

Towards inclusive social work: Putting an ecological approach into practice

Jeroen Knevel

Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands

Jean Pierre Wilken

Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands

Alice Schippers

University for Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, Netherlands

CORRESPONDENCE:

Jeroen Knevel

e-mail: jeroen.knevel@hu.nl

Abstract

Support for an ecological approach appears to predominate in models geared towards inclusive policies and practices. As such, ecological approaches are in keeping with the social model of disability and a relational understanding of (intellectual) disability. For this study, the ecological model put forward by Simplican et al. (2015) served as a framework in two research projects carried out in the Netherlands between 2016-2021.

In both projects adults with intellectual disabilities, social workers and educators participated in workshops and focus group meetings. Based on data from these projects the model was evaluated for its practical value to social work. This led to four propositions rendering the ecological model more dynamic: adding a focus to change agency and change processes, refining levels of facilitating and impeding variables, adding a focus to participation and influence, and incorporating an intersectionality lens. The ecological model provides good guidance for policies and practice, however, it does more justice to changing and complex practices if we conceive of it in terms of four core dynamics.

Keywords

Social work, social inclusion, ecological approach, dynamics, intellectual disability.

Introduction

Considerable effort and research have been devoted to formulating conceptual definitions of social inclusion. This has led to a terminological forest that is sustained rather than clarified (Amado & McBride, 2013; Simplican et al., 2015; Bigby et al., 2017). By and large, the conceptual maze encompasses three main strands, consisting of components and life domains, barriers and facilitators, and meaning and measurement.

Components of social inclusion cover sense of belonging, being accepted as an individual and uniqueness, having meaningful and reciprocal relationships with nondisabled community members, having voice and choice, feeling competent, having service provider support and natural support (Hall, 2009; Amado & McBride, 2013; Jansen et al., 2014; Cobigo et al., 2016). These components intersect with life domains such as work, housing, recreation, leisure, and a multitude of barriers and facilitators identified in accomplishing the social inclusion objective. Barriers and facilitators vary in contextual factors (physical accessibility, communication, social spaces, professional and community attitudes, local social infrastructure, economic expectations and facilities, legislation and policies) and personal factors such as intrinsic motivation, goal setting, level of functioning, and self-esteem (Hall, 2005; Kröber, 2008; Cobigo et al., 2012; Bredewold, 2014; Moonen, 2015; Simplican et al., 2015; Brummel, 2017; Overmars-Marx et al., 2017).

Complexity to the inclusion discourse is added with the question of measurability. On the one hand a subjective meaning of inclusion is centered on the individual experience and connecting life stories (Meininger, 2010; Cobigo et al., 2016), and on the other hand, there is a desire to gauge inclusion in terms of quantities (Amado & McBride, 2013; Jansen et al., 2014; Asunta et al., 2021) as the argument persists that social inclusion is too important not to measure (Coombs et al., 2013).

Martin and Cobigo (Martin & Cobigo, 2011), however, cautioned that the nature of the measure used has a significant impact on the outcome of inclusion. Understanding and measuring social inclusion as a comprehensive concept is strongly impacted by the indicators selected. They furthermore note that objective measures yield higher rates than subjective measures. Consequently, when the person's subjective experience is measured, achieving social inclusion seems further away than counting participation in, for instance, social or leisure activities, work or receiving support from an informal helper.

In the pursuit of social inclusion several approaches are put forward that incorporate these strands. Kröber (2016) champions a simultaneous and multi-perspective approach encompassing bottom-up, middle and top-down strategies. Moreover, in an earlier study Kröber (2008) highlights «entry strategies» which amount to an implementation strategy that deals with how to introduce and execute a new vision and mission across all levels of an organization. This approach considers the socio-political environment, the organization, the employees and the people with disabilities including their informal network. Cobigo et al. (2016) suggest a framework stressing the dynamic process between personal

characteristics and skills, and environmental factors, in which socially valued roles have a pivotal function.

Simplican et al. (2015) proposed an ecological model of social inclusion consisting of two overlapping life domains: interpersonal relationships and community participation. The first comprises category, structure and function. Category refers to social connections that range from intimate relationships to superficial encounters. Structure relates to social networks and covers duration of relationships, frequency and intensity of encounters, reciprocity and location. Function indicates relationships that fulfill emotional or instrumental needs. Community participation is distinguished in a similar threefold manner.

Category signifies activities in the community (leisure, political, religious, cultural activities, productive and consumptive activities). Structure points to settings that either can be segregated from mainstream society, semi-segregated and non-segregated (mainstream or integrated). Level refers to being engaged in-activities in-the community and can be described in terms of participation ladders focused on labor participation or political participation (Arnstein, 1969; Bosselaar, 2011), or interaction patterns between people with and without a disability (Bredewold & Slendebroek-Meints, 2013; Bredewold, 2014).

Furthermore, they include a set of elements that shape pathways to and from social inclusion grouped into individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and socio-political clusters. Both domains and the set of facilitating and impeding variables clearly underline the features inherent to relational social work (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012; Driessens, 2022).

The ecological model appears comprehensive given its applicability to any domain of life accounting for factors that can be either conducive or impeding at different levels in society. It does not provide a tool for measuring social inclusion either objectively or subjectively, but rather provides starting points for developing and evaluating research, policies and programs. Simplican et al. (2015) argue that the ecological model is an appropriate guide for future research questions and approaches that can move social inclusion forward. As yet, one empirical evaluation of this model is available. With the aim of validating the model, Meys et al. (2021) confirm that the ecological model helps in obtaining an overview of enabling and impeding conditions.

They conclude that some factors on the individual and interpersonal level require further detail such as adding personality traits as a factor affecting social inclusion and a division between formal social networks and informal social networks. They furthermore add dynamics as a dimension that covers each level of factors. Dynamics — both over time and between enabling and disabling factors — would provide more insight into the evolution of social inclusion.

In the period 2016-2021 we carried out two projects where the ecological model served as a framework. Drawing on the experiences we evaluated the model for its practical value to social work. As such, this study further contributes to the validation of the ecological model.

Method

The two projects we ran between 2016-2021 were named «Inclusive Campus Life» and «Towards Inclusion». The objective of the Erasmus+ co-funded project Inclusive Campus Life was to promote and support inclusion of adults with mild intellectual disabilities in university campuses (IC Life, 2016). To achieve this, four schools of social work in Europe collaborated for three years (2016-2019) in so called work packages that revolved around accessibility, buddy systems, learning and teaching activities by students with mild intellectual disabilities, curriculum development, and workplacement.

Universities involved were Thomas More University of Applied Sciences (Belgium), Utrecht University of Applied Sciences (The Netherlands), Palacký University (Czech Republic) and Lapland University of Applied Sciences (Finland). In addition, the international advocacy organization Inclusion Europe was engaged in the project.

The project Towards Inclusion was aimed at deepening and nuancing conceptual and professional social work related knowledge on how to advance the social inclusion of adults with mild intellectual disabilities in the community (Knevel et al., 2022). This involved a 2-year collaboration between 2019-2021 with social workers and adults with mild intellectual disabilities in two cities of the Netherlands, Wageningen and Amsterdam.

In both projects the ecological model was evaluated during workshops and focus group meetings. Informed consent was obtained verbally — audio-recorded — from all participants involved in the study.

Workshops and focus group IC Life project

During the Inclusive Campus Life project four workshops with international partners (Geel, 2017, 2018; Utrecht, 2019; Brussels, 2019) were organized that were attended by management staff, educators, life experts, researchers and students from the partnering schools of social work, and advocacy organizations (see Table 1). On one occasion educators and management staff from the Ukrainian Catholic University (Lviv) attended. Beside the workshops, four focus group meetings were organized (Geel, 2017; Kemi, 2018; Olomouc, 2018; Utrecht, 2019) and solely attended by the educators and management staff that formed the core team of the IC Life project.

These meetings took place at the universities involved in this project. At the workshops and focus groups experiences were collected with regard to advancing social inclusion at the university, an ecological approach was discussed, and suggestions were made for redesigning it. Workshops and focus groups were held every four to six months. After completion and closure of the IC Life project, the assessment and redevelopment of an ecological approach continued in the project Towards Inclusion.

Focus groups towards Inclusion

In this project we gathered in two separate focus groups called Communities of Development (CoD) which derives from the idea of community of practice (CoP) (Wenger, 2010; Wilken et al., 2021). Wenger (2010) describes a community of practice as a social learning system in a social context where a dual process of meaning making materializes. This duality consists of participation and reification. The first involves active involvement in activities, conversations and reflections. The latter involves producing physical and conceptual artifacts such as words, tools, concepts and methods. The community of development includes both participation and reification, but links this dual process to four goals, namely, producing knowledge, designing a solution, bringing about (social) change and personal and collective professionalization of the participants (Van Beest et al., 2017). The CoD further distinguishes itself from the CoP by the emphasis on collectively designing solutions and by substantiating the process and results — artifacts — with research.

A total of nineteen meetings were held over a period of two years, at intervals of seven to eight weeks (see Table 1). Ten meetings with the CoD Wageningen and nine meetings with de CoD Amsterdam. The CoD Amsterdam and the CoD Wageningen were composed of social workers and adults with mild intellectual disabilities. The CoD Amsterdam and the CoD Wageningen comprised eight and four participants respectively. The CoD Amsterdam contained two experts by experience. The CoD Wageningen started with two experts by experience, but as the project progressed one withdrew for practical reasons (moving to another city) and the other due to the subject matter which was deemed too abstract.

	Workshops	Focus groups	Participants workshops	Participants focus groups
IC Life	4	4	27* (5, 10, 4, 8)	8**
Towards Inclusion	X	19	X	12*** (8 + 4)

* Twenty-two social work educators, three life experts with mild intellectual disability, two managers/ staff members.

** Seven social work educators, one manager.

*** Two experts by experience with mild intellectual disability, two managers/ staff members, eight social workers.

Table 1 Research participation

The evaluation process followed a cyclical and incremental route that consisted of group discussions, notes of these discussions, producing drafts and prototypes, which

were field tested — testing instructions were provided — and discussed and adjusted in subsequent meetings. The evaluation items covered:

1. Language (what language is used in the ecological approach towards inclusion).
2. Structure (the ecological approach is captured in what kind of structure).
3. Practice-focused (to what extent is the ecological approach consistent with experiences in practice).
4. Purpose (evaluation instrument for change, advancement towards inclusion, measuring quantities).
5. Operationalization (sensitizing concepts incorporated such as inclusion, participation, involvement, change).
6. Focus on transforming the current situation into a more inclusive one.
7. Comprehensiveness (what content is relevant and how is this incorporated in an ecological approach).
8. Consideration of context (to what extent is the ecological approach fit for international use taking into account history, socio-politics, community cultures, organizational culture etcetera).

The collected data consisted of handwritten notes taken during the meetings, reports (written and visualized) made of the meetings, audio recordings of the meetings using a voice recorder, and all tangible material created during the meetings such as written results from brainstorming sessions, empathy maps, sketches, drawings, and prototypes. The handwritten notes and reports were shared with the participants during the whole research process and provided input for further discussion at each succeeding meeting. The tangible materials served as tools to collect data, for instance to use as a means for conversation. Audio-recordings were transcribed and analysis was carried out in the last stages of both research projects. Results from the analysis were shared and discussed with the participants for validation.

Ethics

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study in four ways: (1) physical meetings to explain the project and discover the motivations and potential contributions of the participants, and (2) a visual representation for persons with intellectual disabilities concerning information about the research project, roles, and responsibilities. The visualization complied with accessible language criteria, (3) signing of a general cooperation agreement with partner organizations, and (4) informed consent was recorded with a voice recorder. Oral informed consent was obtained rather than written consent. Privacy by default was used in this study. This means that this research adopted the highest possible privacy settings.

The research proposal was submitted for ethical review to the Utrecht University of Applied Sciences (ECO-SD) and the Ethical Review Committee (ETC) of the University of Humanistic Studies. An explanatory commentary and advice on the research proposal requested that attention be paid to the possible risks for the participants and that these risks be kept in mind (ECO-SD).

Findings

The group discussions and evaluations converged into four themes: change agency and change processes, finer grained levels covering enabling and impeding variables, participation and influence, and intersectionality. The four themes are in keeping with the relational understanding of (intellectual) disability, which assumes, (a) a mismatch between the person and the environment that needs redressing, (b) that (intellectual) disability is a situational or contextual phenomenon, and (c) that (intellectual) disability is a relative social construct (Goodley, 2017). Relational understanding highlights the empowering and disempowering contributions of services and practitioners, to include social workers. It implies a moral stance that deems exclusion from communities and social work practices as morally unacceptable. The four themes described align with the relational model since both aim at systemic change, normalization and inclusive community living (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012; Wolfensberger, 2013; Ingram & Smith, 2018).

Change agency and change processes

Most conceptualizations of social inclusion highlight a process signifying change. However, in the ecological model, little detail is given to change agency and change processes. The research projects confirm that inclusion requires a change agency and that advancing inclusion benefits from the understanding that it demands a multi-stage change process. Here, change is understood in terms of how Folgheraiter and Raineri (2012, 476-477) phrased it: as an «associated (social) action... a joint will to attain a desired improvement».

Broadly speaking, social workers demonstrated change agency in two ways. First, behavior that shows initiative, proactivity, networking and building relationships with the organization's management and staff, and with the community, and setting and achieving feasible goals. Educators and social workers gave evidence of this in the many activities they undertook in their practice, either in promoting an inclusive campus for higher education through workplacement, in collaborating with people with intellectual disabilities in teaching and training activities at the university, or in facilitating encounters between people with intellectual disabilities and community members with no intellectual disability through inclusive and competitive sports events such as football and volleyball.

A second behavior featuring change agency is the advocacy of persons with intellectual disabilities in which ingrained and outdated stereotypes and prejudices within the community are combated (actively seeking to alter perceptions). A striking example was given by a social worker in calling herself a «destigmatizer» when she came to the realization that she is practically continually reminding staff of various organizations (health services, social service providers, community organizations such as sports clubs and so on) of their stigmatizing utterances and conduct.

Both behaviors are complementary and fit in the endeavour of inclusion-focused social work that seeks change for the benefit of the quality of life of people with intellectual disabilities. Both behaviors were demonstrated in the practices involved in the research projects. Although the degree of project-based work in both research projects differed greatly, we nevertheless recognized different stages that are necessary to bring about change.

In addition to change agency, change processes were identified in five recurring stages, with the last stage expressly deemed desirable by the participants. It concerns absence, agenda setting, analysis, action, and (inclusive) evaluation.

Absence is to be conceived of as a stage zero. This holds that inclusion in general terms or specified as a single topic is not being addressed. For instance, it is not on the agenda of the organization's board, management and staff, politics, policy makers, executives, social workers or any other relevant actor. A subsequent stage is agenda-setting. Inclusion in general or a specific topic pertaining to inclusion is being discussed by the organization's board, management and staff, politics, policy makers and so on. Intentions to address the topic are expressed. In this stage agents consider to endeavor for inclusion with regards to a preferred topic. Agenda-setting is followed by analysis. Inclusion in general or a specific topic has been taken on the agenda. Staff is assigned to conduct an analysis on topics such as accessibility (physical, social, information and communication), involvement in activities at school or participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport, workplacement (employment opportunities). The analysis provides a picture of the situation at the local setting that is chosen to pursue inclusion of persons with a mild intellectual disability. Stemming from the analysis it is determined on which topics action is taken. An action plan is drawn up containing goals and performance indicators. Now intentions are being turned into actions.

Succeeding the action stage, evaluation is required and can be conducted in two ways: in a non-inclusive and inclusive manner. We shape this distinction explicitly as too often evaluations of projects aiming at inclusion come about lacking genuine involvement and influence of the people concerned. Tokenism lurks when people with intellectual disabilities are solely deployed to carry out activities and are otherwise excluded from participating in project stages, such as setting goals, thinking along with planning, implementation and evaluation. Doing so, they partially lose their voice. For instance, evaluation in the non-inclusive way is performed by social workers and proxies but not the

persons with an intellectual disability themselves. The inclusive manner includes persons with intellectual disability irrespective of whatever position he or she holds. Reciprocity and learning together during the whole process is a prerequisite to fully experience the stage of inclusive evaluation.

Evaluation encompasses a number of items: goals (with regard to what topics did you set goals, which goals do you reckon achieved and which not), pathways (what were major actions undertaken to achieve your goals, in what timeline were major actions undertaken, and by whom), enabling conditions (what conditions facilitated the accomplishment of your goals), impeding conditions (what conditions impeded the accomplishment of your goals), and opportunities (what could you do different in achieving your goals, what impeding condition can you change into opportunities).

Levels of enabling and impeding variables

A micro, mezzo, macro division was perceived as a clear, but too coarse-grained structure. In a more refined division such as clusters of variables at the individual, interpersonal, organizational, community and socio-political level (Simplican et al., 2015), much overlap and a lack of practical relevance was observed: social workers deemed the classification indiscriminate and could not quite recognize their social work practice in it. This deficiency was overcome by adding two levels: social workers (professionals) and department or team level, which we refer to as unit.

At the level of professionals, we can identify indicators that promote or hinder inclusion. This is reflected in the social workers' value orientation and their professional attitude (Kröber, 2008), the social workers' vision of the social work core remit, and approaches and methods employed in a team (Knevel & Wilken, 2015; Wilken & Knevel, 2016), the social workers' confidence in their personal competences to have an impact (Moonen, 2015), holding stereotypes, prejudices and unwittingly stigmatizing people with intellectual disabilities (Pelleboer-Gunnink, 2020), and social workers acting with disciplinary power that violates human rights and conflicts with ideas of justice (Klaase, 2019).

Unit-level was added after participants' repeated observations that team composition has a strong bearing on whether or not social workers support and implement the corporate vision. In addition, a team that has an enhanced focus on inclusion may stand out from the organization. Teams or departments can be more ambitious than what the corporate vision dictates. Team cultures and departmental cultures can differ and may even deviate from the corporate culture to such an extent that it the corporate culture and structure constitutes an impeding factor-technology, financial space, laws and regulations.

Another observation holds that in teams, one or a few professionals oftentimes fulfill a pioneer's role, whilst other team members distance themselves from the matter

and label the frontrunners' work as «that's their job». In doing so, they barely adopt inclusion-focused actions that are based on good experiences.

Management and staff are an integral part of the effort to achieve inclusion. Invariably, their behavior serves as an example to inspire confidence in team members and encourage them to perform inclusion focused as well. When this behavior expresses intrinsic belief in inclusion it proves to be a facilitator. Imposing an inclusion-focused approach on a team is counterproductive.

Participation and influence

An ecological approach to promoting social inclusion presumes the acknowledgment of the voices of persons concerned and thus sharing influence and power. Influence is comprehended as a phenomenon that affects the probability of choices, thereby impacting behavior, beliefs, knowledge, decisions, and policies of the other (Zaaiman, 2020).

Participants repeatedly commented the peculiarity of working on inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities without involving them. The powerful phrase «nothing about us without us for us», should apply in collaborations from beginning to end, so to say covering the stages agenda-setting, contributions to analysis, actions and evaluation. However, we find participation and influence exerted through participation is hardly reflected in the ecological model.

In line with this, the critique was made that participation interlocking with influence was mostly conceived in a vertical and sequential order; the idea of the higher up the ladder the stronger the participation and the more influence. Each step upwards symbolizes a higher degree of influence (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992; Edelenbos et al., 2001). The same principle applies to a variant proposed by Fung (2006) that consists of three dimensions packed into a democracy cube. All possess hierarchical sequence from forms of «no participation» (tokenism, decoration) to forms of «participation» (consultation, partnership, delegated power, citizen control) and devised in three dimensional scales of intensity, inclusiveness and authority. Participation and degree of influence, however, can move both vertically and horizontally (Van Houten & Winsemius, 2010). Van Houten and Winsemius (2010) define horizontal participation as behavior that involves doing something for another person or the immediate living environment, such as volunteering, helping neighbors, membership in a neighborhood committee or action group. Addressing someone for unwanted behavior in the public space or greeting each other in the street are also included. Vertical participation is explained as citizens exerting influence on policy (neighbourhood councils or residents' committees) or on the functioning of services (client councils, participation councils). Both axes must be recognized and should be part of a conceptualization of pathways to social inclusion.

The research projects demonstrated participation and influence in both horizontal and vertical capacities, not contending that more or less intense involvement is congruent with more or less influence, and that intense involvement plus obvious influence is not necessarily best in pursuing social inclusion.

Intersectionality

A fourth criticism was the essentialist approach to people with intellectual disabilities and the underplaying of the persistent power imbalances that perpetuates inequality. In both research projects, the experts by experience with mild intellectual disabilities clearly expressed their awareness of the disadvantaged position they and their peers have in society, mentioning examples of being low educated, having very few opportunities to further education, scarcity of employment that matches the interests of people with intellectual disabilities, being unemployed, having low income jobs or being dependent on social welfare payments. This was repeatedly underscored with the statement «we are more than an intellectual disability».

In the project Towards Inclusion, especially in the metropolitan environment of Amsterdam, social workers indicated that they observed discrimination, deprivation, and inequality of people with intellectual disabilities, adding that this condition moves beyond intellectual disability, and is amplified by other «social identities» such as ethnic and cultural background, educational level of the person with intellectual disability, and in some cases that of the parents and close family, which relates to language skills and socio-economic status.

This led to adopting an intersectional perspective found pivotal in an ecological approach if inclusion is to be achieved by taking into account the multitude of influences (Barnartt, 2013).

Intersectionality relies on social constructions like race, gender or ability, and many other intersecting categories, but not as a singular point of inequality. The notion of «intersection» demands another, interlocking point of inequality (Collins, 2015). For example, intersectionality critically examines the oppression experienced by a person with an intellectual disability who is a woman of Turkish background, whose highest level of education is secondary school, earns a low income just enough to pay for a small social housing, and appears to have little chance of enhancing her working career. There are plenty of examples of «intersecting categories» that sustain marginalization and powerlessness.

The strength of intersectionality is that it is both an analytical strategy that provides new angles of vision on social phenomena and intersectionality understood as critical praxis that informs social justice projects (Collins, 2015). As Hill Collins (2015, 15) states, intersectionality «makes sense for social justice projects aimed at remedying complex social inequalities and subsequently constitutes an important tool for political engagement». In

addition, it is useful to distinguish between different styles of understanding intersectionality in practice (Choo & Ferree, 2010). One way of understanding it is to emphasize placing multiply marginalized groups and their perspectives at the center of the research. A second way is to view intersectionality as a process that highlights power as relational and that sees the interactions among variables as multiplying oppressions at various points of intersection. And lastly, intersectionality understood as shaping the entire social system and so pushing analysis away from associating specific inequalities with unique institutions.

In effect, seeking social inclusion is interwoven with the pursuit of social justice and cannot go without an intersectional lens, as the intersection of intellectual disability and the many other intersecting categories that make up a person and one's life, keep fueling oppression (Watchman, 2019).

Four core dynamics

Reflection on the above results led us to redesign the ecological framework that is deemed helpful for social work practice and for the analysis and assessment of practices and policies pursuing the social inclusion of adults with intellectual disabilities. We depict the redesign as a multidisc turntable (see figure 1). The model of four core dynamics is a means to thoroughly understand and shape inclusion-focused processes. To do so, one needs to take into account factors that influence inclusion at different levels (core dynamic levels of enabling and impeding variables).

In order to act effectively awareness of the different stages in the process is required (core dynamic change processes). Advancing social inclusion gains wider support when processes are inclusive, that is, where participation of the people concerned genuinely takes place and where participation is evidently influential, up to the level of having power (core dynamic participation and influence). In its entirety, all actors involved must relinquish essentialism and recognize that oppression and exclusion are entrenched and interwoven in multiple, intersecting, social categories also aptly referred to as double or multiple discrimination (core dynamic intersectionality).

We can aggregate our proposed additions into a modified holistic approach best understood as four core dynamics. Drawing on the findings, we can assert that in striving for social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities, it is of great importance to consider all four core dynamics. From each core dynamic emerge implications.

Change agency and change processes

A change lens logically derives from one of the key features of social inclusion definitions that points to a crucial role that social workers have in bringing about social inclu-

sion, namely, social innovator or change agent. Caldwell (2003) defines change agent as «an internal or external individual or team responsible for initiating, sponsoring, directing, managing or implementing a specific initiative, project or complete programme». It is about being aware of the broad scope of this concept and avoiding the misconception that change agents are visionary or charismatic individuals or innovation champions, but rather that change agency is about the environment, and that it is inseparable from team orientation and the various layers of an organization. This understanding is helpful in avoiding a single belief that social workers seeking to promote inclusion must act as agents of change, thereby raising expectations that may be far removed from how social workers perceive their practice. Hence change agency should not be inflated into mere groundbreaking initiatives that result in major successes with a claimed high impact, it should also value small change in social work micro-practices and the contribution of social workers involved in it.

Inclusion is not a given, rather, it is fluid and vulnerable. Once inclusion has ostensibly been achieved, it can easily be violated or vanish again. Society retains focus on the mainstream culture, which establishes and imposes the standards of behavior in norms, values, and preferences. Change management should not be taken lightly, as it requires a range of competences. In view of facilitating inclusion, which we relate to human rights, change agency encompasses advocacy and intrapreneurship skills (Antoncic & Hisrich, 2003).

Arbitrariness of distinguishing levels

Every model is a reduction of what is observed in the field. Any attempt at conceptualization and modeling risks being somewhat arbitrary. This is, for example, reflected in the typical categorization of social work practice into three interrelated scales micro, mezzo, macro. Reduction is not disturbing as long as the essence is reflected, and thus recognizable and useful for practice and policy evaluation. In our projects, it turned out time and again that existing divisions of different scales were a source of discussion. The tripartite division of micro, mezzo, macro is without doubt the most widely used, and at the same time one that demands a flexible approach in terms of its interpretation. Due to its rough lay-out social workers deem it «too much abstraction and theory». For empirical policy evaluations and research purposes, however, it is useful to connect to classifications that are recognizable in practice.

The additions «unit» and «professionals» interface with descriptions of the mezzo and micro levels. Both additions can be understood at the mezzo scale where unit is seen as a component of an organization performing functions of a bureaucracy and having an internal focus, and where professionals are viewed as a group of representatives of a profession. Both additions can also be understood at the micro scale where social work is perceived as a micro-practice and social work conducting individual and family counseling, clinical social workers providing direct services, interventions, and support to individuals,

families, and groups, or helping individuals navigate resources such as social welfare programs from the government or the health care system.

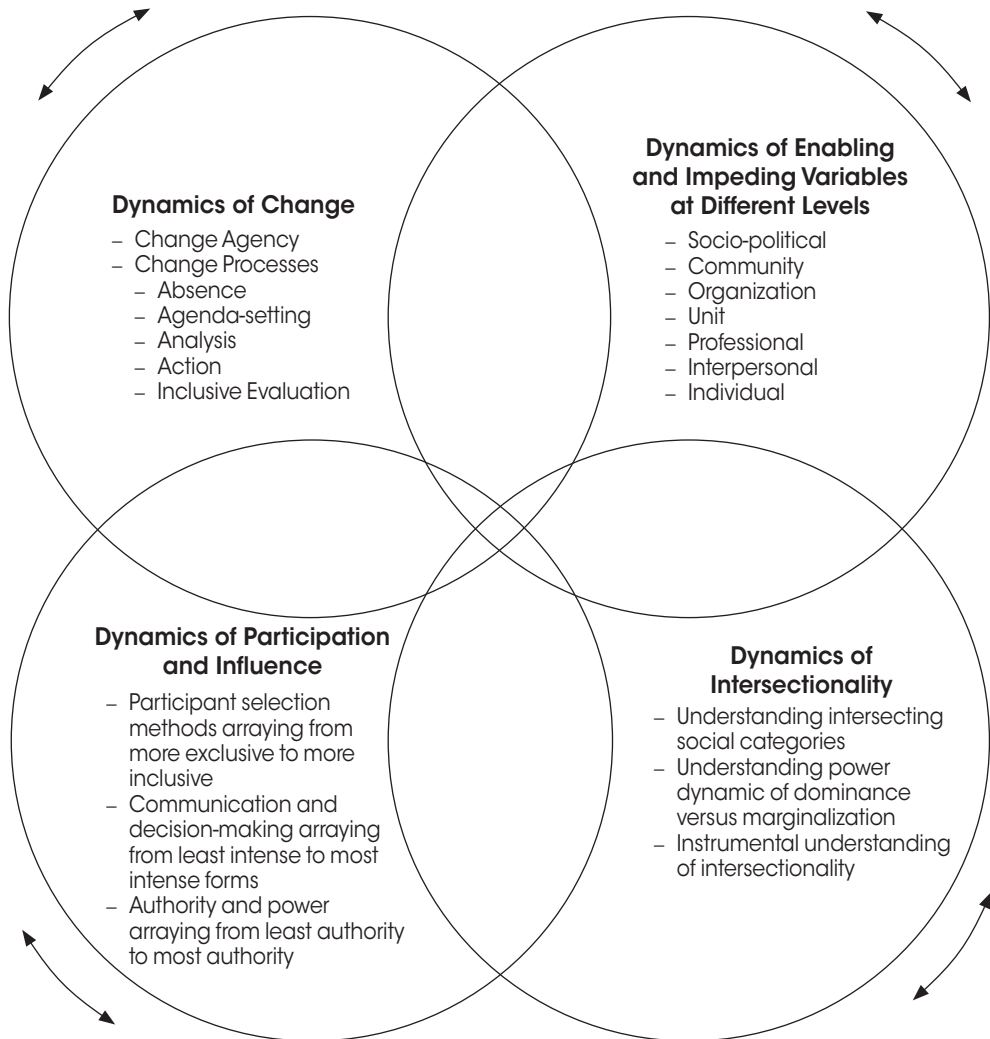


Figure 1 Four core dynamics in processes to social inclusion.

Professionals can equally be said to be part of the mezzo level when social workers' primary focus centers on problem-solving on behalf of groups of clients (mezzo social work). They identify factors that affect the well-being of multiple clients within organizations or within a small community or they collaborate with other client systems and agencies, implementing programs and advocating for services and resources (Forenza & Eckert, 2018; Powell et al., 2020).

Regardless of what division is opted for in a model for analysis or a model for the evaluation of social work practice, we must accept that arbitrariness remains in the form of overlap, interdependence and interrelatedness of variables inside each scale and across scales.

Participation and influence

The issue of participation and influence raises a number of questions. First, the idea of participation posed as normatively imperative. Without some form of participation by relevant groups, efforts at inclusion appear to lose credibility, and get classified as *pro forma* or non-participation. It disregards a fundamental principle within social work, specifically relational social work, which is the principle of reciprocity, as articulated by Folgheraiter and Raineri (2012). For participation and influence to occur, a collaborative connection needs to be founded on relational equality (Driessens, 2022). It is reasonable to differentiate between forms of participation, yet is it by definition «not inclusive» when actions are carried out without participation?

Jacquet (2017) lists a number of reasons for non-participation that are worth considering, such as giving priority to concentration on the private sphere, self-disqualification because of perceived lack of competence and expertise regarding the discussed topics, generalized rejection of (political) activities with a feeling of powerlessness, participation seen as an elite-driven manipulation or negative evaluation of the mini-public because of the lack of potential outputs in the system.

Another concern bears on the recruitment of participants as such approaches are inherently selective. It consists in recruitment generally taking place using one's own network and choosing preferred channels and media. In addition, accessibility determines to a large extent to whom the message of the recruitment gets across and what the effect of the procedure is to achieve participation. Selectivity may lead to over-representation of certain groups, including the occurrence of the usual suspects participating in democratic processes that envisage social inclusion. This raises questions of genuine participation, its linkage to influence, and treating non-participation as a form of participation as well. Moreover, participation and influence appear to be based on the assumption that both are fundamentally good. We then enter a discourse where participation and influence have become empty signifiers deployed to signal a commitment to multiple perspectives, but often not carried through in any meaningful way (Cornwall, 2010). Moreover, there is criticism of the underlying structural inequalities that shape the relationships between different stakeholders in project efforts. Reynolds and Sariola (2018) point at participation becoming a self-fulfilling strategy, in which those who are already successfully «engaged» partake in the process and where modes of engagement are significantly constrained by existing power dynamics.

With regards to our research approach similar observations were made. Although it was practice informed, involvement of persons with intellectual disability remained minimal, which is explained by the fact that rethinking an existing framework is principally an abstract exercise. The mixture of participants entails power imbalances. For instance, risking that the voices of people with intellectual disabilities are overpowered and go unheard. Intertwined with this is the responsibility issue in enhancing the social inclusion of persons with intellectual disabilities. It is a matter of what Freire (1970) termed, the development of critical consciousness through a mutual process between the «oppressed» and the «oppressors».

The closely related concepts participation and influence are oftentimes situated in citizen participation in policy making and arranged in a hierarchical order following the principle of the higher up the participation ladder, the more influence you have. This reveals a risk of oversimplification, as little account is taken of an aspect of the participatory ideology that appears less tangible, but which ought to be appreciated nonetheless, namely that participation as such can be of value. This explains the addition of horizontal participation without explicitly linking it to any degree of influence granted by inviting bodies (authorities). For example, the silent presence of a person can influence decision-making processes. Likewise, a previous encounter with or comment made by someone who is currently absent from a democratic meeting, can impact decision-making and implementation processes. We can consider this an influence without manifest participation (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). In traditional participation ladders, however, this is filed under types of non-participation or tokenism such as decoration, informing, consultation and placation (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992). In our account of advocating social inclusion, the democratic cube offers some illumination on the complexity of participation and influence (Fung, 2006). It attaches three dimensions to participation and influence: participant selection, communication and decision making, and authority and power. Participant selection methods diverge from more exclusive (recruiting and involving experts administrators, elected representatives) to more inclusive (least restrictive methods of selection that is open to all who wish to attend), communication and decision arraying from least intense to most intense forms interaction and decision making (from being a spectator to deliberation, negotiation and deploying expertise), and the dimension of authority and power arraying from least authority to most authority (someone participates to derive personal benefits or participants exercise direct authority over public decisions and resources). Applying such a three dimensional way enriches and deepens the story of participation and influence.

Intersectionality and the inclusion–exclusion nexus

Intersectionality is narrowly associated with diversity, inclusion and exclusion. Thomas et al. (2021) underline that intersectionality is distinct from diversity as it «challenges the status-quo by taking a holistic approach to human individuality, transitioning siloed

views of diversity to a more intrinsic view of identity to achieve inclusivity». Laperrière and Lépinard (2016) put forward a more instrumental understanding of intersectionality by distinguishing intersectionality as a tool for the inclusion of underprivileged populations inside organizations and as a tool used to reveal the political marginalization within organizations. Ultimately, an intersectionality lens has an impact on the political agendas in communities and organizations. Although Laperrière and Lépinard (2016) apply this to migrant women, the principle applies equally to underprivileged minority groups such as people with disabilities. Regardless of whether intersectionality is presented as a holistic approach or as a tool, this lens helps comprehend social-political reality and provides opportunities to explore new courses of action that enhance understanding and encourage inclusivity at the micro, mezzo and macro levels.

Adopting the intersectionality lens necessitates a critical awareness of those involved, both those who enjoy privilege and those who are subject to the dominance axes, and in that sense, get marginalized by oppressive structures. However, this awareness is not evident among both the privileged population and the underprivileged. From both sides, willingness to develop a critical consciousness and daring to show vulnerability are therefore paramount. As Paolo Freire (1970) asserted and elucidated, «liberation is not a gift, not a self-realization, but a mutual process» between the «oppressor» and «the oppressed».

Thomas et al. (2021) therefore claim that we no longer can work to a notion of universality or traditional thinking around inclusion and diversity, but instead we must work from a framework of intersectionality built on understanding how the broader context of identity impacts individuals differently, at different times and in different contexts.

Recurring in the inclusion and exclusion literature is the contrasting of both phenomena. In itself an intelligible tendency when inclusion is understood as combating exclusion (Asante, 1997), but this simplicity is not a realistic representation of the comprehensive and complex practice. Authors of discussions of social inclusion commonly use theories and discourses related to exclusion to develop their arguments. This induces confusion and blurring of boundaries between both concepts (Wright & Stickley, 2013). Only a handful of studies critique this dualism and invite nuance (Rawal, 2008; Hunting et al., 2015; Silver, 2015; Mascareño & Carvajal, 2016). Hunting et al. (2015) bring to the fore an intersectionality lens intended to transform current understandings of, and approaches to, social inclusion. They assert that social inclusion and exclusion are dynamic and simultaneous, that experiences of social inclusion and exclusion differ and change across populations, and that social inclusion and exclusion are constituted and shaped by power. Mascareño and Carvajal (Mascareño & Carvajal, 2016) transcend the dualism by identifying five constellations of inclusion and exclusion wherein inclusion and exclusion coexist — self-inclusion/self-exclusion, compensatory inclusion, subinclusion, inclusion in the exclusion, and inclusion by risk/exclusion by danger. In addition, social exclusion is usually condemned as unjust, whereas inclusion has its downsides as well. For example openness to the «other» can jeopardize group ways of life and the feeling of being

at home (Rawal, 2008; Silver, 2015). The virtue of intersectionality is that it transcends the false inclusion-exclusion opposition and allows room for other strategies to achieve social inclusion.

Complexity in complexity: four interrelated core dynamics

Social inclusion and the pursuit to achieving it concerns an ecology conceived as a totality of relations between elements and their environment. We have discerned four core dynamics that shape a comprehensive ecology of social inclusion: change management lens, levels of enabling and impeding variables, participation and influence, and the intersectionality lens.

We have not refrained from displaying the immense complexity and comprehensiveness of the idea of social inclusion in our model. Herein lies the pitfall of the inclusion discourse. If we oversimplify it, then virtually every initiative can be labelled as inclusive in one way or another; if we take its complexity seriously, then it risks discouraging micro and mezzo social workers, and will it remain a matter for actors active in (macro) policy making. While promoting inclusion relies heavily on initiatives by the micro social work profession and the subjugated population itself. Our model not only includes different levels of facilitating and impeding forces, it also suggests that working on inclusion is an ongoing process of change, that stakeholder participation and influence is integral to this process and that this needs to be understood from an intersectional perspective. The failure to set up a change management lens and an intersectionality lens is in itself a limiting factor in the pursuit of inclusion.

Conclusion

We can conclude that the ecological model of social inclusion provides good guidance for policy and practice. Nevertheless, it is a tool that overlooks or undervalues crucial components of social inclusion. To do more justice to the complex reality of social inclusion, it is not sufficient to put into effect policies, and develop and evaluate programs based on impeding and facilitating factors at different levels only. Social inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities continues to revolve around a power struggle for recognition, which requires transformative social change. In this regard, it is imperative to invariably include participatory processes where participation and co-decision making is central to an ecological approach as well as the intersectional framework that highlights persistent social power inequalities. In addition to advocating social change, the intersectional lens provides a deeper explanatory basis for the impeding factors and promoting opportunities. By taking social inclusion and exclusion as a social construct, we acknowledge its

dynamic nature, rendering it obvious to adopt an ecological approach that is reflective of it in four core dynamics.

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