Inclusive Practice: Walking the Talk

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Abstract

After an intense and confusing experience being excluded by an inclusion expert, I began researching the phenomenon of exclusion. What is it? When does it happen? What does it look like when it’s happening? What can be done about it? What are its implications for my career in Organization Development and my professional relationships with my clients? I spoke with seven Organization Development consultants about their professional experiences with exclusion. Their stories led me to believe that exclusion occurs when a person disallows a concept from entering awareness because it is somehow threatening to their identity. Exclusion is overcome through active inclusion by assuming an attitude of lifelong learning about both self and others. This allows the leveraging of interdependence that is necessary for inclusive practice to occur.
Introduction

“No one of us ought to issue vetoes to the other, nor should we bandy words of abuse. We ought, on the contrary, delicately and profoundly to respect each other’s mental freedom … then only shall we have that spirit of inner tolerance with out [sic] which all our outer tolerance is soulless… then only shall we live and let live, in speculative as well as in practical things.”

William James (1896, p. 346)

I once participated in a workshop led by a community activist. He set up roles that we would play to demonstrate inclusionary and exclusionary behaviors. Half of the workshop group portrayed school board members and half portrayed frustrated parents of students. We split up and each group planned how they would approach the conversation. As a member of the parent group, I assumed the conversation would be fair and that the school board would be interested in our points of view. When we came back together, we found that the board members had created strict rules that they used to regulate our participation, yet they exempted themselves from those very same rules. For example, when we entered the room, we were told that we were too late to get on the agenda. A late board member walked in behind us and was immediately allowed to make changes to the agenda. The workshop leader had effectively demonstrated that the attitudes of meeting participants and the structure of the meeting can both include and exclude its participants at the whim of those in control of the meeting.

I later worked with this very same activist and quickly found myself struggling with his own excluding behaviors. Staff meetings were initially devoted to him describing the vision of the organization, but questions were not answered. Rather, questioners were met with criticism for their lack of understanding. He would discount and ridicule staff perspectives if they didn’t match his own. He made agreements he didn’t keep. In subsequent meetings, he would sit with his arms crossed, tapping his feet and checking his watch while others spoke. Factions formed among the volunteers and staff. There seemed to be no way to resolve it. The organization disbanded within months of incorporating. I was stunned. Shouldn’t he have known better than to treat his staff like this? What was going on?
Preliminary Literature Review

Inclusion in Organization Development

A crucial strategy in Organization Development (OD) is to include people in the design and implementation of the organizational changes that will affect them (Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean 1995, p.8). While many might agree that this is simply the right thing to do, effective OD practitioners also believe that including people in the change process is the best way to foster commitment to lasting change (Block 2011, p. 31). “Inclusion is not an end-point in itself; it is a means to an end. It is how organizations can continually raise the bar on performance and perpetuate an environment that is as limitless and resourceful as the members themselves” (Katz & Miller, 2009, n.p.)

Unfortunately, “while many people express their support for inclusive leadership, they do not always follow through with it in practice” (Ryan 2006, p. 11). “Many well-intentioned people do not always recognize the extent or variable nature of inequality and exclusion and thus have difficulty putting their inclusive ideals into practice” (Ryan, p. 138). It’s easy enough to fault the activist I worked with for not walking his talk, but can I really be sure I don’t do the same thing? If I am as capable of exclusion as anyone else, what can I do to identify it and overcome it in myself?

The OD Consultant-Client Relationship: The Core of the Work

“The primary role of OD consultants is to establish helping relationships with and among individuals and groups within organizations…. The effectiveness of the consultant necessarily depends upon the quality of his or her relationships with clients.” (Cheung-Judge 2001, p. 12).

“Organization development’s primary emphasis is on relationships and processes between and among individuals and groups. Its primary intervention is influence on the relationship of individuals and groups to reflect the impact on the organization as a system” (McLagan 1989, p. 7; as cited in Cheung-Judge 2001, p. 12). “At its essence, every organization is a product of how
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gts members think and interact. Thus, the primary leverage for any organizational learning
effort lies not in policies, budgets, or organizational charts, but in ourselves” (Ross et al. 1994, p.
48). Thus, the way in which the OD consultant personally practices inclusion and manages
exclusion has everything to do with the success of his OD intervention.

Theories of Inclusion

Ideas: Dead or Alive?

By “alive,” William James (1896) meant that an idea carries credibility. Conversely, a dead idea
does not. “Deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to
the individual thinker” (p. 328). What we each are willing to consider has everything to do with
what we already believe to be worthy of consideration. I believe that we are constantly
evaluating what other people express and that we assign credibility to others based not on the
inherent worth of their ideas, but on our personal predispositions in favor of or against their
perspectives.

Scope of Justice: A Personal Boundary between Inclusion and Exclusion

Susan Opotow (1990) defines the scope of justice as the “boundary for fairness.” “Moral values,
rules, and considerations of fairness apply only to those within this boundary” (p. 3). Those
same values do not apply to those outside the boundary. This moral exclusion is a process of
classifying people, animals, things, or concepts into those we identify with and those we do not
(Opotow & Weiss 2000, p. 477), or perhaps more simply, into us and them. It is this
psychological boundary that allows us to believe we are living up to our morals even if we
aren’t.

Shifting and Transcending Paradigms

“It is virtually impossible to ‘see’ something that does not exist within your operating
paradigm. A change in paradigm can be so powerful that it is usually considered revolutionary
or transformational in impact” (Marshak 2006, p. 24). One of my interviewees stayed on an
adversarial management team for three years trying to improve things before making the choice
to leave. He said, “While you’re in the middle of it, you don’t see it coming. You keep
rationalizing that it will get better, that things are changing.” “Because moral exclusion can be invisible when shared social convention supports it, it can be difficult to detect in our own thinking and within our own culture as well” (Opotow & Weiss 2000, p. 479). We will continue along an anticipated or hoped for trajectory with no idea that other options are available.

Yet there is one leverage point that is even higher than changing a paradigm. That is to keep oneself unattached in the arena of paradigms, to stay flexible, to realize that no paradigm is ‘true,’ that every one, including the one that sweetly shapes your own worldview, is a tremendously limited understanding of an immense and amazing universe that is far beyond comprehension. (Meadows, p. 19)

An ingrained attitude such as the one above would make the business of shifting paradigms somewhat easier.

**Human Identity**

Identity “includes assessments of one’s traits and abilities: ‘I am a nice person; I am a runner.’ It also includes a description of one’s role in relation to others: mother, teacher, employee.” It describes who we are like and unlike, to whom we are connected, and from whom we are separate. It is also laced with an evaluative element,“ allowing us to both be evaluated and to evaluate (Clayton and Opotow 2003, p. 299), which makes us vulnerable to the opinions of others and others vulnerable to ours. “Exclusion not only concerns the identity and the moral standing of others, but it also seeks to protect one’s own identity as an upstanding and moral person” (Clayton and Opotow 2003, p. 304). Being vulnerable means allowing my identity to be shaped by yours, and vice versa. Vulnerability is essential to good OD practice: “Note that in helping the client understand his view, the consultant also made himself more vulnerable. His willingness to be vulnerable and to deal with the confrontation that followed led the CEO to call him ‘my kind of consultant’” (Argyris 1990, p. 83).
**Methodology**

After reflecting on my past experiences and researching some related concepts, I decided to try to interview consultants and clients together to get two sides to the “lived experience” (Creswell 2013, p. 76) of exclusion. I hoped to learn about the exclusion and inclusion experiences they had in their relationship. I also asked how they noticed exclusion, what they did about it, and how each learned from it. (See Appendix A for the interview question framework.) The intent of my research is to further knowledge of inclusionary behaviors in the field of OD by better understanding how they operate in practice.

**Research Data**

*Data Gathering and Analysis*

Unfortunately, I was unable to locate enough willing consultant-client pairs within the limited time frame of this research. Of the seven consultants I spoke with, two were willing to give me access to their clients, which I then had to decline. As a result, this paper reflects only the consultant’s perspective. Each consultant received the questions in advance and signed a release form. I used the questions as a guide and asked them only if the consultant’s story did not address the query. I recorded and transcribed hour long interviews and then categorized related statements into themes.

*Demographics*

Seven consultants from different regions of the United States spoke with me about their experiences including and excluding clients. Four live in the San Francisco Bay area, one in the Southwest, and two in the Northeast. Three were personal contacts and four were contacts of contacts. There were four men and three women of various ages with between ten and thirty years of professional experience. All interviewees operated their own consulting businesses or worked for consulting firms at the time of the interview. Prior fields of experience include: conflict resolution and negotiation, information technology, marriage and family therapy, human resources, and social justice.
Seven Stories

Each consultant I interviewed shared one or more stories with me during our one hour conversation. Their stories reveal what exclusion and inclusion look like from multiple perspectives. Names have been changed, identifying information has been omitted, and stories have been condensed for brevity.

Barbara’s Story: Identity Issues

Barbara tries “to engage the client at the beginning from the contracting stage in co-developing the work” so that she works “with them in a very collaborative manner.” This way she is able to listen “to the client’s ideas,… to what they state as the presenting issue, [and to] what their viewpoints of the challenges and the opportunities are.” Good preparation is one of her major strategies for supporting her inclusion skills. “One of the things that I think positively affects my ability to remain aware is really making sure I’m prepared for meetings, that I’ve really vetted the conversation that that we’re going to have.”

In one of these partnerships, Barbara “facilitated a transition of the founder of an international organization.” The founder “had all these clear plans that she had articulated” for her retirement and how she wanted the organization to function after she had left. Despite extensive preparation by creating a clear, phased transition plan, the retiring founder began “stalling.” Things weren’t getting done. “I felt that she was retreating. I felt like there was not the kind of authentic and rigorous relationship we had had.” Something was getting in the way and the founder wasn’t letting Barbara know what it was.

“There’s a whole emotional field around letting go and facing human nature around change, even if it’s chosen.” Barbara “didn’t read the cues.” “It never occurred to [her] that [the founder] would be having self-doubt” about her changing identity. Barbara knew something was going on but couldn’t put her finger on it. She had to reach out to her mentors to figure it out, and then it was “obvious.” “I brought back some questions to her about her personal life.” “She began to immediately open up and for a few sessions we ended up spending much more time
[on the personal aspects of the transition]. In some ways you could argue we weren’t really getting work done.” “We had to deal with that personal sense of loss and that personal sense of vulnerability about, ‘Who am I if I’m not in this role?’ and ‘Who am I if I’m not associated with this title in this organization?’”

“Even when we have big titles or even when I have a lot of respect for my client, we are all human. We have our vulnerabilities. We have our needs for certain identities in our narrative about who we are.” Barbara later realized that she had been struggling with her own identity issues at the same time in her own personal life, which led to a parallel exclusion process in both consultant and client. “I don’t know if I would’ve figured it out alone. Why was that such a blind spot for me? This particular client work was happening at a time when I was transitioning. I was moving back to my hometown.” “I had a lot of my identity as an adult wrapped up in the location [I was leaving behind].” “It was too painful for me and too fearful for me to be aware of what was next [for me and] the unknown for me. I was shut down around that. I was not able to be aware of it for her.”

Elliot’s Story: Shifting Paradigms

Elliot builds his consulting work around deliberately seeking out and including the expertise of others and learning from it in order to shift his own paradigms and the paradigms of others. Instead of “inventing something brand-new, it’s really about bringing together these differing elements from different sectors into one state, and these hybrids create an innovation or a new way of doing something.” The meeting of paradigms creates a new paradigm that expands opportunities for both parties, provided both are open to the transformation brought on by being inclusive of one another’s approach. This process “leaves behind new relationships both between the tools that haven’t been used together in the same space, but it also leads to potentially new partnerships and new relationships between individuals that have seen themselves before as totally separate from each other.”

Elliot is currently working with the executive director (ED) of a school for deaf children. “One of the things that we did is design an all staff retreat.” During the retreat, Elliot and the ED worked with the staff and one-on-one. “We would be shooting basketball and we’d talk and I’d
ask [the ED],... ‘What is it about this particular job or this particular challenge, what is it for you? I kept trying to drill down to get an understanding of what was motivating him to do the work.” Elliot kept at it because “it would take multiple passes to get [the ED] to get beyond the cliché answer.”

The breakthrough began with the meeting of worldviews. Elliot recalled that at “the end of the second day after dinner, we were sitting there with one of the teachers at his school who was deaf. He began explaining to us, and really to me... what doesn’t happen... between deaf people and hearing people... [The teacher] said, “Look, there’s only about 2 million deaf people in the entire country and we generally exist in these hermetically sealed environments. There’s a lot of exploitation that happens to deaf people and a lot of abuse... And then there are all these limitations about what people think we can and can’t do.”” Elliot and the ED came away from that conversation with “a different sense of the world that [the teacher] lived in.”

The next day the ED interrupted Elliot as they were discussing organizational structures. “He said, ‘That conversation we had last night really stuck with me. Those questions you’ve been asking me about what motivates me, why am I doing this, I know what it is.’” The ED revealed that “‘This is a social justice initiative for me... I believe that these deaf kids... should have every opportunity that anybody else has to have a substantive meaningful life that they can be proud of... They should have the opportunity. Right now they don’t have the opportunity. My role here is to make sure that I can provide that for them.’”

Elliot reflected the ED’s motivation back to him. “‘What I hear you saying is you want to be able to expand the universe of opportunities for your students [and to make sure] that they have every opportunity to be as whole and complete as anybody else.’ And [the ED] said, ‘That’s exactly it.’” The shift was instantaneous. “At that moment we both realized that we... now had a mission that we could articulate and a vision for what his leadership at that school was going to be about.”
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Gabrielle’s Story: Excluding One Member of a Team

Gabrielle found herself contributing to an *us-them* situation while working with a non-profit board. There was a power struggle with one board member who did not agree with her, her client contact, or the rest of the board. Gabrielle was “brought in to do a three-day strategic planning” spread out over a few weeks. “I probably had two meetings with the board to plan it beforehand.” Unfortunately, “the person I ended up in the conflict with” had missed the first planning meeting where “I did a lot of the context setting.” “I learned later from the executive director that he had advocated for not hiring me [even though] the rest of the board … loved how I worked. So there was a strong difference of opinion there.” This dynamic had been an ongoing issue for the board. It served as the foundation for Gabrielle’s later experiences on this project. “In this case the client contact didn’t believe differently from the group which I think shored my position and made me more rigid.”

“The first day… was a really good day.” Gabrielle’s design didn’t get to this one board member’s ten primary concerns right away, and he didn’t like that fact. After day one, they “had a debrief meeting” in which “he was really silent.” Gabrielle got good feedback from most of the board members. “Then I asked the person who I was pretty sure had a different opinion. I could see it in his face. He looked like he was really disagreeing with the rest of the group… He really just didn’t like how I did the whole thing and from there it started to get really tense.” The ED who had hired Gabrielle said, “I know you were against her facilitating to begin with, but this is what the group agreed we wanted so you have to go along with it.” The man said he wanted to do the agenda and give it to the ED, basically trying to cut Gabrielle out of the project. Gabrielle shook her head and then “he got really inflamed… He actually stood up from the table and I said something like, ‘You have a bad habit of not listening to others, but you need to listen to me now.’ The room got quiet and I could feel all sorts of tension at that point.” The issues were not worked out that day. “After that meeting the whole group looked pretty shell-shocked.”

The dynamics did shift over time. “At the end of the second meeting he came up to me and shook my hand and said, ‘This was a really good session.’ So he somehow resolved internally.” No group-wide resolution ever occurred. “I told the ED about it and a few others but it needed
some public reconciliation that never really happened. We came out at a really good spot and they are still using the plan and I think it’s actually been very beneficial for the staff and the board.”

Gabrielle later spent a lot of time reflecting on the experience. “A few months later I was talking about it with… a consultant colleague… She asked me how I contributed to the situation and that took me down a long series of questions and thoughts… Some of it I could see right away and some of it I couldn’t.” She realized it was not only her job to help him to hear the group, but to help “the group also acknowledge what he was needing and where he was going.” Instead, “it [turned] into a situation about me and him versus what’s best for the board” as a whole.

**Kevin’s Story: Including Self in the Client Relationship**

Kevin includes his clients by being with them. He worked with two organizational leaders who were each “blaming the other for the conditions of the company.” Despite starting the first session with “how important it is that we each hear the other,” it became clear “that [the executive director] was holding onto a lot of anger that had built up over time.” Kevin made a “judgment call to allow for some imbalance” by giving room for her to vent. The president’s views were more or less excluded, and the consultant knew that.

Afterward, “we debriefed the meeting… I spoke with the president and asked him how he felt about it and he was a little upset, not so much with me but with her.” Kevin said he had “allowed for it” and “was okay with it.” He “apologized and owned the choice and also owned the potential consequence for” the president. “[I said that] I did the best that I could in the circumstance and [that] I think it will be okay if he will… trust that it was wisdom give her a little more space to vent.” They then had a productive conversation exploring “his relationship with his wife and how it would be good for him to learn that spaciousness more and it became a teaching moment for him unintentionally on my part.”
Kevin had a separate, similar meeting with the executive director as well. “I then spoke to her before the next session and I shared with her my observation that she had a fair bit of anger and… that she really needed to release some of it and that it was hard for her to take responsibility under the conditions that she was in. We then had a lovely conversation about that and I said to her that the relationship was going to remain lopsided until she was able to take responsibility.” He then made that request of her. “I asked her, I didn’t force her, I asked her [if she would] be open to it and she said she would think about it. I said, ‘That’s all I can ask.’”

The three of them met again. “[At] the next session… I named the dynamic.” “I said that… in the session I wanted to invite a lot more self-curiosity and I acknowledged that I might have done it in an imperfect way [last time] and that we could be curious about my own participation as well.” Kevin’s openness about his role “unlocked the dynamic pretty quickly and the second session flowed beautifully. [The ED] admitted her responsibility and acknowledged some things she got stuck in and [the president] really appreciated her openness and we actually didn’t need a third session. The relationship shifted.”

Michelle’s Story: Bringing a Dead Idea to Life

Michelle was doing process redesign with a small manufacturing company. “We were trying to take three separate planning processes, sales had their own, finance had their own and the operations planning process, they had their own, and we were trying to put them all together.” The company also had a significant amount of single run business, but the consultant “just selected it out because we have to focus on the whole and that’s an annoying little thing over here that we don’t have time to focus on.”

She had the redesign team work the “little” issue on their own. “‘Two or three of you go have a meeting and then come back to us and tell us what it’s going to be and we’ll just put it over here on the side of our process map.’” The clients didn’t know what to say. “They looked at me funny and then they went off and had a really unproductive meeting because they were like, ‘We needed you in the meeting because we couldn’t even map our current process much less figure out what the new process was without you there.’”
Michelle didn’t understand what the issue was. “But it’s such a small piece,” she responded. “Then the finance [manager] actually said, ‘Let me share some numbers with you. For the last three quarters the one-offs have been a third of our volume.’ I was like “Oh, okay.” See they all knew that, they all knew the one-offs were significant [and that they] had to be considered [as] part of the regular-cycle process. I just didn’t know. I made this assumption that it was small portion. I, of course, never asked.” It wasn’t until the finance manager explained the significance of these “off-cycle” orders that Michelle realized how important they were and shifted the process to include them. “I flipped a switch. ‘Alright, so here’s what we’re going to do. We’ll have a separate planning process just for that.’”

Scott’s Story: Live Ideas Getting in the Way

Scott used to coach abroad, helping managers get promoted to the international level at their companies. One of his clients was a marketing manager who was trying to improve how she worked with foreign counterparts in her organization. Scott “had assumptions about the working environment in [that country] and assumptions about the nature of this person’s job” even though he’d “never been in that position before.” He also had “assumptions about what was logically correct, especially given the limited facts I had to construct a globally relevant logic.”

His client was having trouble convincing a foreign marketing manager to produce marketing materials the way she knew they needed to be done to appeal to her domestic clients. The foreign manager wanted it done another way that was less expensive. In a coaching session, she described the response she was getting from the manager, and Scott “was disregarding her insight because [he] was agreeing with the manager.”

They went “back and forth a few times” until Scott realized that it was “a situation she wasn’t ready to give up on.” She maintained “a very steady gaze, repeating the same word regardless of the comments I was making.” It was clear “she wasn’t going to let up” and that she was pointing out “an understanding gap that I had that was getting in the way.” Scott struggled to
describe the experience. “It probably sounds pretty vague because it is vague. She didn’t say specifically, ‘This foreign manager is ignoring a very important fact.’ That’s the communication but that’s not what she said it all.” She said something like “I’m working as hard as I can to do my best,” Scott knew something was up, but had a tough time identifying it. “Even at that time I knew it was a cue, but I was reading it to be something quite different, because I was assuming that this [foreign manager was] right because I understand what she’s telling me this manager’s saying, and that manager was right if he was back home, but he wasn’t.” The expectations of marketing materials were different in this culture, and no one was noticing except Scott’s client.

He asked for more information, and she explained the relevant nuances of her culture, “which completely justified exactly what her point was.” He was then able to help her “articulate this need in a persuasive way” to the foreign manager. To Scott, her marketing needs had been dead ideas and as long as they remained that way, their communication was inhibited and her perspective was excluded from consideration. “That exchange is where she pointed out that I have this bias that I didn’t let go of.”

**Ted’s Story: Being Excluded**

Ted found himself excluded as a member of a management team when a new president was hired, an experience that has influenced decisions in his current consulting career. Before he started consulting, Ted was a part of the client group at an organization that sought leadership coaching for its president. The president “got some pressure from a trustee… to get some feedback.” The president hired a consultant to do a personality inventory of the management team and “one-on-one interviews… with people about the leader’s management style…and the issues people saw.” Throughout, there was a lot of optimistic talk about how the president wanted “to have a high-performance team,” and wanted “people to really openly debate issues and put their ideas on the table without retribution and have really good discussions about things so we can pick the best solutions.” Ted believes the president was sincere, but the walk didn’t match the talk. “He didn’t behave that way at all.”
The management team went to a retreat where they looked at the results of the personality inventory. “It came out that a number of us had a lot stronger leadership profiles than [the president] did.” The tone of the retreat shifted abruptly and “the next day everything changed… The consultant wasn’t there and the message from our leader was, ‘I fired the consultant. He breached confidentiality and he’s gone and we aren’t doing any of this feedback stuff.’” Ted believed him at the time. “In retrospect it’s highly likely that he just didn’t like the feedback he got… and he wasn’t going to own up to it and have a discussion about it.” Ted acted on his doubt and curiosity at the time. “I did ask his administrative assistant… what happened. She said to me that he’d read the feedback and felt that it was undermining his own ego and made him feel powerless and unsure of himself.”

The repercussions from this incident lasted years. “After that… the team started getting bifurcated into those that were on his good side and those that weren’t and in team meetings he would actively praise people that he liked and other people he’d denigrate or put down or just dismiss.” Ted was not on the president’s good side. Ted thinks his coworkers tried to use this favoritism to their own advantage. Other managers would try to disguise their own failing by blaming Ted. “And I caught some of these people in their lies even at some of these team meetings. I had to because it was my credibility versus theirs.” It was a tough spot to be in. “They didn’t see it coming but then they had to agree that the facts were what I was saying and that they had to eat crow. It wasn’t my intent to get somebody to eat crow. It was my intent to keep my reputation clean.”

While Ted won many battles, he didn’t gain allies. “These incidents started increasing and it was pretty clear to me that they wanted somebody that they could totally manipulate.” Ted didn’t like it, but he stayed on “for about 3 ½ years, maybe four years. And there were organizations that tried to recruit me out of this organization at the time and I didn’t want to move because I was trying to fix the one remaining area that was really a problem in [my department].” His “health was deteriorating” and he ultimately had to leave to organization. “My core values were such that they were so different from this person’s that I just didn’t want to be there and the stress was too much, so I left.”
Discussion

A Note about Process and Limitations

The data I was able to collect within the time frame allotted is necessarily limited. Though it feels like I have reviewed many pieces of literature, I have only scratched the surface of what is available on the subjects of moral exclusion, dehumanization, and identity. In this paper, I have come up with my own generalized understanding of what exclusion is and how it can be overcome. It is necessarily a limited and biased perspective. I had a very difficult experience of my own that shapes my views and opinions. I can’t help but select out information from my interviewees according to the value I place on it. My interviewees were very generous in sharing their intimate stories with me, and yet this was not a collaborative writing process. Their words are molded to my purpose. That is to be expected, because:

Exclusion is Normal

One of the first things I learned while writing this paper is that exclusion is natural. It’s going to happen. It’s unavoidable. The simple act of being in relationship with other people lays the foundation for exclusion. People are interdependent, which makes them vulnerable to one another. People have differences of opinion and come into conflict. They perceive threats from one another, compare status and group membership, and grant or deny forgiveness (Leyens et al. 2007). Exclusion is part of our normal behavior. “Dehumanization becomes an everyday social phenomenon, rooted in ordinary social-cognitive processes” (Haslam 2006, p. 252).

Exclusion is Difficult to Recognize

When you are excluding someone else’s point of view, you probably aren’t even aware that you are doing it. As Michelle said, “It’s hard to know when you’ve selected out something important.” Not all exclusion is obvious, and even when there are obvious breakdowns that result, it’s still challenging to see the exclusion that caused it. “Of course I was contributing to the problem but not having a lot of insight into what contribution I was making,” said Gabrielle about the dramatic exclusion conflict she experienced. Ted said, “While you’re in the middle of
it, you don’t see it coming. You keep rationalizing.” Barbara commented that some exclusion “is so normal you have to really work hard to look at it.”

**Exclusion is an Act of Separation**

Because people are interdependent, in order to gain control, we will often choose to distance ourselves from the influence of a person who makes it difficult to maintain control. Argyris (1990) observed, “Some lower-level employees, usually the better ones, try to distance themselves enough so that they can get something done” (p. 21).

Ted used the word “bifurcated” to describe the impact of the president’s behaviors on the management team. Some were included because the president liked them, and others, like Ted, were not because he didn’t like them.

Barbara described the shift in their relationship as her client “retreating” from her, creating distance and separation between two people who had before worked very closely.

After he came to understand her view on the marketing brochure, Scott worked with his client for two more years with an unusual “level of work intimacy” for the culture they were in. He saw proprietary emails and meeting notes, for example. When that relationship began to come to an end, Scott saw a pattern of increasing distance. At their last meeting, “she showed me almost nothing. There was pretty much no content or anything to talk about.”

Michelle described a formative experience from earlier in her career:

> There were some key people in the organization that should have been put on the project team that I was assembling. I just didn’t like them. So I excluded them… They were perfectly enjoyable people outside of work, but I knew that they were going to make the project difficult because they were going to do a lot of bitching and moaning, they were going to do a lot of resisting. And it was a total mistake, because then they just ended up
Some Counterexamples

Some forms of separation are helpful for inclusion, or at least helpful for good listening and conflict resolution. Scott describes his view of not taking things personally as “to separate a statement or an action from a person.” Elliot said that “over time, I’ve learned the importance of getting people to be able to disconnect their thoughts from their feelings.”

Exclusion Protects Our Identities

Separation reinforces identity. “Management… learned… to protect themselves by distancing themselves from the organization as a whole, retreating inward to their own subgroup” (Argyris 1990, p. 126). In all of our relationships, we are constantly asking ourselves: What do I identify with? What do I not identify with? The things that I do not identify with are the things that I exclude while I include those things with which I do identify. The more strongly I identify with a group, the more exclusive I will tend to be.

“High identifiers, however, often tend to be reluctant to accept that their group has behaved in an immoral way (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead 2006). The same phenomenon is true with infra-humanization. In fact, ingroup identification to some degree appears to be necessary for infra-humanization to occur. Someone who has weak affective or cognitive ties with their ingroup is unlikely to really believe that arbitrary group boundaries mean that outgroup members possess less of the human essence than do ingroup members” (Leyens et al. 2007, p. 153).

When Barbara’s relationship with her client grew distant, it was because Barbara herself was not identifying with the changes she was going through in her own life. She was unable to then identify with the changes going on in her client’s professional role.

Kevin described a moment early in his consulting career when he was called into a CEO’s office and given feedback. “I felt that the feedback was not fair. It didn’t feel true to me what she was
accusing. It was awful stuff... She pretty much laid into me and I got defensive and I started to explain why I did what I did out of some need to protect myself... My defensive posture was not okay... Afterward the CEO basically fired me from working with her.” Kevin did not identify with the information he was being given, he rejected it, and that rejection catalyzed the termination of the project with that organization.

Gabrielle had this closing thought to share:

So much about consulting is based on the personality and the way that you are with people and it’s very challenging when someone doesn’t like that. Not only do you want them to like you, it’s not easy to be challenged in that way. It’s much easier to support them challenging each other than challenging you. But it happens. There’s really good reasons why people challenge the authority of the facilitator or the leader and then what do you do with that? What is your belief about that?

How Can Exclusion Be Overcome?

The absence of exclusion is not the presence of inclusion. To overcome exclusion, you must actively include. “Moral agency has dual aspects manifested in both the power to refrain from behaving inhumanely and the proactive power to behave humanely” (Bandura 2002, p. 101). “The study of acceptance needs to be added to the more common focus on rejection” (Bogdan & Taylor 1989, p. 135).

Inclusion Requires Recognizing Interrelatedness

“Cortes, Demoulin, Rodriguez, Rodriguez, and Leyens (2005) found that the best predictor of infra-humanization was relevance of the outgroup, that is, a kind of interdependence between groups” (Leyens et al. 2007, p. 152). That relevance is discovered through interaction. “The more people enter into harmonious interactions with exemplars of the outgroup, the more they are willing to consider as human the outgroup as a whole” (Leyens et al. 2007, p. 154). Such interactions would likely create worldviews wherein a “social place for the other” (Bogdan &
Taylor 1989, p. 135) automatically exists, and make it easier to cultivate an *exclusion mindset*: “If one wants to foster expansiveness of moral regard, one should focus not on why an entity should be afforded moral treatment, but why an entity should not be” (Laham 2009, p. 252). Inclusion acknowledges the connections between people. It’s not about seeing how we are the same; it’s about seeing how we are related.

“Having it be about the relationship with my clients is a crucial part of the learning process,” said Kevin. Barbara said, “It’s important to me… that I feel there is co-responsibility for our work.” What might this co-responsibility look like? Elliot describes it as, “If I can learn what you feel your needs are and what work you feel like you need to do, I can then bring my best self and help develop strategies and ways that we can partner to get that work done.” If both parties recognize each other’s contribution to the relationship, then mutual inclusion can occur.

**Mutual Inclusion Requires Malleable Identities**

For people to be inclusive with each other, they have to allow their identities to be shaped by the other person. Argyris (1990) describes this in his theory of the Model II worldview: “Advocate your position and combine it with inquiry and self-reflection. Feeling vulnerable while encouraging inquiry is a sign of strength” (p. 107).

**Know Thyself and Find Out about the Other**

You must be familiar with your own self-identity and be willing to explore it further in order to have the capacity to include others. This includes knowing strengths as well as limitations. Barbara commented that “I lost the ability to take care of myself and manage my own boundaries so that I can help others manage their boundaries.” Gabrielle inquires of herself in the moment, “What does that mean… when those physical reactions happen? It means that I’m stressed about this. So I’m stressed. Why am I stressed? It leads me into the path of further inquiry.” Kevin reported that “in my earlier days I spent a lot of time reflecting on how I need to be.” When Scott commented on how he has learned to be an inclusive consultant, he described the ongoing challenges. “They’re all learned skills. I don’t feel like they’re these naturally occurring talents that I have. First I had people beating me over the head for years
trying to teach me this and I finally started getting it and then I had to work on it and I still have
to work on it.”

Likewise, you must be willing and interested in learning about the other. Ted says, “I do a lot of
interviewing of people to get a sense of their style, of what they say their aspirations are, what
they want to do there, their frustrations.” Elliot says, “the client is the expert and I need to learn
from them.”

Not only does the consultant learn from the client, the consultant encourages the client to learn
about others as well. Elliot described how he might help an upset client through the learning
process. “Let’s find out from this other party if that’s in fact what they’re trying to do, and if it is
then your anger is justified. And if it’s not then we have a communication issue, and maybe we
can use some clarifying questions and we can find out what’s really going on here.” Kevin
likewise fosters curiosity through “deep inquisitiveness about my own inner world and the
outer world and encouraging others toward the same. I have a relationship with my clients in
which that’s pretty natural. I invite them to be deeply self-inquisitive.”

Change Comes from Between

The inclusive interaction of people is what shifts and transforms personal paradigms and
ultimately organizational and social paradigms. Kevin said it this way, “My experience is that
when two people are in that place of ownership and learning, something shifts.” Change is
something we do together, and we must be inclusive of one another in order to make it a
positive improvement for both of us.

Further Questions

This very brief exploration into the phenomenon of exclusion omits analysis of the details of
how exclusion and inclusion manifest. Another entire paper could be written about that using
this same dataset. Also, while I do trust the sincerity of my interviewees, my original intent was
to see if people who endeavor to be inclusive are in fact succeeding with their clients. Another
entire research project with a longer data collection phase is required to find enough willing participants to make such a project informative.

After shutting off the recorder, I shared my exclusion story with Kevin. He asked what I would do if I were to encounter that person again. I know I would make different choices, but I am not sure what they would be. I regularly distance myself from people I perceive to have threatened my safety, and yet my interest in learning more about the phenomenon and not perpetuating it grows. This is in line with the research on exclusion experiences increasing the desire to connect, though not with those with whom it’s already failed (Maner et al 2007, p. 42).

As a practitioner, I am likely to encounter these dynamics with clients. At some point I will be excluding a client’s point of view. I may even realize things aren’t working right, though it is likely I won’t be able to tell quite what is amiss. What I have done in the past is keep to my own way of doing things, even as I watched the relationship deteriorate in front of me. Will I be able instead to look to learn and be influenced by what my client is saying or doing? Sometimes yes, and sometimes no, but at least now I see that I can make the choice.
References


Appendix A: Interview Questions

Introduction
For my culminating paper for my Masters in Organization Development at Sonoma State University, I am researching how OD consultants might unconsciously disregard, discriminate, or otherwise exclude the ideas, concerns, viewpoints, etc. of their clients. I am looking for consultants who have had an experience like this with a client, realized in hindsight that they had excluded their client, and then made a course correction. My goal is to describe the phenomenon of unconscious exclusion, how it can be surfaced, inclusion strategies that can be used to correct it, and the effects of modeling that correction on the growth of both the client and the consultant. I am also interested in the inclusion practices and habits the OD consultant uses regularly. I would like to interview OD consultants about general and specific experiences, and if possible, I would like to also interview a client who was aware of being involved in a course correction.

Consultant Interview Question Areas
1. What do you do to stay aware of your client's ideas, concerns, viewpoints, etc.?
2. What challenges your ability to maintain that awareness?
3. How do the circumstances of your work affect your ability to remain aware?
4. How do you notice when you are losing awareness? How do your clients notice?
5. What do you and/or your client do to address it?
6. What have you learned from these experiences?