Understanding Inclusive Organizations through Ecological Systems Theory

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ABSTRACT

Current research in the area of understanding the dynamic of hiring people with disabilities is gaining momentum as communities and governments are intentionally seeking to create new avenues for employment for all of its citizens. For over 6 years, our team has worked in Walgreens and Sephora USA to understand the transformational dynamic of these inclusive teams. Previous research has looked into developing models of requisite inclusive management style, dynamics of inclusive teams, as well as inclusive onboarding strategies (Transitional Work Group). In studying these organizations, we shift focus to look at the entire system of an inclusive organization. In order to accomplish this we use Ecological Systems Theory as a lens by which to analyze inclusive organizations to determine the interactions between inclusive teams, departments, plant location and the corporation.

First introduced in the 1970s, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory proposed that in order to truly understand an individual's growth and development, it was vital to examine the contexts and relationships in which they were embedded. This model imagines the individual at the center of a series of concentric systems, the influence of which grows stronger as you approach the center. Here, we apply Bronfenbrenner's model to the world of business and inclusion—with an inclusive team, rather than an individual, as its hub. This approach allows for the examination of an inclusion model in a systemic way—taking into account the many levels of influence and coordination that are required for successful implementation of an inclusive workplace. Using examples from real-world inclusion initiatives, we explore the ways in which Ecological Systems Theory can be used to better understand and effectively address the challenges faced by companies eager to implement inclusive hiring practices.

Keywords: *Employees with disabilities; inclusive organization; Bronfenbrenner; Ecological Systems.*

INTRODUCTION

Diversity in the workplace is becoming increasingly desired, and research has found that initiatives to integrate persons with disability into the workforce can result in a number of positive outcomes for both employees and organizations in creating great teams (Alper and Domnitz, 2017; Bruyère, 2016; Bushe & Nagaishi, 2018; Hartnett et al., 2011; Jamieson & Marshak, 2018; Kalargyrou, 2014; McCary, 2005; Moore, Hanson, & Maxey, 2020). As efforts in this area continue to grow, much of the relevant research remains focused on either the individual characteristics of the persons being added to the workforce (Barnes & Mercer, 2005; Gomez et al., 2014; Kaye, Jans,& Jones, 2011; Khalifa et al., 2020; Värlander, 2012; Zolna et al., 2007), or on the impact of such initiatives on the company's bottom line (Dwertmann& Boehm, 2014; Green et al., 2002; Hartnett, Stuart, Thurman, Loy, & Batiste, 2011; Lindsay et al, 2018; SHRM, 2018; Stone &

Colella, 1996; Wells, 2008). While such efforts have provided valuable insight, we argue that taking a more holistic view of inclusion in the workplace may be beneficial.

Efforts to increase inclusion of persons with disability are becoming increasingly common, and when implemented, have met with varying degrees of success. When trying to pinpoint the 'cause' of a given effort's success or failure, it may be tempting to look first at the specific individuals or groups who were integrated. This urge, however, fails to appreciate the myriad ways in which all levels of an organization collectively create an environment that allows for the success or failure of individuals and initiatives.

Bronfenbrenner's work, a cornerstone of the field of human development, posits that one cannot truly understand a person (or their development) until one takes into account the numerous relationships and contexts into which they are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In

his Ecological Systems Theory (alternately known as the Bioecological Model), he develops a model that places the developing human at the center—surrounded by a series of concentric circles, which he referred to as systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, 1994, 1999; Bronfen brenner & Morris, 2006). The closer they are to the center of the model, the greater and more direct their influence on the individual's development. This theory allows us to better understand the ways in which a person's development is influenced by their environment—factors both within and outside of their control. Widely used in child development and family studies, this approach has also been adapted for use in contexts including educational practice, family policy, and the study of individuals with disability (Bronfen brenner, 1974 & 1976; Maciver, Rutherford, Arakelyan, Kramer, Richmond, Todorova, Romero-Ayuso, Nakamura-Thomas, ten Velden, Finlayson, O'Hare, & Forsyth, 2019; Odom et al., 1996; Olivier- Pijpers, Cramm, & Nieboer, 2018; Panopoulos & Drossinou-Korea, 2020; Zhang, Boyle, & Chan, 2014).
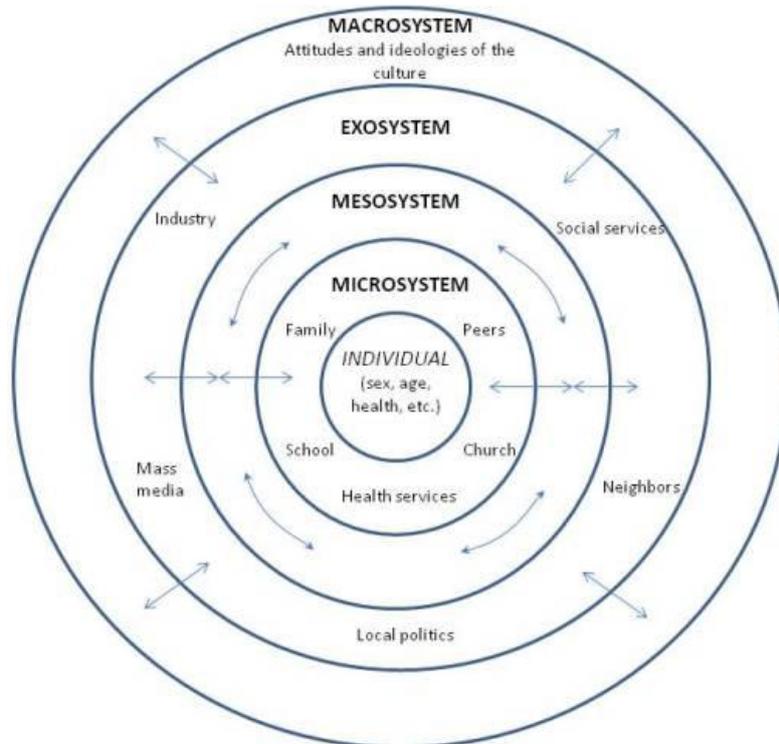

Figure1: *Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems framework for human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)*
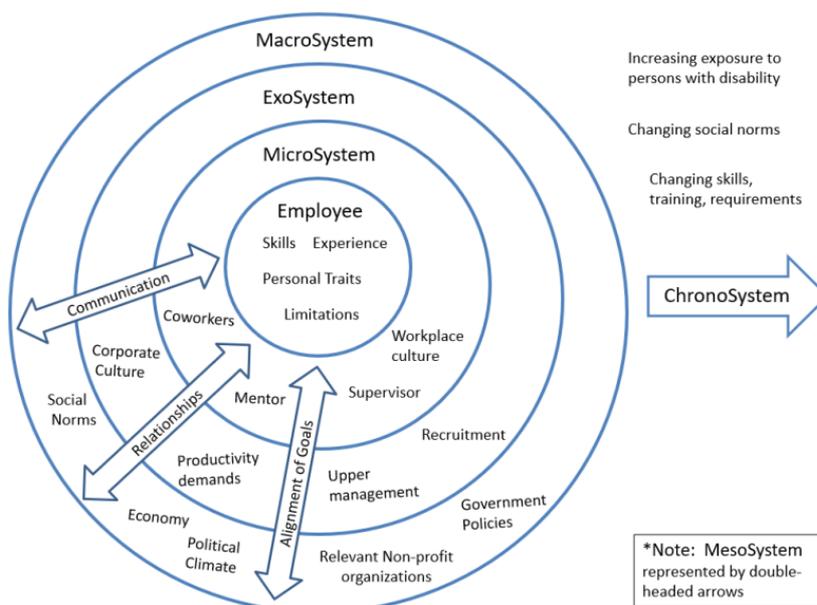

Figure2: *Model of an Inclusive Workplace from an Ecological Systems perspective*

In this paper, we aim to examine the inclusive workplace through the lens of Ecological Systems theory in the hope that it will better allow us to identify and ameliorate the challenges that can arise at all levels in an organization as it strives for greater inclusion. This will be done by describing each level of

DEVELOPING PERSON

At the center of each Ecological System is the developing person. Here we consider all of their characteristics—age, background, skill set, personality, training, special needs, etc. In a work setting, it may be relevant to consider an individual's training, skill set, age, necessary accommodations, and personality traits. Here we can also place characteristics that describe how the individual fits in the workplace—for example, their productivity, belongingness, and interactions with coworkers. It may initially seem as though these personal characteristics are irrelevant to the workplace—after all, they are likely to be things over which the employer/manager has little influence and control. However, learning about an employee's personal characteristics may provide insight into what tasks they may be suited for, effective motivational tools, or ways to promote success on the job. For example, employees with sensory processing issues found it difficult to work in a noisy warehouse, but excelled when allowed to listen to music while working. As described bya manager with 70 to 80% of his team composed of people with disability: "The way I motivate person X is different than person Y, there is no common method of engagement. You are managing people who have their own experiences, talents, and backgrounds, so if you don't treat [them] as individuals, you will never improve" (Moore, Doughty, Hankins, 2020).

MICROSYSTEM

Perhaps the most important part of the ecological system is the Microsystem. Depicted as the innermost layer of the Ecological System, the Microsystem is comprised of the people, relationships, and environments that an individual interacts with directly. Its proximity to the center of the system reflects the enormous power of the Microsystem to influence (and be influenced by) the individual's behavior, well-being, and development. In most models, the Microsystem includes family, friends, and coworkers, as well as places such as one's neighborhood, church, or school. In the workplace-focused model, it includes team

Bronfenbrenner's model—first in its original focus, then applied to an inclusive workplace. Examples of how each system contributes to the success or failure of integration initiatives will be used to demonstrate the utility of this theoretical approach.

members, immediate supervisors, and anyone else in the workplace that the individual interacts with regularly (HR staff, mentors, etc). It is this regular interaction and that makes the Microsystem a powerful focus of many integration initiatives. And for good reason—regardless of what may be going on in the larger picture of building an inclusive workplace, the Microsystem will loom largest in the employee's day-to-day experiences.

The Microsystem would also include the physical characteristics of the individual's workspace, which can serve to aid or impede the success of an employee. One manager relayed how an observant and thoughtful team member led to an improved Microsystem: "Once a team member had an idea to create an "easy button" for the employee with a disability. She has cerebral palsy and could not use her fingers to type on a keyboard. Now she uses the palm of her hand to hit the button. This innovation was installed on all the workstations and makes everyone's life better. "This example shows how relatively minor changes in the workplace can make an outsize difference in a company's inclusivity. It also demonstrates the importance of employees' immediate supervisors in promoting inclusive practices on a daily basis. This requires a degree of flexibility, openness, and compassion—all characteristics of a "complexity leadership" style that helps encourage and sustain a culture of inclusivity in the Microsystem (Moore, Maxey, Waite, & Wendover, 2020).

EXOSYSTEM

Just outside the Microsystem is the Exosystem, which consists of the people, relationships, and settings that the individual experiences indirectly. Positioned further from the center of the model, these elements are less immediately influential than those in the Microsystem, but they still play a significant role in shaping the individual's experience. Traditionally, the Exosystem might include the workplace of a parent or spouse, settings that the individual may not interact with directly, but which influence them through members of the

Microsystem. In a work setting, the Exosystem might include upper management, recruitment agencies, productivity demand, and other determinants of general workplace culture. While the Microsystem is the most visible and meaningful; in an employee's day-to-day work experience, in many ways it is the actions of those in the Exosystem that create a workplace culture that makes a supportive Microsystem possible. This can be seen in the creation of policies, support staff, and overall corporate culture. For example, when employing individuals with diverse needs, many companies find that their training protocols and guidelines may need to be adjusted. At Sephora and Walgreens, this meant the creation of a special hands-on training room, greater supervision of on-the-floor training, and an expanded training period (45 days instead of the standard 2 weeks). Corporate support and funds were needed to accommodate these additional needs (time, space, training personnel), but these efforts have been pivotal in fostering the success of employees with special needs. One employee explains the support received from corporate headquarters: "Support from upper management to help overcome issues is key. I have a deaf employee— I write notes. We have now have subtitles for films, which provides him with a feeling [of] inclusion. We need their support to get the tools we need."(Moore, Doughty, & Hankins, 2020).

In addition to upper management, the Exosystem also includes individuals who work less directly with employees, such as those in Human Resources. Sephora departments in the distribution center recognize that the HR inclusion staff are essential to their success. They have three key roles. First, they help the disabled employee "have the right technical fit" in the workplace station. Second, they function as coaches to managers and disabled employees to develop a positive partnership with each other through open communication and resolution of operational issues. In our work, we have seen how important HR staff can be when dealing with issues that arise between employees with disabilities and their immediate supervisors. Rather than allowing the performance-related dismissal of special needs employees, HR can urge/require managers to instead develop performance improvement plans (PIP) for employees not meeting production standards. Managers having difficulty coping with the special needs of their employees are then given the resources and coaching necessary to create a work environment in which the employee can be successful. This often ends up creating a better, more inclusive work environment for *all* employees, rather than benefitting just the targeted employee. Thirdly, they act as recruiters in the community, knowing which partner agencies to work with in order to attract skilled disabled candidates (T. Gustafson, personal communication, July 22nd 2020).

MACROSYSTEM

Continuing to expand the circle of influence, Bronfenbrenner's next system is the Macrosystem. This encompasses the broadest influences on an individual—government, culture, economics and society. These influences are not felt directly but work to shape the contexts and situations that an individual must navigate. In an inclusive work setting, this might include relevant public policies, the economic wellbeing of the company at large, the political climate, and societal beliefs and support. Individuals may not be aware of the myriad ways in which their experiences are shaped by these large-scale forces, but that doesn't diminish their ultimate importance. For example, in many states there are economic incentives for companies to hire individuals with disabilities (United States Department of Labor, 2020). Public support and funding is also critical in operating a variety of non-profit organizations that work with people with disabilities. These programs and individuals can partner with inclusive organizations to help identify good candidates, provide "soft skills" training, supply specially trained job coaches and consultants, as well as create an effective onboarding system (Maxey, Moore, & Hanson, 2017). Most employees are unaware of the ways in which state or federal policy enables diverse employment, but its support in creating an inclusive workplace can be invaluable.

The Macrosystem also encompasses forces like social and cultural norms. Here, companies' increasing desire for inclusion and diversity is mirrored in increasing calls for social justice and representation worldwide. By raising awareness of their inclusion efforts, Sephora has made diversity and inclusion part of its brand identity, both internally and in the public eye. Tom Gustafson of Sephora, said: "Sephora marketing department was very excited about our inclusion program and filmed some of our associates for the national campaign. They included our

associates with a disability and told their story of belonging. These employees have a sense of belonging at Sephora that is very powerful." This sentiment is echoed in a recent campaign: choosing as their company slogan "we belong to something beautiful" (T. Gustafson, personal communication, July 22nd 2020).

CHRONOSYSTEM

A later addition to Bronfenbrenner's model, the Chronosystem is depicted as surrounding the system in its entirety and symbolizes the dynamic nature of an individual's Ecological System over time. An individual's relationships, environments, and social networks are bound to change over time—an inevitability also faced in the workplace. Much like humans grow and develop over time, companies, workplaces, and programs also experience cycles of growth and change. In the Chronosystem of the workplace, we must consider factors such as turnover in management, the productivity cycles found in many industries, changes in employees' skills, shifts in job requirements, changes in social policy, and society's increasing acceptance of PWD and diversity in the workplace. For example, younger employees who are used to main streamed classrooms may be more comfortable working with PWD.

Another such example is the way Sephora's disability inclusion initiative has become, after just 4 years, an integral part of their corporate culture. Tom Gustafson, a Vice President of Human Resources at Sephora, explained that the inclusion initiative is not a secondary project for the company but is central to their identity. In 2019, Sephora's goal was to employ 30% of its distribution center workforce with people with disabilities. In two of their distribution centers they have hired 119 people with disabilities with nine being promoted. This inclusive culture is part of the recruitment process for individuals interested in joining as supervisors and managers (T. Gustafson, personal communication, July 22nd 2020). He stated: "Our recruiting department sends the inclusion video to all the applicants, letting them know about the inclusion initiative. Interestingly, while [other] companies tend to shy away from hiring people with a disability, people who want to come work with us see it differently. I repeatedly hear candidates saying that they want to be part of something great. They want to change people's lives by participating in the inclusion culture of Sephora".

MESOSYSTEM

A final component of Bronfenbrenner's model, the Mesosystem, represents the relationships and interactions that occur between elements in different systems. In our model, this is depicted using arrows, which we feel best captures the connective nature of this system. Here, Bronfenbrenner placed collaborations between school and home, but we might also include concepts such as work/life balance, communication between management and employees, and collaboration or competition between individuals or departments. Other possible forces in the Mesosystem are individuals and philosophies that function to create connection between different systems. A corporate executive champion of the inclusion initiative, points to the corporate leadership philosophy needing to be flexible, adaptive, and decentralized in order to ensure the effective implementation of inclusion in the distribution centers' culture. For example, executives' decision to empower management provides an example of the kind of openness and flexibility that the managers themselves often need to creatively engage employees with special needs. Corporate empowerment allows managers to focus on working with the specificities of each employee, regardless of the existence of a disability, looking to build relationships and innovative solutions by engaging the team in decision making and problem solving. Furthermore, corporate empowerment creates an HR department that focuses on employee and manager development instead of being the enforcers and punishers of compliance. Active engagement with goals, positive, empowering relationships, and clear communication in the Mesosystem can help ensure that challenges are identified and resolved early.

DISCUSSION

It is our hope that by using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory to frame the issue of inclusivity in the workplace, the complexity of such a venture will be better appreciated. It is important to have a multi-faceted approach to inclusion, targeting key players at every level of the company's Ecological System. At the Macrosystem level, a combination of economic factors, governmental policies, and social norms create support and demand for increased attention to diverse hiring practices. For such programs to be pursued, engagement and investment from corporate leaders and upper management (in the Exosystem) is needed to

ensure that key resources and policies are secured and implemented within the company—creating a corporate culture of inclusivity. This should then provide the support and incentive needed for supervisors, coworkers, and mentors to provide an inclusive workplace environment where all employees can thrive. Helping to ensure alignment of goals is the Mesosystem—the relationships and dynamics that create communication and consistency across all systems.

While companies often recognize the recruitment and retention challenges involved in diverse employment, less attention is given to the ongoing challenges of maintaining investment in the program over time—especially with turnover in management. In our work with inclusive organizations, we have seen how rapidly a successful inclusion program can suffer as one or more elements in a system fall out of alignment with the company's inclusion goals and values. For example, one site was eager to begin their inclusive hiring program, and had achieved enthusiastic buy-in from employees, management, and corporate. Policies had been written, and new training protocols developed. The only problem was their recruitment agency, which failed to recruit enough individuals with disability. Only one element of the system was out of alignment with the goal of inclusion, but it was enough to diminish the overall effect considerably. The same could happen if any one of the systems fell out of alignment—so it is important to be mindful and strategic when planning and implementing inclusive practices. The successful, long-term inclusion of persons with disability requires communication, involvement, and buy-in from individuals and groups at all levels of the system.

CONCLUSION

The push for greater diversity and inclusion in the workplace is exciting and long-awaited. A more diverse workforce has the potential to benefit individuals and corporations across the board. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that inclusion initiatives are given the thought, resources, and care needed to succeed. Regardless of the facet of diversity being focused on (age, religion, disability, racial/ethnic background, gender, etc), the success of individuals depends on so much more than just an individual's characteristics—but rather the smooth interactions of a complex system. By encouraging a broader look at the complex ways in which inclusivity involves

support from all levels, the application of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory to the workplace can facilitate a broad range of inclusion and diversity efforts in the workplace.

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