personnel selection systems and diversity

Recent research has explored the interaction between personnel selection systems and diversity (e.g. Berry, 2024; Berry et al., 2024; Van Iddekinge, et al., 2023). Van Iddekinge, et al. (2023) reviewed key questions and findings in the selection literature; spanning 75 years of the journal *Personnel Psychology*. They focus on selection procedure development, administration, and scoring decisions in personnel selection that can affect validity, diversity, and the applicant experience.

The diversity-validity dilemma

Many of the selection predictors with the greatest validities e.g., general mental ability (see e.g., Sackett et al., 2022) also exhibit the largest racial/ethnic subgroup mean differences (Berry, 2024; Sackett et al., 2023). Some studies try to address the dilemma by predictor weights (adjusting the level of impact in the analysis) (Van Iddekinge et al., 2023; Wee et al., 2023), and/or with new strategies and technologies, such as using machine learning (Rottman et al., 2023; Van Iddekinge et al., 2023).

Surprisingly few articles discuss variations within groups. A general observation in the study of individual differences is that variations within a group are often greater than the differences between groups .

DEI Initiatives and Training

Some of the literature covers DEI training and other initiatives and provides guidelines on how to implement DEI actions effectively to avoid unintended consequences. There have been instances where such initiatives have backfired, undermining the sense of belonging (e.g., Burnett & Aguinis, 2024; Georgeac & Rattan, 2023; Kawasaki & Zou, 2023; Leslie et al., 2025).

³ Harrison and Klein (2007) conceptualised diversity into separation, variety and disparity, where separation refers to differences in position or opinion (cf. horizontal distance on a continuum), variety to differences in kind or category (e.g., experience or functional background), and disparity to differences in concentration of assets or resources, such as pay or status (cf. vertical differences).

Nevertheless, the literature shows that the long-term benefits provided by DEI initiatives far outweigh any short-term risks (Nittrouer et al., 2025). Other researchers state that diversity training is generally effective, although moderate in size, and conclude that the effects of diversity training may depend on several cultural values (Kawasaki & Zou, 2023). Leslie et al. (2025) are more nuanced and conclude that “diversity initiatives will only be effective if designed in ways that maximize their intended consequences and minimize unintended ones”.

Recommendations

Below is a summary of recommendations articulated in the articles to enhance inclusion and diversity in the recruitment, selection, and retention processes.

Recruitment and Selection

- Urge investors and nomination committees to carefully consider company characteristics when selecting new directors (Zattoni et al., 2023).
- Broaden engagement in targeted recruitment (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024; Nittrouer et al., 2025).
- Extend the shortlist to promote non-prototypical candidates (see Lucas et al., 2021 in Cerventez & Milkman, 2024).
- Use bias-free language in job descriptions and advisements (Heath et al., 2023; Nittrouer et al., 2025).
- Use structured interviews (Nittrouer et al., 2025).

Retention

- Promote inclusive leadership (Li et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2024; Nittrouer et al., 2025).
- Implement (context-conscious) diversity training (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024; Nittrouer et al., 2025).
- Integrate diversity training into different types of training programs (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024; Kawasaki & Zou, 2023).
- Create DEI accountability structures (and secure top management support) (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024).
- Assess the inclusion climate beyond representation (Burnett & Aguinis, 2024).

Conclusions and practical implications

The conclusions drawn in the review on Inclusion and Diversity 2023 (Jonsson, 2023b) remain valid. The number of scientific publications on inclusion and diversity continues to grow. The documented effects of inclusion on organisational results are consistently positive, whereas the effects of diversity, per se, are ambiguous and inconclusive. This corroborates the observation that inclusion is the significant element for organisational result in personnel selection as well as in leadership. Inclusive personnel selection processes, inclusive leadership, and an inclusive workplace have positive effects on organisational results and may enable the benefits of diversity.

An important implication of the research on inclusion and diversity in recruitment and selection processes and discourse resulting from the diversity-validity dilemma is that it is important that only predictors assessed as relevant for the success in the position within the given context should be used. Using irrelevant predictors not only affects the validity of the prediction but also creates a selection process that is unfair and not inclusive.

MU Leader Selection Science® in the work with clients has solid support in the research. The MU emphasis of inclusion, transparency, fairness and focus on result is also supported in the view on internal organisation and leadership.

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