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How leaders shape the impact of HR's diversity practices on employee inclusion

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we develop a theoretical framework about how leaders help shape the impact of HR diversity practices on employee inclusion. So far, the HR literature has given leaders a relatively passive role in that they are mainly seen as enactors and communicators of HR policies and practices. We expand this view by suggesting that leaders can respond to HR's (diversity) practices with various levels of alignment (or misalignment), and clarify the respective implications for felt inclusion. Informed by literature on multiple identities at work, we derive four potential responses of leaders to HR's diversity practices—deletion, compartmentalization, aggregation, and integration. We show how these responses shape the effects of diversity practices on employee inclusion, and in doing so, we also question a commonly held assumption that leaders' full alignment with HR's diversity practices is the most conducive for employees' felt inclusion. Our framework has important implications for theory and practice, as it specifies the role of leaders in leveraging the inclusive potential of HR diversity practices.

1. Introduction

As workforces are becoming increasingly diverse, organizations are investing considerable efforts into Human Resources (HR) policies and practices to manage diversity (i.e., diversity practices; Nishii, Shemla, Khattab, & Paluch, forthcoming). These initiatives are important, as research has shown that despite the benefits that diversity may bring in terms of innovation and improved decision making, actual or perceived differences among organizational members—when left unmanaged—can also lead to status distinctions, subgrouping, outgroup discrimination (Shemla, Meyer, Greer, & Jehn, 2014; Van Dijk, Van Engen, & Van Knippenberg, 2012; Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007), and implicit biases against certain groups (e.g., Carton & Rosette, 2011). For instance, work on the glass ceiling and glass cliff suggest the importance of managing the barriers for women and ethnic minority groups to reach and maintain managerial positions (Cook & Glass, 2014; Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Because of the potential downside of diversity, diversity practices have thus traditionally focused on reducing biases that may cause discrimination or on increasing the managerial representation of minorities (e.g., through a quota) (Ely & Thomas, 2001).

In this paper, we suggest to focus on employee inclusion as an outcome of diversity practices. Whereas a focus on ensuring fairness is typically concerned with the objective reality of specific, often marginalized, groups (e.g., in terms of gender, race), a focus on creating inclusion (Nishii, 2013) emphasizes the extent to which all individuals feel they can express who they are and thus also how

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they are different from others (also considering deep-level differences such as values, personality, and strengths; [Veebraeten, 2016](#)). Thus, emphasizing inclusion as an outcome captures both minority and majority employees' reality, turning both groups into beneficiaries of the diversity practices. We thus argue that in order to understand whether diversity practices are valuable in diverse work contexts, we need to expand our focus from elimination of biases and fairness to one of employee inclusion.

Prior research has suggested that many well-intended HR diversity practices do not always foster more inclusion. For example, investments in diversity training may not always pay off (e.g., [Homan, Buengeler, Eckhoff, Van Ginkel, & Voelpel, 2015](#)), and may even produce adverse effects, as such training often makes existing differences more salient, unwillingly strengthening biases (e.g., [Gebert, Buengeler, & Heinitz, 2017](#); [Jackson & Joshi, 2011](#)). Also, adjustments to HR practices introduced to increase their standardization and thus to reduce their susceptibility to biases such as employing multiple raters in personnel selection have not always led to the attainment of diversity-related goals (e.g., [Nishii et al., forthcoming](#)). These potential negative effects leave HR practitioners, especially those seeking to build more diverse and fair organizations, at a conundrum: The practices that are intended to establish more fairness and inclusion in the workplace may actually result in lowered inclusion. In this paper, we address this issue and look at when HR diversity practices do or do not promote felt inclusion at work.¹

In resolving this issue, we believe it is important to consider the role of the front-line managers that directly supervise employees' work, later referred to more generally as *leaders* ([Den Hartog & Boon, 2013](#)). Prior work has already highlighted the role that leaders play in employee felt inclusion. Research has for example suggested that leaders may foster employee inclusion within workgroups by emphasizing each individual's value, without signaling inequality through making distinctions and thus increasing exclusion ([Buengeler & Den Hartog, 2015](#); [Nembhard & Edmondson, 2009](#); [Nishii & Mayer, 2009](#)). Adding to their direct impact on employee felt inclusion, leaders have also been argued to be critical drivers of the communication and implementation of HR practices: in their role as direct supervisor, leaders are important gatekeepers to the success of HR practices ([Den Hartog, Boon, Verburg, & Croon, 2013](#); [Gilbert, De Winne, & Sels, 2015](#)). So far, however, it is not clear whether and how these two factors considered vital for inclusion—HR and leadership—interplay to shape felt inclusion. In this paper, we develop a theoretical framework on how leaders co-determine workplace inclusion with HR through their reactions to HR's diversity practices.

Specifically, we draw on identity theory and suggest that in dealing with diversity practices, leaders have multiple role identities which may conflict with one another and therefore must be managed ([Pratt & Foreman, 2000](#)). While identity theorizing has already advanced our understanding of diversity and felt inclusion from the employees' perspective (e.g., [Hogg & Terry, 2000](#); [Shore et al., 2011](#)), we suggest that a focus on employee identity alone is not sufficient to tackle the "implementation problem" of diversity practices that HR faces—namely that diversity practices do not necessarily lead to inclusion. We believe that the literature would also benefit from adopting an identity perspective to study how *leaders* deal with HR diversity practices. Doing so allows capturing the potential ways in which leaders may react to HR's initiatives and why they may react in these ways, thereby taking an important step towards understanding why HR practices are not always implemented as intended.

While recent HR literature recognizes the importance of leaders in HR implementation (e.g., [Den Hartog et al., 2013](#)), it has so far not achieved to shed light on why leaders sometimes openly or covertly, and intentionally or unintentionally resist HR's well-meant strategies. As we will show, explicating the tension that leaders in organizations experience given dual, potentially conflicting identity demands facilitates this understanding, and allows to properly address this crucial source of the implementation problem. Specifically, in this paper we clarify the various identity responses (borrowing from [Pratt & Foreman, 2000](#)) that leaders may have to HR diversity practices (entailing differential levels of leader alignment with HR) and theorize on the effects of this interplay for employee felt inclusion. [Fig. 1](#) depicts how the various levels of identity integration of leaders underlying their different responses to HR diversity practices entail different degrees of alignment with HR. [Fig. 2](#) puts the degree of alignment of leaders with HR in relation with employee felt inclusion.

We contribute to past literature in the following ways. First, consistent with [Nishii et al.'s \(forthcoming\)](#) call to explore how leaders together with HR can promote inclusion, we introduce leaders' responses as an explanatory factor for the mixed effectiveness of diversity practices. Several authors emphasize leaders' role in shaping inclusion ([Hollander, 2012](#); [Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006](#); [Shore et al., 2011](#)), but thus far their role in the success of HR diversity practices has not been detailed. As we show, doing so is vital, as accounting for the responses of leaders to HR could help reconcile some of the inconsistency in previous research and guide future research on diversity-practice effectiveness as well as practical interventions.

Second, the HR literature has assigned leaders a relatively subordinate role in the equation—one in which leaders are largely confined to follow in the footsteps of HR by enacting and communicating HR policies and practices as intended (alignment; e.g., [Gilbert et al., 2015](#); [Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007](#)). Drawing on leader identity literature ([Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010](#); [Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006](#); [Petriglieri, 2011](#); [Pratt & Foreman, 2000](#)), we expand current theorizing on leaders' role in HR implementation by suggesting that leaders can respond in different ways to the demand to implement HR's (diversity) practices, with different outcomes in terms of felt inclusion for each of these responses.

¹ Some authors have suggested to make the differentiation between diversity-practices and inclusion-practices. These are distinguished mainly by their strategic intent: Are they focused on improving diversity (e.g., higher representation of minorities, more equal opportunities) versus inclusion (e.g., more overall felt inclusion, more synergy between members). However, a strategic intent does not guarantee its result and what some have called inclusion-intended practices (e.g., inclusive talent management) may still create exclusion ([Veebraeten, 2016](#)) and what some have called diversity practices (e.g., bias-free performance rating) may also promote more inclusion ([Barak, 1999](#)). For this reason, we use the term diversity practices to describe a higher-order set of practices that comprises inclusion-aimed practices next to practices centered on other diversity-related goals, including reducing discrimination, increasing fairness, and enabling synergy and leave it an empirical question whether or not these result in more inclusion. Note that in our focus on inclusion as the primary dependent variable, we do not consider alternative outcomes (e.g., performance, equal representation). Examining these outcomes is beyond the scope of the current manuscript.

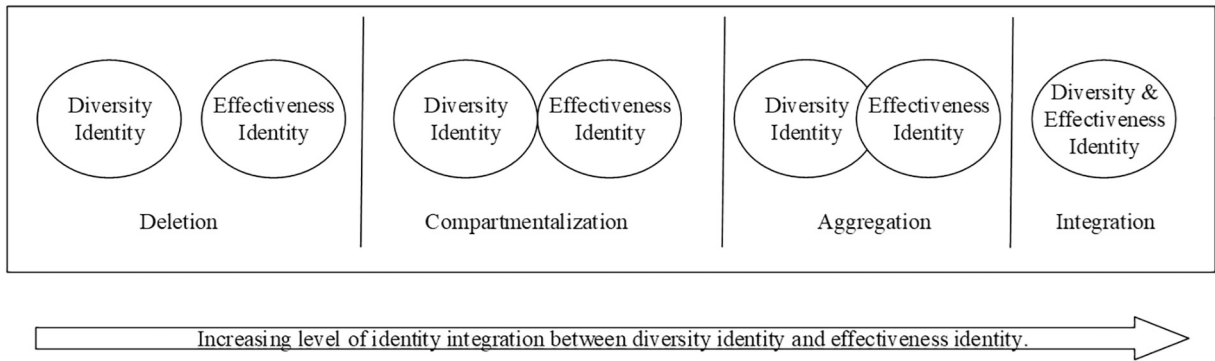


Fig. 1. Leader responses representing increasing levels of alignment resulting from identity integration.

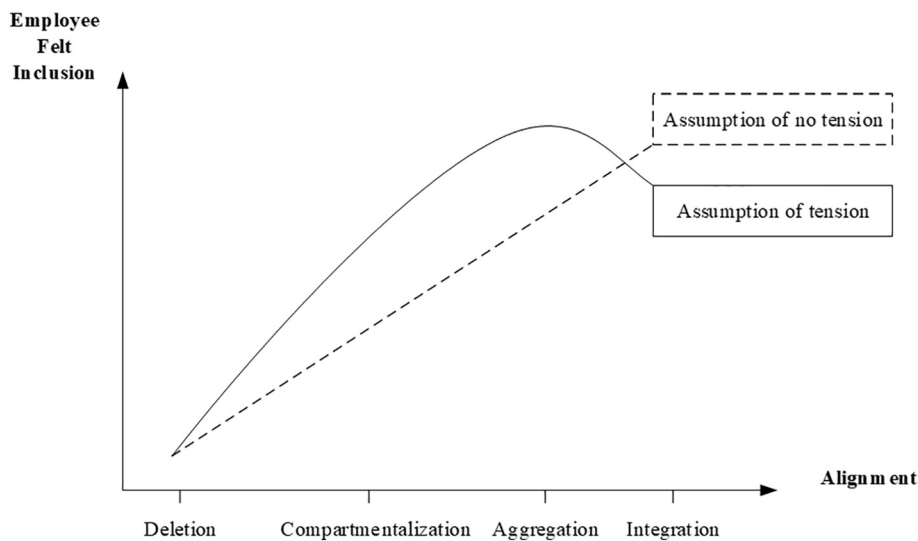


Fig. 2. The relationship between alignment of leaders with HR and employee felt inclusion as commonly assumed (assumption of no tension between employees' self-facets) versus as proposed here (assumption of tension between employees' self-facets).

More specifically, we contribute to a refinement of current theorizing on alignment in the HR literature by clarifying what leader alignment with HR actually means. While employees' identity has been a focus in the HR (inclusion) literature (e.g., Hogg & Terry, 2000; Shore et al., 2011), we bring in leaders' multiple identities as well to show that there are various degrees of acceptance of, and thus alignment with HRs diversity practices. Indeed, leader's identity of being an effective leader may not align with their identity of being supportive of diversity practices. The recent case of a manager at Google whose open devaluation of HR diversity practices caused public turmoil (Statt, 2017), exemplifies that there is more nuance to what (mis)alignment means than the literature would suggest. Whereas in general higher alignment should be more conducive to inclusion, we introduce the idea that there is an *optimal* degree of alignment after which inclusion declines. In other words, we argue that full acceptance of diversity practices may not always be the most conducive to inclusion.

Finally, we contribute to the extant literature by detailing contextual factors that are likely to cause a shift in the relative effectiveness of various degrees of alignment of leaders with HR diversity practices. These are derived from the literature on leader responses to multiple (organizational) identities (Dutton et al., 2010; Kreiner et al., 2006; Pratt & Foreman, 2000) as well as the literature on diversity-practice effectiveness (Nishii et al., forthcoming; Shore et al., 2011). These contingencies characterize organizations' discourse and the dominant diversity paradigm in which these diversity practices are embedded (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Nishii et al., forthcoming; Shore et al., 2011): whether diversity is perceived as a means-to-a-marketing-end, or with an avoidance mindset (of lawsuits), irrelevant and counterproductive, a problem of the minority, etc. versus whether it is seen as having strategic value for the functioning of the organization, and thus as relevant for both minority and majority employees in the organization.

2. Workplace inclusion from a self-concept perspective

Before unraveling the interplay between HR diversity practices and leadership, we first develop a thorough understanding of our dependent variable of interest; employee felt inclusion. As noted, research has already adopted an identity lens to study felt inclusion

from the employee's perspective. For example, Shore et al. (2011) elaborated on what inclusion means, drawing from optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991). Specifically, they have argued that to feel included, individuals need to feel unique and different from others in their direct work environment as well as feel like they belong to that same work environment. There are two notable characteristics of this understanding of what it means to feel included. First, there is a clear tension between feeling unique and belonging such that individuals will unlikely be able to score high on both simultaneously but will need to find a balance or "optimal distinctiveness" between both. This suggests that there are inherent tensions within this notion of inclusion as multi-faceted that are not easily resolved. Second, inclusion is a multi-level phenomenon, as it occurs within context: the inclusion of one group member depends on the inclusion of others in that group (Jansen, Otten, Zee, & Jans, 2014). In other words, inclusion does not happen in isolation; when others in your group feel excluded this will impact the extent you feel included.

Our paper is grounded in this multi-faceted and multi-level view of workplace inclusion. However, we extend Shore et al.'s (2011) and Jansen et al.'s (2014) framework by integrating the conceptual foundation and later developments of optimal distinctiveness theory. Brewer and Gardner (1996) suggested that there are levels of self-concept underpinning these experiences of inclusion. Uniqueness reflects whether we can enact our personal self-concept and belongingness reflects whether we can enact our interpersonal self-concept. In addition to personal and interpersonal identity demands, they suggested that collective identity demands are typically at play as well (see also Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Especially in a work setting (e.g., through strong group and organizational values and norms) individuals may also define themselves by the extent to which they identify with the collective identity of the organization. Reflecting identification with an organization's common identity, this collective identity may result in feelings of communality (collective self-concept) that supersedes individual differences (personal self-concept) and relationships (interpersonal self-concept).

In sum, we conceptualize inclusion as whether individuals feel they can simultaneously experience uniqueness, belongingness, and communality. Similar to Shore et al. (2011) and Brewer (1991), we acknowledge that this is unlikely to be easy, as tensions may occur between these facets of the self-concept. For instance, consider the implementation of a talent identification and development program in an effort to promote inclusion (van Woerkom, Bakker, & Nishii, 2016). While highlighting the individual strengths of employees will likely promote the personal self-concept and feeling unique, the emphasis on personal strengths may detract from belongingness and communality within the group, especially when these strengths are not appreciated by or shared with others. As another example, quota for management positions may lead women to feel included collectively, but they may feel less competent (i.e., personal self; see Eagly & Carli, 2007; Summers, 1995), and it may even backlash within the group (e.g., through non-beneficiaries), which could undermine these women's (as well as non-beneficiaries') inclusion and thus overall felt inclusion in that group.

The above suggests challenges for HR in fostering inclusion in the workplace. The focus on one self-facet may come at the expense of other self-facets; even when there is no conflict, engaging multiple facets of the self-concept simultaneously may be hard to achieve.² Because of these difficulties, we will look at how leaders can potentially complement HR in fostering more overall inclusion in their workgroup.

3. Leaders' role in HR diversity practice effects on felt inclusion

While a diversity practice could potentially foster inclusion of the targeted group, leaders may not, or not properly, convey the practice's aim and importance (e.g., Nishii et al., forthcoming), because they do not identify with the practice and/or with the inclusion goals behind the practice. This is likely to undermine the practice's effect on inclusion. Ineffective HR practices are oftentimes attributed to a lack of alignment, either because leaders refuse to support the respective HR practice or because the espoused support is not enacted (e.g., Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). That is, the HR literature suggests that whether or not HR practices such as diversity practices will lead to employee inclusion, will largely depend on whether or not leaders align themselves with the practice and enact the practice accordingly.

We however propose that reality may be a bit more complex, and that managers' responses to diversity practices will not be limited to either fully aligning or not aligning with them. In doing so, we highlight that leaders play a more independent role in employees' overall felt inclusion, actively co-creating it. Identity research (e.g., Dutton et al., 2010; Petriglieri, 2011; Pratt &

² The multi-faceted and multi-level nature of inclusion suggests challenges in fostering inclusion in the workplace: the focus on one self-facet may come at the expense of other self-facets; even if there should be no conflict, engaging multiple facets of the self-concept at the same time may be hard to achieve. We notice similar tensions in past research that looks at how to promote inclusion in the workplace. For instance, different authors have emphasized different self-facets in terms of promoting inclusion. For example, Hollander (2012) targets mostly the personal self-facet and feelings of inclusion in terms of uniqueness by including factors such as support-recognition (valuing the ideas and the person behind the ideas) (see also Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Alternatively, Nishii and Mayer (2009) use LMX theory to describe inclusion as the extent to which individuals feel excluded from others in the group—thus focusing mostly on the interpersonal self and feelings of belongingness. Finally, some authors (e.g., Buengeler & Den Hartog, 2015; Roberson, 2006) talk about inclusion mostly in terms of promoting interactional and procedural fairness—thus ensuring communality, as everyone is treated similarly.

Other efforts to promote inclusion emphasize more than a single self-facet. For instance, transformational leadership appears to be dual-focused, as it seems to involve individuals' personal self (e.g., via intellectual stimulation) and individuals' collective self (e.g., by articulating an inspiring vision; Wu, Tsui, & Kinicki, 2010). Likewise, conceptions of inclusive HR typically comprise multiple practices and policies that—although most clearly linked to employees' collective self—may also partly target individuals' interpersonal and/or personal self-concept. Nishii (2013), for instance, describes fair employment practices (collective self-facet), an interpersonal integration of diverse individuals (interpersonal self-facet), and an inclusion in decision-making (personal self-facet) as vital for the emergence of a climate for inclusion. The challenge with these multi-faceted conceptualizations is that they might increase the tensions between the self-facets, thereby undermining overall felt inclusion. For instance, fairness in employment practices or a shared vision and identity might make it more difficult to also promote consideration of individual differences and their use in decision making. These tensions reveal that having different actors—HR and leaders—joining efforts could be more suitable to make employees feel included overall (i.e., by making them feel to be unique, to belong, and to have communality) without conflict.

Foreman, 2000) has shown that the complexity of managerial work makes that managers often need to deal with conflicting demands, which may trigger a wide variety of responses. To date, however, we know relatively little about the various ways in which leaders could react to HR diversity practices, and how this may influence the practice's effectiveness in creating inclusion. Next, we start from an identity perspective to develop our argument that leaders' role in creating inclusion could extend beyond full alignment as described in the HR literature.

3.1. Modes of leader reactions to HR diversity practices and felt inclusion

Pratt and Foreman (2000) describe what may happen when individuals experience multiple, potentially conflicting organizational identities.³ When diversity is promoted within an organization, leaders may face identity demands arising from promoting diversity on the one hand next to those arising from ensuring that effectiveness goals are being met on the other hand. In other words, these leaders will likely experience to be confronted with two different organizational identities: "The identity of a leader that supports organizational effectiveness" and "The identity of a leader that supports HR's diversity practices." Even though effectiveness does not preclude diversity, or the other way around, leaders may not always perceive these two identities—which we label as "effectiveness-focused" and "diversity-focused,"—as being compatible. That is, leaders may sometimes feel that being focused on diversity may divert their attention from being effective. As such, the two identities can potentially be seen as competing. These two (potentially conflicting) identities can give rise to four prototypical ways in which leaders deal with them. Of course, these modes are abstractions, and several other more fine-grained reactions in-between the four prototypes could occur (Pratt & Foreman, 2000).

According to Pratt and Foreman (2000), leaders' efforts to manage multiple organizational identities differ in whether they achieve synergy or integration among one or more identities, and thus whether the multiple identities are well-aligned, from low to high: deletion, compartmentalization, aggregation, and integration. Next we describe each of these response modes for the two identities—effectiveness-focused and diversity-focused—that are likely to surface when leaders are supposed to implement HR's diversity practices.

3.1.1. Deletion

In the deletion approach, there is one dominant identity and the other identity is deleted (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). For instance, when leaders are asked to consider and promote diversity through enacting HR diversity practices, leaders may see this as opposite to their identity seeking to promote organizational effectiveness. This is likely to be experienced as a conflict which may lead them to suppress the (oftentimes less central) diversity-focused identity in favor of the dominant effectiveness-focused identity. Identity deletion can for instance reveal itself in leaders refusing to enact a certain policy (e.g., quota in hiring). Of course, some policies are required for leaders or their employees (e.g., mandatory diversity training; Rynes & Rosen, 1995), but leaders can be creative (e.g., physical or mental absence) in demonstrating that this identity is not dominant and, in fact, not present. This is also consistent with Petriglieri (2011) who suggests that multiple identities can impose an identity threat which can result in an attempt to conceal one identity aspect. Similarly, Kreiner et al. (2006) put forward that an identity conflict can create a hierarchy in one's identities, with one identity superseding and crowding out the other.

3.1.2. Compartmentalization

When leaders respond with compartmentalization, both effectiveness-focused and diversity-focused identities are experienced but separated into two detached entities. When leaders are asked to support and enact a diversity practice, they may comply in one situation (e.g., to satisfy HR) but not carry the practice through to other situations. Leaders may for example fully promote diversity practices in the organization's diversity month but then easily revert back to their standard approach when that month is over. As another example, HR may ask leaders to engage in inclusive talent management in order to make better use of the manifold talents, strengths and unique perspectives that diverse employees possess (van Woerkom et al., 2016). Whereas leaders may apply talent management in a training and development context because HR asks them to do so, they may fall back into comparing employees to specific, narrow standards when evaluating performance or assigning bonuses, as a deficit-oriented (fit) approach would suggest (Veestraeten, 2016).

Hence, leaders react to the dual identity demands through emphasizing one identity at a time. In certain diversity-related situations (e.g., after having participated in diversity training or calibration meetings in the context of performance appraisal), leaders may actively support HR's diversity practices and think of own ways to increase these practices' effectiveness; in other situations, they will emphasize what they believe is most effective for the organization. For instance, leaders may perceive and communicate diversity training as a "nice to have", but may give priority to other training types that they deem more central to effectiveness. Which identity is emphasized might for example depend on the demands of the situation (e.g., the available time for hiring a new employee or the salience of diversity), the "strength" of the respective practice with respect to achieving diversity-related goals (e.g., equal opportunity versus equal enhancement in affirmative action programs; Kovach, Kravitz, & Hughes, 2004; Nishii et al., forthcoming), or on whether or not the practice is mandatory (e.g., diversity training; Bezrukova, Jehn, & Spell, 2012; Bezrukova, Spell, Perry, & Jehn,

³ We considered various frameworks to describe leaders' reactions to HR diversity practices, including their levels of autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), positive identity construction at work (Dutton et al., 2010), and responses to identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011). Ultimately, we decided that drawing from Pratt and Foreman's (2000) work on "managerial responses to multiple organizational identities" is most suitable to show the spectrum of reactions when leaders are faced with dual, oftentimes conflicting, identity demands. We nevertheless also integrate reasoning from the other frameworks, where applicable.

2016; Rynes & Rosen, 1995).

3.1.3. Aggregation

In this mode, effectiveness-focused and diversity-focused identities still exist separately but are not necessarily in conflict with each other. Here, leaders would be open to diversity practices, understanding how these practices could both enhance and detract from their effectiveness as a leader. They would apply the practices because they feel it would make them a better leader, but they also try not to blindly copy the practice and ensure it is aligned with their own goals and values. For example, HR might want to implement a high-performance management system that emphasizes work-life balance, flexibility in extending deadlines, and communal goals (e.g., helping behaviors) in order to value women more explicitly in the organization (White, Hill, McGovern, Mills, & Smeaton, 2003). This could for instance mean that men and women can partly set their own goals. The leader understands that using the strengths of each party will likely increase their effectiveness (e.g., by being able to set competitive versus cooperative goals according to one's preferences). However, the leader may still maintain high standards regarding effectiveness, irrespective of the practice. Those effectiveness-related standards would be seen as complementing rather than opposing the diversity practice, jointly improving effectiveness and the attainment of diversity-related goals. This approach thus entails that the leader develops a meta-identity or a narrative where both an effectiveness focus and a diversity focus can co-exist.

3.1.4. Integration

When a leader responds with an integration approach, the two identities are seamlessly integrated such that the leader's diversity focus equals his or her effectiveness focus. In other words, leaders fully believe that diversity management also means being more effective in reaching the organization's goals. These leaders will be convinced that diversity supports their own and the organization's effectiveness, and will see possibilities for a synergistic integration of their identity demands. In this mode, the two identities are no longer separate but they are blended into a new, overarching identity. Indeed, leaders may not even be aware of the fact that these two identities are integrated, treating them as one new identity. Leaders will thus gladly enact any diversity-focused HR practice because they truly believe in the value of diversity for supporting organizational effectiveness. For example, these leaders may not doubt the importance of diversity-neutral screening in recruitment because they are convinced that this will enhance the organization's effectiveness (Purkiss, Perrewé, Gillespie, Mayes, & Ferris, 2006; Richard, 2000). These leaders will see advantages, or at least no drawback, of such a practice in terms of effectiveness and will therefore full-heartedly embrace and promote this practice.

Fig. 1 depicts the four leader response modes and pertinent degrees of identity integration of leaders. These leader responses to HR diversity practices determine the degree of alignment of leaders with HR.

3.2. Impact of leader responses to HR diversity practices on employee felt inclusion

Past research has argued (and shown) that the leader's identity can have an impact on the identities of followers (Epitropaki, Kark, Mainemelis, & Lord, 2016; Hannah, Woolfolk, & Lord, 2009; Lord & Brown, 2001, 2004). For example, leaders shape follower identities and the construction of those via the values that they communicate and through role modeling of those values in behavior. More specifically, a leader's emphasis on the personal, interpersonal, or collective self-facet in terms of inclusion could be argued to be transferred down to the respective self-facet of followers (Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999). For instance, a leader's focus on the collective identity could foster more feelings of communality, whereas a leader's focus on the personal identity would foster more inclusion in terms of uniqueness.

We extend on the above idea to argue that not only the identity focus of the leader is important to understand the impact of leaders on followers' inclusion but the level of identity integration, determining the degree of leader alignment with HR's diversity practices, will equally affect inclusion. Specifically, the extent to which leaders have integrated diversity into their view of what an effectiveness focus means may influence the extent to which employees accept the proposed diversity practices. A logical starting point is thus to assume that employee inclusion will increase with the increasing level of integration between effectiveness-focused and diversity-focused identities in the leader. That is, the extent to which the leader embraces HR's diversity practices should directly affect the employee's degree of felt inclusion. Fig. 2 displays this logic in the form of a positive linear relationship between leader alignment with HR's diversity practices and employee felt inclusion.

The idea here is that as diversity practices are more embedded within the assumption of effectiveness as a leader, this will promote overall felt inclusion. This argument follows the more traditional reasoning within the HR literature that how HR is enacted is vital for its effectiveness (e.g., Den Hartog et al., 2012), suggesting that higher alignment will lead to more enactment and thus more overall employee felt inclusion. It is also aligned with the diversity literature, where various authors have proposed and shown that the extent to which individuals hold "value-in-diversity beliefs" can make all the difference in promoting the benefits of diversity (e.g., Homan, Van Knippenberg, Van Kleef, & De Dreu, 2007; Van Knippenberg, van Ginkel, & Homan, 2013).

We nevertheless argue that reality is more complex than the linear relationship in Fig. 2 would suggest. Assuming that integration is always the most effective leader response to HR diversity practices in creating inclusion ignores that an employee's overall felt inclusion requires felt inclusion on multiple self-facets simultaneously. As we have stated earlier, feeling included personally, interpersonally, and collectively will always live to some extent in tension with each other such that it is difficult to score high on all aspects of inclusion. In contrast, an integration mode suggests that leaders' dual identities are completely merged and no longer co-exist separately (Pratt & Foreman, 2000), without tensions. Leaders in this mode may potentially blindly accept and enact diversity practices without questioning whether these truly support their effectiveness as a leader. Moreover, if the diversity practice only targets one self-facet (e.g., promoting uniqueness), then a full alignment with that practice may hinder the leader from also fostering

the other self-facets, thereby ignoring that employee felt inclusion is multi-faceted.

Consider the example of an HR diversity practice that aims to promote more equal opportunities in the organization, for instance by having performance standards be bias-free (Smither & London, 2012). A leader's blind acceptance of that initiative may promote a sense that everyone is treated equally, but it may also come at the expense of individuals' feeling of uniqueness and belongingness. Indeed, whereas leaders might have had the discretionary power to reward specific individuals for what they uniquely bring to the table, thus fostering uniqueness but also belongingness (as they feel accepted for who they are), this option is no longer available. The focus on fairness in performance criteria may thus detract from the other two aspects of inclusion. Leaders may be wise to distance themselves a bit from this HR practice if it allows them to simultaneously foster other important aspects of employee felt inclusion. For instance, a leader may implement more fair and standardized performance criteria, but will take the opportunity to highlight to individual employees how they are uniquely valued.

The preceding suggests that while in general higher degrees of alignment relate to higher overall felt inclusion, integration may oftentimes *not* be the most effective mode for achieving it. Lower-than-maximum degrees of alignment could in fact oftentimes be more conducive to overall felt inclusion. This contradicts the implicit idea of a linear relationship between degree of alignment and inclusion, as the current HR literature would suggest, and favors a curvilinear relationship. Fig. 2 contrasts the linear relationship following traditional logic with the curvilinear relationship following the more realistic assumption of tension among employees' self-facets. Therefore, we argue for a curvilinear relationship between the level of leader alignment with HR diversity practices and employee felt inclusion. Formally, we propose:

Proposition 1. There is an inverted u-shaped relationship between the level of leader alignment with HR diversity practices and employee felt inclusion such that employee felt inclusion increases up until an optimal degree of alignment after which it declines.

3.3. Contingencies of the proposed curvilinear effect

We suggest that in many instances, an aggregation response is most conducive to achieve overall felt inclusion, because the preserved identity plurality helps tailor HR diversity practices to employees' multiple self-facets simultaneously. In this mode, leaders can focus on effectiveness and diversity at the same time, as both can *complement* each other.⁴ This complementarity is likely to be present in employees as well: Employees will experience that leaders actively support and enact HR's diversity practices, thereby strengthening these practices' effects on the self-facet(s) that the diversity practices engage. Creating an understanding in HR and leaders of how both agents' approaches are complementary, not opposite, is thus a crucial precondition for this complementary alignment, and thus employee felt inclusion, to emerge. Within this aggregation mode, an overarching narrative can help leaders and HR see how their complementary efforts fit together so that both agents' activities conjointly allow employees to bring their full self to work. Therefore, we argue that all other aspects being equal, the curvilinear relationship between the level of leader alignment with HR diversity practices and employee felt inclusion peaks at an aggregation response. Formally, we propose (represented graphically in Fig. 2):

Proposition 2. There is an inverted u-shaped relationship between the level of leader alignment with HR diversity practices and employee felt inclusion such that all other aspects being equal, employee felt inclusion increases up until an aggregation response after which it declines.

While we propose that in general aggregation is likely to have the highest potential for creating high employee felt inclusion given the likely existence of tensions among employees' self-facets that this mode allows to manage, contextual factors ultimately determine at which level of identity integration the inflection point is being reached. In the following, we discuss several contextual factors that may alter what level of alignment of leaders with HR diversity practices is optimal for overall employee felt inclusion.⁵ These

⁴ An example that highlights the utility of complementary efforts of HR and leaders for employee felt inclusion in the context of an aggregation response is selection. Some of the most predictive selection instruments are known to be biased (Roth, Bevier, Bobko, Switzer, & Tyler, 2001). For example, while cognitive ability is the strongest predictor of future job performance, cognitive ability tests are also those with the strongest bias against certain minority groups (e.g., Afro-Americans; see, for instance, Schmidt, 1988). In contrast, unstructured, face-to-face interviews which have limited predictive validity are often well-received by candidates (especially when done by an interviewer perceived to be similar to the interviewee) and interviewers alike and thus widely employed and endorsed in organizations (e.g., Posthuma, Morgeson, & Campion, 2002; Van der Zee, Bakker, & Bakker, 2002). However, interviewers (often the leaders whom the selected employees will work for) may be systematically biased against certain candidates, confirming the stereotypes they hope to see (e.g., Judge, Cable, & Higgins, 2001; Purkiss et al., 2006). An important reason for why unstructured interviews remain so popular despite their biases may be because they engage the personal and interpersonal self, both on the interviewer and interviewee side (e.g., Dipboye, 1997; Herriot, 2002). As discussed earlier, these self-facets are more easily satisfied through human interaction (Van der Zee et al., 2002) than they are satisfied through collectively employed electronic or paper-and-pencil tests (e.g., Harris, 2000). Leaders could help connect HR's standardized use of selection instruments with those facets of employees' self-concept that are not yet appropriately targeted by the HR practice. In this example, HR's efforts are focused on ensuring consistency in testing, and enabling a shared identity; leaders can complement this through allowing for this human interaction. For instance, selection instruments such as work samples, structured interviews or assessment centers should make interpersonal contact with candidates possible and give candidates the opportunity to reveal their unique personal self. These instruments also have considerable predictive validities (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998), thereby allowing hired individuals the experience of legitimately belonging to the organization (communality), as they are satisfying the set standards. Also, these instruments have high face validity (e.g., Hausknecht, Day, & Thomas, 2004; Smither, Reilly, Millsap, Pearlman, & Stoffey, 1993), securing approval of other applicants and those employed in the organizations, not only those belonging to minority groups.

⁵ While we specify proportion of beneficiaries versus non-beneficiaries, effectiveness, and strategic value of HR diversity practices as potential contingency factors, we want to recognize here that they may also serve as antecedents to some of these responses. Indeed, when a contingency factor hinders a certain leader response from effectively fostering inclusion, it reduces the likelihood that the leader will continue to display this behavior.

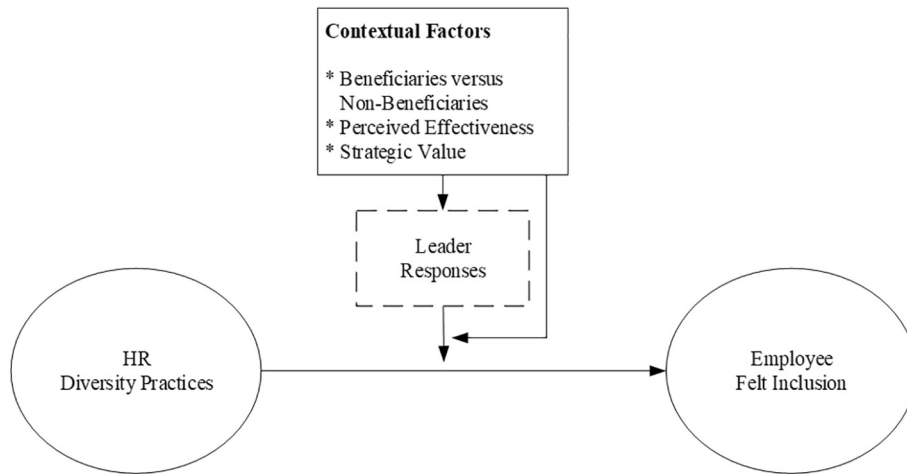


Fig. 3. Proposed theoretical framework of the interplay among HR diversity practices, leader responses, and employee felt inclusion, and the moderating role of contextual factors.

contextual factors are extracted from the literature on synergy of multiple (organizational) identities (Dutton et al., 2010; Kreiner et al., 2006; Pratt & Foreman, 2000). For instance, Pratt and Foreman (2000) explain how identity integration is affected by aspects such as the inherent compatibility of identities being combined (i.e., the identity of promoting effectiveness as a leader and the identity of supporting diversity practices) as well as more external factors as the political and economic context of the organization (that may or may not favor diversity practices).

Using a similar logic, we discuss three specific factors: (1) the proportion of beneficiaries versus non-beneficiaries of the diversity practice, (2) the (perceived) effectiveness of the diversity practice, and (3) the strategic value of the diversity practice in the organization. Fig. 3 shows how these contingencies interact with leaders' responses to HR diversity practices—and thus level of leader alignment with HR—to shape employees' overall felt inclusion.

Note that these factors are also mentioned in the diversity literature as describing the broader narrative and dominant paradigm around the topic of diversity in an organizational context (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Nishii et al., forthcoming; Shore et al., 2011). Together, we believe these three factors describe whether the topic of diversity is viewed as something that is only relevant for the unhappy (minority) few or applicable to a larger (majority) group of people. Or whether diversity is just a means-to-a-marketing end (window dressing) versus whether there is a solid business case for diversity such that diversity is essential in the narrative around organizational effectiveness more broadly and leadership effectiveness more specifically. Finally, it describes how much diversity is of strategic value and an absolute priority for an organization: Intertwined with all activities versus a function that is managed separately from all else (often in a function with relatively little power).

3.3.1. Beneficiaries vs. non-beneficiaries of the diversity practice

A first important contingency is whether the practice is framed towards only a few beneficiaries or a majority of individuals benefitting. Consider the following example: When most group members are male rather than female, the leader's open non-endorsement or even ridicule of the quota (a deletion response) will have less impact on the overall felt inclusion in the group than when a considerable portion of the group members are female. Indeed, depending on the "strength" with which an affirmative-action program (e.g. quota) seeks to reduce discrimination (Kovach et al., 2004; Nishii et al., forthcoming), men (the non-beneficiaries) may perceive quota as if what they bring to the table is no longer equally valued, leading to resistance and actually reducing their felt inclusion as a majority.

This aligns with (and highlights) the broader debate on whether diversity practices should be strategically focused on a select few or be reframed and refocused around inclusion, thus making all organizational members to beneficiaries (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998). For instance, if men suspect differing performance standards given higher flexibility needs of women involved in child or elderly care, leaders could reframe this flexibility around more work-life balance for everyone in the organization rather than "special treatment" for a targeted group. The difference of this reframing may have significant impact, as one group (typically the majority group) may no longer feel excluded by these practices. Without such reframing, however, leaders might be wise to distance themselves from this practice to maintain overall high felt inclusion. This distancing may even help the leader maintain the inclusion of the majority, while more silently and indirectly working on the inclusion of the minority (a compartmentalization response). Formally, we thus propose:

Proposition 2a. The inverted u-shaped relationship between the level of leader alignment with HR diversity practices and employee felt inclusion is moderated by the proportion of beneficiaries versus non-beneficiaries of the diversity practice such that the inflection point will shift to a compartmentalization response when the proportion of beneficiaries is small.

3.3.2. Perceived effectiveness of the diversity practice

The second contingency factor under consideration is how effective the proposed diversity practice is. As the level of alignment is determined by the integration of a leader's diversity identity with a leader's effectiveness identity, it is important for the leader to consider what does and does not work in terms of diversity practices. A recent overview of the literature suggests that not all diversity practices are as successful as we expect or even want them to be (for an overview, see Nishii et al., forthcoming). Furthermore, even those practices that do work may not have found themselves into the layperson theories of effective leadership. Indeed, consider research on implicit leadership theories—more communal behaviors that aim to promote uniqueness, belongingness, and communality are typically not associated with our idea of a leader (Scott & Brown, 2006). This is likely to have an impact on whether the various leader responses to diversity practices promote inclusion. When practices are deemed to be ineffective, they are unlikely to be accepted by followers, thus increasing the probability (through a mechanism of self-fulfilling prophecy) that they will be ineffective. For this reason, we will primarily focus on shared perceptions of effectiveness of diversity practices rather than the actual effectiveness (although we expect that both will be related).

Not only will a lack of perceived effectiveness reduce the employee's (and leader's) acceptance of the practice, it may even undermine the group's natural tendency towards inclusion. Indeed, regardless of the leader's and HR's attempt to promote inclusion, employees themselves may have the tendency to foster an environment that is inclusive of others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This natural tendency towards inclusion could manifest in various ways, such as promoting collective goals and discovering communalities (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000). Any attempt to promote a diversity practice that is deemed ineffective may undermine the natural and pro-active tendency of a group towards inclusion. In other words, their intrinsic motivation towards more inclusion is undermined by these extrinsically imposed goals.

With the knowledge that certain practices are deemed ineffective, leaders may choose to “delete” the diversity focus. Take diversity awareness training for example. Raising awareness by making majority members feel the biases and stereotypes that minorities may be faced with, may inadvertently increase, rather than reduce, stereotypes, particularly if skills to deal with diversity are not provided (Jackson & Joshi, 2011). Minority members may actually suffer from repercussions of these trainings, especially if the raised stereotypes were not salient previously. Leaders may seek to protect their minority-group members, especially if making their minority status salient may backfire in the organization. Leaders may also refuse to support the practice to protect their majority-group members, especially when actual diversity is limited. Having low diversity may prevent that a diversity practice is useful (e.g., groups' actual diversity and thus their ability to apply newly-learned diversity skills at work is relevant for diversity-training effectiveness; Homan et al., 2015; see also Bezrukova et al., 2016). When low degrees of leader alignment with HR (in the form of deletion, or to a lesser extent, compartmentalization) serve to protect group members from an ineffective practice, this could actually help prevent that this practice lowers felt inclusion in their groups. Formally, we thus propose:

Proposition 2b. The inverted u-shaped relationship between the level of leader alignment with HR diversity practices and employee felt inclusion is moderated by shared perceptions of the effectiveness of the diversity practice such that the inflection point will shift to a deletion response when the practice is perceived as ineffective.

3.3.3. Strategic value of the diversity practice

Adding to the presumed effectiveness, we believe the strategic value of employing diversity practices in organizations matters. Indeed, organizations may pursue diversity initiatives for a variety of reasons. Some of these reasons may be more aligned with the core and bottom line of the organization and others may be more superficial. For some organizations, diversity may only be a matter of preventing lawsuits—in such an organization, a leader's deletion strategy might be most effective in averting harm to overall felt inclusion, as diversity has little to no bearing on the functioning of the organization; in fact, in these organizations diversity issues are often seen as detracting from it.

Other organizations appear to care about diversity but only in a superficial manner—their focus on diversity reflects window dressing to look good to the outside world, without believing that diversity truly enhances their bottom line. Following Dutton et al. (2010), we expect that the compartmentalization response is most likely to be triggered when reputation is the primary driver of the leader's identification with diversity: When the leader knows that by supporting diversity he or she will be valued by relevant others, it is likely that the leader will create a *separate* identity that values diversity (without fully integrating it with the effectiveness identity). For example, leaders may switch to a diversity-focused identity and enact diversity practices only when these cannot be ignored. While a leader's compartmentalization approach may have limited effectiveness in increasing overall felt inclusion, it may actually help prevent that diversity practices result in lowered felt inclusion when the diversity initiative merely reflects a PR-activity. Knowing that HR's diversity practices are not meant to promote minority-group members in the organization and increase employees' possibility to contribute their unique talents to foster organizational effectiveness, this compartmentalization could help avert that beneficiaries of these practices put their hopes in these practices, and ultimately feel more excluded rather than included upon noticing the hidden agenda. It may also prevent that majority-group members may get insecure. When compartmentalized, the diversity-focused identity does not influence how the group operates, as diversity practices are only adhered to and communicated when the situation demands it (e.g., when there is an upcoming top employer survey for which diversity practices are introduced or when there is a diversity month in the organization; see also Dobbin, 2009).

Organizations may also believe that diversity is important but have a nuanced understanding of its importance. These organizations attempt to embed diversity in their HR practices but realize that diversity may not always contribute to organizational effectiveness. In these organizations, an aggregation mode might be most successful, as the leader can choose which diversity practices he or she wants to endorse more or less, and under which conditions he or she will endorse them.

Finally, in some organizations, diversity is strategically imbued in the organization's core (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Diversity is one of the core values of the organization and all practices in the organization are targeted to promote this diversity. Even if the diversity practice does not always have its intended effect, it could be beneficial for a leader to engage in the integration mode here, as it is likely to be perceived as the appropriate and effective leader response for that context. Taken together, we offer the following proposition:

Proposition 2c. The inverted u-shaped relationship between the level of leader alignment with HR diversity practices and employee felt inclusion is moderated by the strategic value of employing the diversity practice such that the inflection point will shift to an integration response when diversity is strongly strategically valued.

This brings up the question whether these contextual factors occur in isolation (see Fig. 3). We can expect to find that in many organizations two or more contingencies coincide such that they together are either supportive or unsupportive of HR diversity initiatives. For example, when in an organization diversity (and accompanying practices) is seen as having low strategic value, this is likely to be coupled with lower perceived effectiveness of these practices, especially when only select few are beneficiaries. In contrast, when diversity is fully endorsed in an organization, diversity practices are seen as effective tools to achieve the organization's mission. Given the recognition that differences in the sense of uniqueness are valuable, diversity practices are then likely to be seen as benefitting many rather than just a few. These examples suggest that the contextual factors presented are likely to reinforce each other; changing beliefs and behaviors towards diversity (practices) in an organization will thus require a systems focus.

4. Discussion

In this paper we have developed a theoretical framework about how leaders help shape the impact of HR diversity practices on employee inclusion (see Fig. 3). By questioning and clarifying what alignment between HR and leaders actually means (see Fig. 1), and linking the various degrees of alignment with inclusion outcomes (see Fig. 2), we have carved out testable propositions that provide important implications for theory, practice, and further research.

4.1. Theoretical implications

Our research contributes to the extant literature in the following ways. First, we contribute by not only specifying what employee inclusion means from the employee's perspective, but by also specifying the role of leaders in the impact of HR diversity practices on inclusion (see Fig. 3). As such, we respond to Nishii et al.'s (forthcoming) call to explore how leaders together with HR practices can foster employee inclusion. Our theoretical analysis has revealed a more dynamic and constructionist view of how leaders and HR co-create inclusion (rather than the currently-employed traditional top-down logic). This is important, as better understanding the role of leaders in co-creating HR may help explain some of the inconsistency in previous research on diversity-practice effectiveness (e.g., Nishii et al., forthcoming).

Second, more broadly than the previous point, we contribute to a refinement of current theorizing on alignment in the HR literature by clarifying what leader alignment with HR could entail. In the extant HR literature, leaders seem to be confined to a rather passive role. This is based on the idea that as long as leaders follow in the footsteps of HR (by enacting and communicating HR policies and practices as intended), this will give rise to employee outcomes as intended (see the notion of alignment; e.g., Gilbert et al., 2015; Purcell & Hutchinson, 2007). Questioning that full alignment is always the most conducive, we have introduced more nuance to this notion of alignment. Informed by (leader) identity literature (Dutton et al., 2010; Kreiner et al., 2006; Petriglieri, 2011; Pratt & Foreman, 2000), our theorizing highlights that leaders' roles may be much more varied and often go beyond full alignment (or misalignment) in enacting HR practices or policies.

Our clarification that leaders' responses differ substantially may also prove useful for understanding leaders' reactions to HR more generally. Past work has looked at the bad reputation HR often has in the organization (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010; Hammonds, 2005; Kaufman, 2012; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). HR is typically not everyone's favorite in the organization—most commonly driven by the idea that it is unclear how HR adds strategic value to the bottom line of the organization (Becker & Huselid, 2006; Boudreau & Ziskin, 2011; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Delaney & Huselid, 1996). An important reason for this is that actual HR practices as implemented by the leader do not always align with intended HR practices nor with how they are perceived by employees (Nishii, Lepak, & Schneider, 2008; Wright & Nishii, 2007). Interestingly, this article would suggest that the leaders who are prone to refuse HR practices that seek to promote diversity because they are unsure how it adds value may be the cause of this lack of added value given their personal response to the practices.

Consistent with prior HR and diversity literature, we entertain the idea that higher alignment between leaders and HR is more conducive to felt inclusion than lower alignment. However, this ignores the literature on inclusion as a multi-faceted and multi-level phenomenon that leads us to propose that there is an optimal degree of alignment (namely aggregation) after which inclusion declines (namely integration) (see Fig. 2). This is a significant departure from past literature that has argued that more alignment in terms of diversity goals and mindset is better to promote positive diversity outcomes (see, for instance, Homan et al., 2007; Van Knippenberg et al., 2013). Similarly, although allowing bi-directional influence runs counter to the dominant thinking in HR according to which line managers mostly implement and communicate HR policies and practices (Gilbert et al., 2015), our theoretical framework reveals that accounting for a more active role of leaders in this is essential for employee inclusion.

As a third contribution, our conceptual model specifies theoretically and empirically derived conditions under which full leader alignment with HR—a state considered ideal in the current HR literature—is most effective, and under which it is ineffective for

enabling felt inclusion. That is, we clarify that full alignment is desirable yet only under specific circumstances (namely when diversity is of strategic value to the organization, diversity practices are framed towards a majority rather than a minority as well as perceived to be effective). However, if these conditions are not met—a state that is likely to be present in many organizations (Ely & Thomas, 2001)—this full alignment may actually hinder overall felt inclusion. Interestingly, our theoretical analysis reveals that the diversity practice's framing towards only a few versus a majority of beneficiaries, the shared perception of its ineffectiveness, and a low strategic value of diversity (i.e., diversity practices as window dressing) are conditions that make lower rather than higher degrees of leader alignment relatively more favorable for ensuring overall felt inclusion. Hence, we acknowledge that the impact of HR diversity practices on felt inclusion is not only a matter of leaders' responses, but also a matter of the context in which these responses take place.

Our framework also has important implications for studying and nurturing workplace inclusion. We explicated that the notion of tension among employees' multiple identity demands is essential in understanding how inclusion can best be fostered. It appears that given the multi-faceted nature of people's identity, feeling included is always going to be challenging. As our identity-based view of inclusion further suggests, inclusion may be targeted at different levels of analysis: individually, dyadically, and collectively, and efforts to promote inclusion will need to cut across these three levels in order to be effective. While advocating for multi- and cross-level initiatives is not new (Klein & Kozłowski, 2000), our theoretical framework reveals why this may be particularly important for the study of inclusion.

4.2. Practical implications

Globalization and enhanced mobility, demographic shifts, and a higher participation of women and members of minority groups have made the workforce composition increasingly diverse (Shore et al., 2009; Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). Many firms employ diversity-management strategies in the hopes to reap the benefits of their increasingly diverse workforces (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004). Felt inclusion is seen as instrumental in this regard, as it may allow employees to fully contribute to their workplaces (Roberson, 2006; Shore et al., 2011). This paper offers important guidelines to HR practitioners and business leaders who want to build a more inclusive work environment, as it specifies what felt inclusion is, what the roles of HR and leaders are in it, and what *optimal* alignment between HR and leaders means depending on the contextual factors present. In so doing, our paper highlights leaders' crucial but oftentimes overlooked role in firms' diversity strategies, as leaders can make HR's efforts fail or succeed.

First, as our theoretical framework suggests, an important step to build a more inclusive work environment is to teach line managers and HR managers that inclusion occurs at various organizational levels—at the level of the organization (or department), at the level of relationships within organizations (both vertically and horizontally), and at the level of the person. These three levels of inclusion need to co-occur for employees to feel included. In reality, however, these levels of inclusion oftentimes are in conflict with each other, as they are inherently related. Enacting one's self in one domain can be experienced as colliding with another domain. Therefore, line managers and HR managers need to consider the consequences for all three levels when making decisions affecting any of these layers.

Doing this exercise will reveal that any activity can produce a number of tension points that, by focusing on only one level of inclusion, would have gone unnoticed. This may explain why some inclusion efforts, although meant to be inclusive, inadvertently are ineffective or even have negative effects. In seeking to find solutions and thus resolve these tensions so that all three levels of inclusion are fostered, both line managers and HR managers may ultimately understand that by teaming up, they more easily provide room for all three levels of inclusion to develop. We encourage a fruitful communication on what inclusion means, and what either one can add to fostering it.

Judging from the current HR literature, achieving this full inclusion at all levels of the identity hierarchy requires full alignment between HR and leaders. As our conceptual analysis reveals, however, full alignment is optimal only under specific circumstances whereas quite counterintuitively, most of the time the optimum should be achieved at high yet “imperfect” degrees of alignment. While our theory may not provide cut-and-dry advice for organizations aiming for inclusion, we highlight that organizations may benefit from a thorough analysis of the contextual factors present in their organization to determine the optimum in terms of alignment. Do organizational members truly embrace diversity, and see differences (and accompanying diversity practices) as vital for the organization's welfare as a whole? If this most encompassing of contextual factors is met (in the sense of the integration-and-learning perspective; Ely & Thomas, 2001), the highest degree of inclusion will indeed be achieved when leaders embrace HR's diversity practices. Organizations would therefore be well off by taking measures that help leaders to support HR's mission (e.g., through providing training in delivering effective performance appraisals and adjusting performance management such that a leader's effectiveness is fully contingent on how effectively he or she supports HR's diversity mission). Interestingly, especially with respect to training initiatives, those that are most in need of training (e.g., majority members) are usually the ones that are least willing to engage in it (Kulik, Pepper, Roberson, & Parker, 2007), which highlights the relevance of mandatory training to reduce biases in the workplace. However, without proper explanation and possibilities to express divergent opinions, resistance to training, and to change more generally, are likely to occur (Dass & Parker, 1999; Gebert et al., 2017).

Therefore, if in an organization, the value of diversity is seen but only as long as majority-group members are not affected and the business case for diversity is salient (in the sense of the access- and legitimacy perspective; Ely & Thomas, 2001), from an inclusion standpoint organizations should seek to achieve but be careful not to *enforce* full compliance of leaders. This could further alienate leaders (given fears that demands of their effectiveness-related identity cannot be met when forced to fully meet demands arising from their diversity-related identity) and the groups they are leading, ultimately limiting overall felt inclusion in these groups. At the downside of having HR diversity practices not implemented exactly as intended, allowing leaders at least certain leeway in

interpreting HR's diversity practices for them may help stimulate ownership, helping leaders commit to HR diversity practices in the longer run.

Should organizations enforce or refrain from diversity initiatives when organizational members are not (yet) embracing pro-diversity beliefs? An example for this dilemma is the aforementioned case of a Google manager whose documented negative view of diversity (practices) came to the attention of the public, in response to which Google publicly sanctioned the manager and terminated the work contract (Statt, 2017). We would indeed recommend that organizations be firm about the importance of diversity, and thus about the “why” HR diversity practices are needed. Yet, organizations should be open to debate around the “how,” understanding that there may be more than one path to reaching inclusion.

Given our argument that whether or not leaders' alignment with HR diversity practices will lead to felt inclusion will depend on a number of boundary conditions (which may not always be under the control of leaders/organizations), the practical implications may not be as normative, nor straightforward as has been suggested in previous inclusion research. We therefore advise against formulating and imposing normative solutions for inclusion in the organization, but instead recommend promoting constructive dialogue based on mutual tolerance of opposing views with leaders (yet sanctioning intolerance, as tolerance of intolerance produces more intolerance; see Gebert et al., 2017). Allowing constructive dialogue about the “how” (see above) should prevent further alienating those with opposing views who, upon perceived enforcement, are likely to react with either silence or dogmatism, strengthening opposition (Gebert et al., 2017). Such constructive dialogue may help leaders find their own narrative, experiment with possibilities for diversity to become the business case that leaders may hope for, and find ways to interpret HR's diversity practices such that seemingly opposing effectiveness- and diversity-related demands appear manageable.

This could give rise to creative synergies between HR and leaders in the longer run. When leaders that are seen as ambassadors of the organization and its mission, slowly begin experimenting with diversity, and enacting some of the practices that HR promotes in ways that their groups can accept, this could even help promote pro-diversity beliefs in their groups, and the organization more generally. Hence, while in the beginning, imperfect alignment may not just be necessary but even wise (in the sense of a paradoxical intervention), this constructive dialogue can allow leaders to determine their own pace in becoming more aligned; this in turn could stimulate more positive diversity beliefs in the broader organization.

We also believe that our work can help increase understanding of inclusion in society and bring more nuance to the public debate on the highly controversial topic of workplace inclusion. For example, the debate around quota in hiring for managerial positions for women or other minority groups in firms, public organizations, and in the political sphere in various countries often focuses on *whether* these quota work or not. Considering how they impact the various facets of inclusion, and studying quota in the specific context where these are implemented, could advance this debate, as this could increase understanding regarding which boundary conditions need to be in place for quota to work.

4.3. Avenues for further research

As with any research, our manuscript is not without limitations that provide opportunities for future research. First, our theoretical framework highlights the powerful impact of leaders on whether diversity practices elicit employee inclusion or not. Oftentimes, leaders may undermine HR's effectiveness, as we pointed out earlier. For instance, HR may suggest a new diversity training for all employees, but this initiative, aimed at creating inclusion, may actually be undermined when the leader communicates this as a “compulsory element” or even ridicules it (e.g., Kulik et al., 2007). However, not only is ensuring that inclusion efforts are not ineffective relevant; avoiding that feelings of exclusion result is vital as well.

The HR literature contrasts constellations of misalignment among practices, labeled “deadly combinations,” from those producing “synergistic effects” (Becker, Huselid, Pickus, & Spratt, 1997). We argue that while the high alignment with HR that is present in both aggregation and integration responses of leaders resembles the idea of synergistic effects (either through the identity plurality that is preserved in aggregation, or the new identity that forms in integration), HR and leaders together may also form a deadly combination. One way in which this could materialize, is when HR diversity practices and leaders complementarily target facets of the self, while implicitly or explicitly undermining the respective other's value and effects—a potential downside of the aggregation model despite the in principle beneficial complementarity. This suggests that the potential to gain and the potential to lose are likely to be higher when an aggregation response is present, suggesting the need for a careful balancing of effectiveness-focused and diversity-focused identities.

Interestingly, a deadly combination could also emerge when HR and leaders are so strongly aligned that they are perceived as one, as described in an integration response. The notion that the various layers of inclusion are likely to be in tension unless resolved helps understand this potential downside to the integration response. When employees cannot attribute HR's and leaders' activities to distinct actors (because HR and leaders are perceived as one) in order to resolve seemingly conflicting identity demands (to feel unique, to feel to belong, and to have a sense of communality), this could increase tensions between these facets, lowering overall felt inclusion. For instance, when both leaders and HR adopt a policy that equalizes performance standards for all employees, this hinders the leader from departing from those performance standards to make individual employees feel personally encouraged and wanted. Empirical research may seek to examine when aggregation and integration responses actually engender deadly combinations, and when they produce synergistic effects. We suggest polynomial regression analysis to detail the respective patterns.

Second, in our conceptual model we have clarified how leader responses determine the impact of HR diversity practices on felt inclusion and how the ideal leader response actually depends on the context. In this regard, we have suggested that the contextual factors we specify based on previous theorizing and research—proportion of beneficiaries versus non-beneficiaries, perceived effectiveness, and strategic value—are also likely to influence the response that leaders will show when confronted with HR's diversity

practices (see Fig. 3), as these factors will not only shape employee perceptions but also leader perceptions and attitudes towards the respective practice. Future research may focus on additional antecedents. For instance, which response leaders choose may also depend on personal factors such as whether they themselves believe in the value of diversity, whether they are predisposed to be open to diversity (practices) (e.g., because openness to experience is high; Homan et al., 2008), or their past experiences with HR and diversity (see, for instance, intergroup contact theory; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Third, we have argued that leaders, typically the formally assigned line managers, are crucial for employee inclusion. In self-managing teams, however, the role of formal external leadership is minimized, as the members themselves engage in collective, or shared, leadership (Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010). The teams' ability to enact diversity practices in ways that best cater to all three aspects of inclusion (uniqueness, belongingness, communality) among their members will thus decide on the degree of overall felt inclusion in these teams. Drawing from our view of overall felt inclusion as a multi-level phenomenon, further theorizing is needed on how collective leadership in self-managing teams affects inclusion.

Fourth, because our focus was on integrating HR and leadership to achieve felt inclusion, we have not detailed the role of the individual in felt inclusion. However, granting the individual an active role may be important as well. Individuals are more proactive than they are typically depicted in the literature (e.g., Grant & Ashford, 2008) and at least partially craft their own experiences at work (e.g., Bakker, Tims, & Derks, 2012). Analogous to individuals' proactivity in managing their own effectiveness (e.g., De Stobbeleir, Ashford, & Buyens, 2011), they could also be proactive in crafting inclusion. This is also in line with notions in the HR literature recognizing that individuals' perceptions and actions shape the effectiveness of HR practices (e.g., Den Hartog, Boselie, & Paauwe, 2004). Future research may account for the role of individuals by examining how they can proactively co-determine inclusion with HR and leaders, thereby increasing the effectiveness of organizational inclusion efforts.

Last, whereas our focus is on determining optimal degrees of alignment of leaders with HR for maximizing employee felt inclusion, the degree of alignment between HR and leaders could also shape more distal outcomes (e.g., financial performance), either directly or via inclusion experiences. Not surprisingly, modern diversity management seeking to tap into a diverse workforce's potential tends to focus on inclusion (e.g., Roberson, 2006) in the hopes that this also benefits broader group and organizational functioning (e.g., Shore et al., 2011). Empirical research into the effects of inclusion has provided first evidence that inclusion experiences are indeed linked to valuable distal outcomes (e.g., lowered turnover in groups; Nishii, 2013). Future research could seek to understand whether the degree of alignment between leaders and HR as specified here also affects more distal goals.

5. Conclusion

In light of increasingly diverse workplaces, inclusion has become a dominant theme among scholars and practitioners alike. We have developed a theoretical framework about how leaders shape the impact of HR diversity practices on employee felt inclusion. Leaders have so far played a relatively passive role in the HR literature in that they are mainly considered HR-enactors and -communicators. Using literature on multiple identities at work, we have uncovered that leaders' role is more active in that there are four potential responses of leaders to HR's diversity practices—deletion, compartmentalization, aggregation, and integration—that differently shape these practices' effectiveness in eliciting employee felt inclusion. In providing meaningful contextual factors that influence the effects of HR's and leaders' interplay on employee inclusion, we have shown that a commonly held assumption in the HR literature that leaders' full alignment with HR is the most conducive for employee inclusion, is true only under specific circumstances. Our framework contributes to both theory and practice, as it increases understanding regarding how to utilize the inclusive potential of HR's diversity practices, and specifies leaders' role in HR effectiveness which provides important avenues for future research on the intersection between the two.

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