

Belonging and Uniqueness as Essential Elements for Inclusive Workplaces: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Despite efforts spanning two decades, the LIS field struggles to diversify its workforce. This literature review examines research focussed on the ways belonging and uniqueness work together to create genuinely inclusive workplaces. The review attempts to answer the question, “From the perspective of people working in libraries in Canada, how have efforts to create diverse and inclusive library workplaces affected their sense of belonging and uniqueness?”. The question is one way to translate the lived experience of people working in Canadian libraries into an evaluative measure of organizational diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work, provided it is positioned within a foundational understanding of the relationship between DEI, belonging and uniqueness. Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT) forms the foundation for much of the research and is identified as a key element of inclusivity. Models of belonging and uniqueness research are included as well as a discussion of the gaps in and future directions for research in the LIS field.

Keywords: belonging, uniqueness, DEI, diversity, equity, inclusion, inclusivity, organizational-management, Optimal Distinctiveness Theory.

In his 2004 “Director’s Chair” article in *Felicter*, then Canadian Library Association (CLA) president Don Butcher stated that the Association did not look like or talk like its membership. He also noted that “reflecting Canadian society” was a longer-term goal for the LIS community (Butcher, 2004). In 2008, CLA crafted its “Position Statement on Diversity and Inclusion” as way to achieve this goal. This statement has

since been adopted by the CLA's successor, the Canadian Federation of Library Associations / Federation Canadienne Des Associations De Bibliothèques (CFLA-FCAB) (Position Statement on Diversity and Inclusion, 2017). In the 18 years since Butcher made his observation, virtually all Canadian library associations and many individual libraries of all types have adopted DEI statements, formed DEI committees, or in some way committed to fostering DEI in the library community. A DEI statement has become as de rigeur as mission, vision and values statements.

Unfortunately, as Bell (2021) observed, “Despite these commitments to diversity and inclusion, it is well known that the LIS profession in North America is largely homogeneous along racial and ethnic lines” (p. 153). In addition, Oud (2018) articulated concerns regarding the gap between managers and employees with disabilities around perceptions of academic library workspaces accessibility. Doerksen & Martin (2016) observed, “The failure to realistically assess the importance of race is evident in librarianship – a profession that has historically been influenced and guided by Eurocentric values” (p. 2). It would seem that Canadian libraries are starting to move towards diversity in their workforces, but more work is needed.

One possible issue with diversifying library workplaces is the lack of articulation around the desired outcomes of organizational DEI work and of evaluative measures that go beyond a measurement of surface level diversity based on gender, ethnicity, and other characteristics. Deep level diversity is less observable, consisting of attributes such as attitudes and beliefs, but has a significant impact on how people experience their work environment. For example, Kim et al. (2019) discuss the impact that a lack of belonging has on organizational attachment in terms of psychological and behavioral involvement. They note that demographic dissimilarity “is often associated with reduced organizational attachment” (Kim et al., 2019, p. 119) and a key factor influencing a lack of belonging. It is that lived experience of the workplace that is markedly absent from the literature around DEI work in Canadian libraries.

This review begins with definitions of the key concepts, then explores models of belonging and uniqueness grounded in Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT), followed by LIS-specific research that used belonging and uniqueness as a framework for DEI-

related questions. It then considers the complexity of applying the belonging and uniqueness framework to Decolonization in a Canadian context.

Definitions

Shore et al. (2011) define workplace inclusion as the “degree to which an employee perceives that he or she is an esteemed member of the work group through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for belongingness and uniqueness” (p. 1265). Belonging or belongingness is a multi-dimensional concept which includes perceptions of supportive and caring relationships, having access to networks, and being considered as a valued and important part of the group (Mor-Barak and Cherin, 1998; Shore et al., 2011; Chung et al., 2020). Similarly, uniqueness has multiple aspects, including feeling as though it is acceptable to be different from their group, to have different perspectives, and that those differences are not just accepted but valued by the group (Shore et al., 2011; Chun et al., 2020). Intersectionality refers to the ways the multiple categories of diversity can potentially converge to construct a multi-faceted social identity (Shore et al., 2011).

DEI, Belonging, and Uniqueness: The Model

Most of the literature around diversity, belonging and inclusion comes from the organizational management research arena not specific to libraries. Initially, Brewer (1991) posited *optimal distinctiveness* (ODT) as the fulcrum point where people strove to balance their opposing needs for differentiation (uniqueness) and assimilation (belonging) as the desired level of inclusion in a group. That is, people want to be able to feel like a part of a group without having to hide or subsume unique characteristics that may distinguish them from the majority.

Mor-Barak and Cherin (1998) examined the oppositional concepts of inclusion-exclusion and its relationship to belonging and cohesion. They posited a spectrum along which individuals feel part of the organization as represented by processes such as “access to information and resources, involvement in work groups, and ability to influence the decision-making process” (Mor-Barak and Cherin, 1998, p. 52). Importantly, Mor-Barak and Cherin acknowledged their study did not account for diversity characteristics and specifically identified the need for more research which included these elements as part of the study.

Shore et al. (2011), building on Brewer's ODT and Mor-Barak's inclusion-exclusion frameworks, is the seminal work on belonging and uniqueness. They took the concept of workplace inclusion further by arguing that it is uniqueness which creates opportunities for improved group dynamics when the individual is accepted by the group and valued *because of* rather than *instead of* their unique characteristics. Basically, belongingness and uniqueness as articulated by Shore et al. (2011) are foundational concepts essential for inclusive workplaces. The matrix created by Shore et al. (2011) to describe various combinations belonging, exclusion, conformity, and uniqueness is shown in Figure 1.

Shore et al. (2011) emphasized that an organization's climate of inclusion, as defined in their matrix, is dependent upon their "policies, procedures, and actions" (p. 1277) particularly towards underrepresented groups that have had fewer opportunities or who experienced stigmatization in society. They also discussed the importance of inclusivity for all members of the organization. Consistent and equitable employee treatment which fosters belonging and uniqueness for underrepresented and dominant groups alike can mitigate "second-order diversity conflict (disputes over or caused by the remedies designed to eliminate discrimination such as backlash and resentment...)" (Friedman & Davison, 2001, as cited in Shore et al., 2011, p. 1277).

Figure 1*Shore et al.'s (2011) Inclusion Framework*

	Low Belongingness	High Belongingness
Low Value in Uniqueness	<p>Exclusion</p> <p>Individual is not treated as an organizational insider with unique value in the work group but there are other employees or groups who are insiders.</p>	<p>Assimilation</p> <p>Individual is treated as an insider in the work group when they conform to organizational/dominant culture norms and downplay uniqueness.</p>
High Value in Uniqueness	<p>Differentiation</p> <p>Individual is not treated as an organizational insider in the work group but their unique characteristics are seen as valuable and required for group/ organization success.</p>	<p>Inclusion</p> <p>Individual is treated as an insider and also allowed/encouraged to retain uniqueness within the work group.</p>

Second-order diversity conflict is addressed again by Shore et al. (2018) when they noted that subtle forms of exclusion are *unlikely* to be regarded as legitimate or needing to be addressed even though “subtle forms occur more frequently and perpetuate fewer opportunities for individuals who belong to social categories that are targets of discrimination” (p. 177). Second-order diversity conflict is a difficult issue to address; it can be tempting to dismiss it as white fragility, but it has the potential to derail DEI work in an organization. This is why equity is a key aspect of DEI work, even though the literature tends to focus on the diversity and inclusivity aspects.

Equity underpins the systemic change needed to achieve the deeper level diversity posited by Fernandez (2020). Bell (2021) noted, “Improving equity contributes to full and meaningful participation in the workplace. In other words, inclusion cannot exist without first acknowledging differences and addressing inequities” (p. 153). If everyone working in the library does not acknowledge the existing inequities, second-order diversity conflict may become an insurmountable barrier to diversifying library workplaces.

Chung et al. (2020) undertook an in-depth test of the Shore model of belonging and uniqueness using work groups as the unit of study. Their main argument stated people’s perception of inclusion were impacted by belongingness and uniqueness, two

related but separate elements of work group inclusion (Chung et al., 2020). Their results were consistent with Shore et al.'s (2011) model which requires people to experience belonging and uniqueness concurrently to perceive their workgroups as being inclusive. However, Chung et al. (2020) also recognized that more research is needed which considers demographic variables as moderating the relationship between belonging, uniqueness, and inclusivity. They noted that, given the large body of literature showing that diversity undermines group effectiveness, there is significant potential for positioning inclusion, with its components of belonging and uniqueness, as mitigating those negative effects.

Igobanugo et al. (2022) tested the Diversio Diversity and Inclusion Survey (DDIS) as a tool to “identify workplace factors affecting their [diversity and inclusion] acceptance and implementation” (p. 2) in the context of Shore et al.'s (2011) belonging and uniqueness model. DDIS is built around five themes: Inclusive Culture, Fair Management, Access to Networks, Flexible Working Conditions, Safe Working Environments. Each of these themes can be directly connected to at least one aspect of DEI, belonging, or uniqueness.

What differentiates the DDIS and this study from others is that it explicitly incorporated demographic representation (Gender, Ethnicity, Sexual Orientation, Disability & Role) into the survey to determine the effect of these factors on inclusion. It also establishes what constitutes the dominant and non-dominant groups in a given organization to provide context to the survey results. Igobanugo et al. (2022) tested the instrument across 18 different professions, 44 different countries, and a broad range of ethnicities. Their findings indicated a high degree of reliability to “accurately capture D&I metrics and generate relevant data that may identify and address areas needing improvement or monitor...ongoing D&I programs” (p.12).

Belonging, Uniqueness & Inclusion in LIS Research

One Canadian study, “Contextualizing Inclusivity in Terms of Language: Distinguishing Librarians from ‘Library Staff’” (Petropoulos et al., 2022), considers inclusivity from an unusual and rarely discussed perspective: the use of terminology describing people working in libraries. It is also one of the few examples of LIS-related

literature that discusses ODT, belongingness and uniqueness. Petropoulos et al. (2022) establish the same foundational principles as this review, citing Brewer (1991), Shore et al. (2011), and Chung et al. (2020), summarizing the need for people to experience belonging and uniqueness simultaneously to perceive their workspaces as inclusive. They then considered how inclusivity is defined by library associations and finally contextualized those understandings by applying them to a content analysis of library employee listings on Canadian Academic Research Libraries (CARL) and American Research Libraries (ARL) websites, as well as the language in library literature (Petropoulos et al., 2022).

Eleven library diversity statements were examined in the Petropoulos (2022) study. The discussion of the library association DEI statements categorized them as being inwardly directed, such as the American Library Association statement which explicitly describes an inclusive LIS work environment, and outwardly directed, such as the previously mentioned CFLA-FCAB statement, which focuses on services to an external community of service. Most of the other association statements are either inward (directed at a diverse workplace) or both.

Of the eleven diversity statements that were studied, nine of them began with “librarians and library staff”. Petropoulos et al. (2022) asked, “Why is this distinction present and necessary?” (p. 538). They argued that using unnecessary distinctions of terminology to discuss people working in libraries creates exclusionary language. They found that “there is a tendency to use ‘staff’ as an exclusionary term to differentiate and distinguish between groups of employees within libraries and library associations” (Petropoulos et al., 2022, p. 540). Their findings indicated that the various terms used to name people working in libraries were used inconsistently throughout all of the websites that were scanned. The articles that were analyzed consistently identified “librarian” separately from their colleagues, using “library staff” in most cases to denote non-librarian staff, even though in some cases there was no functional necessity to distinguish between librarians and library staff.

Distinguishing between employee groups outside of necessity increases the potential for exclusion. In the context of belonging and uniqueness, the grouping of people into siloed categories may not provide the optimal balance of being an accepted

part of a group (library staff) if the uniqueness experienced is only due to being labeled as different from another group (librarians). Petropoulos et al. (2022) recommended that library documentation, internal and external, should be intentionally crafted using language that fosters a “greater sense of inclusion and belonging in academia” (p. 542). If it is necessary to single out a specific group, then this practice should be consistent with all employee groups.

This desire for consistency of language may seem trivial; however, equity in the library workplace should apply in all situations. It is also an example of Fernandez’s (2020) deeper level diversity encompassing beliefs and attitudes. How we speak of people working in libraries directly affects their perception of how they belong to the organization and arguably to the LIS field in a broader context. It also affects how they are thought of and valued by management and administration.

While Petropoulos et al., (2020) brought to light a seldom discussed area of equity and inclusion in library workplaces, Oud (2018) addressed a DEI area that exists in a liminal space: accessibility for people with disabilities who work in libraries. The surface characteristics of diversity, particularly ethnicity, can sometimes overshadow other diversity characteristics, such as disability. People with disabilities can have more complex relationships with DEI work, especially if the disability is invisible. Oud (2018) noted that 2016 estimates of academic librarians with disabilities was around 5.9% in Canada, yet there is not much known about their lived experience in the workplace. Furthermore, there is a lack of DEI literature addressing the equity concerns of people with disabilities in the library workplace.

Oud (2018) sets out to understand how satisfied academic librarians are with their jobs and workplace environment and what influenced that satisfaction. Existing literature tends to focus on specific aspects of DEI, such as accessibility, rather than a holistic understanding of how people see themselves belonging to the organization as well as being valued for their unique characteristics. Oud’s (2018) findings indicated that while librarians with disabilities did not have significantly different overall satisfaction levels, there were areas where they did have higher levels of concerns compared to librarians without disabilities.

Several of the survey's questions were reflective of those asked by Chung et al. (2020); the ability to contribute to the library, support from management and colleagues, and the extent to which they feel accepted by their colleagues (Oud, 2018). While this study does not specifically reference belonging and uniqueness, the areas where librarians with disabilities had concerns are directly related to those aspects of inclusivity:

Librarians belonging to any minority group, including those with disabilities, found their workplace less inclusive than non-minority librarians, although only librarians with disabilities were less satisfied with workplace levels of accessibility and disability awareness. (Oud, 2018, p. 11)

Unfortunately, Oud (2018) also determined that management and supervisors had substantially higher perceptions of workplace diversity and accessibility. Again, this indicates the need for deeper level diversity in Canadian libraries.

A Uniquely Canadian Concern

Decolonization is a specifically Canadian area of DEI work where inclusivity, belonging and uniqueness may be insufficient as a model to address the diversification of the Canadian library workforce. Complicating the concepts of belonging and uniqueness as a model for inclusivity is the reality that "in Canada, Aboriginal identity and ancestry is complex and may or may not be self-reported. As a result, definitions of what constitutes "Aboriginal" can be somewhat nebulous" (Doerksen & Martin, 2016, p. 3).

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Calls to Action specifically identifies libraries, archives, and cultural memory institutions. CFLA-FCAB responded with a TRC Committee report, the formation of the Indigenous Matters Committee and the provision of significant Indigenous Resources on its website. Recommendation 7 of the TRC Committee report specifically addresses the need to increase "opportunities for Indigenous, library, archival, and information professionals" in recruitment and professional education through continuous relationship building and consultation with Indigenous communities.

This last aspect of continuous engagement with Indigenous communities was articulated by Doerksen & Martin (2016), who noted that the usual practice of outreach recruitment “manifests an insulting and patronizing paternalism;” what is needed is “meaningful and equal relationships characterized by respect and reciprocity.” Doerksen & Martin (2016) were writing prior to the establishment of the CFLA-FCAB Indigenous Matters Committee, and it must be noted that Canadian libraries have done significant work around decolonization since they published their article.

There are, however, many issues that need to be addressed, particularly around tokenism. Doerksen & Martin (2016, p. 8) argued that “minority recruitment in general - and Aboriginal recruitment in particular - has high potential for tokenism” and since more recent literature indicates a distinct lack of progress around the diversification of Canadian library workplaces, tokenism is a valid concern. Once again, the importance of deep level diversity is highlighted when DEI is considered within an Indigenous context in Canada.

Existing DEI literature (this review included), even that which encompasses intersectionality as in Igobanugo et al. (2022), tends to take the form of an umbrella approach under which any non-dominant group is gathered. This approach fails to consider the deeply problematic relationship between Indigenous people and colonial institutions such as government and learning institutions as a result of the intergenerational trauma created by the residential school system. This overgeneralization may be a factor in the failure of recruitment of Indigenous students to LIS programs and to the LIS profession in general (Doerksen & Martin, 2016).

The concept of belongingness, being an accepted part of a group, may be uncomfortably close to assimilation for an Indigenous person. Shore et al.’s (2011) matrix specifically identifies uniqueness as the missing component in assimilation, but this might be too much of an academic distinction for someone whose language and culture have survived despite the attempts of the dominant power structures to eradicate them. Doerksen & Martin (2016) identify an inclusive environment “that incorporates alternative cultures and epistemologies throughout the institution” (p. 11) as the means for engaging Indigenous students. From an ODT perspective, an institution would need to prioritize uniqueness to a greater degree than belonging in

order to find the optimal balance for Indigenous students, and by extension, Indigenous people working in libraries to establish an inclusive space. This critical lens challenges the original conceptualization of ODT as being an equal balance between belonging and uniqueness.

Conclusion

The literature around belonging and uniqueness as elements of DEI work is sparse in the LIS field. Most of what does exist tends to have a narrow focus on a specific area of DEI work rather than a broader organizational perspective. In addition, intersectionality is seldom considered as a mitigating factor to creating inclusive workspaces using a belonging and uniqueness model.

More research is needed to determine how intersectionality informs inclusivity in the broader context of how people working in libraries think about their belonging and uniqueness. From a Canadian perspective, there also needs to be dedicated research around Indigenous perspectives of belonging and uniqueness as people working in libraries. This research is necessary to support the diversification of Canadian library workforces.

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