

Promoting Social Justice Antecedents of an Inclusive Leader in Public Organizations: A Macro and Micro Perspective

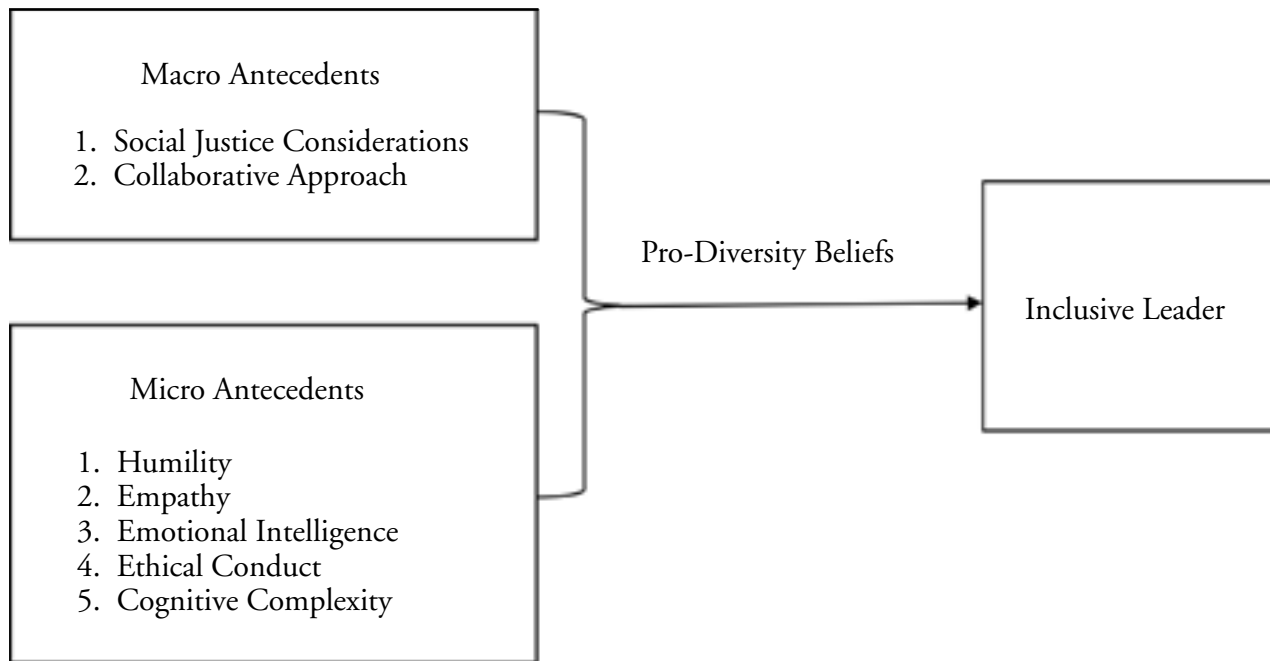
Namrta Sharma
Meghna Sabharwal

As public administration struggles to further the goal of social equity, part of the problem is leaders who do not know what characteristics can help them act more inclusively. The role of a leader to establish and promote social equity cannot be overemphasized. Leaders can inadvertently play saboteur. As humans, leaders suffer from cognitive limitations that translate into alienating behaviors toward groups of employees, citizens, and other stakeholders. With complex internal battles to fight, what are the antecedents that motivate a leader to emerge as an inclusive leader? This article aims to create a comprehensive conceptual framework for an inclusive leader. We examine these precursors in a broader context of community and society relevant to public administration with the aim to inform research, practice, and teaching in the field.

The political, social, and economic context of public administration brings unique challenges for public administrators whose decisions and actions have the potential to affect the lives of millions and shift the gears of society. Emerging from this context is the emphasis in public administration on social equity. As one of its foundational values, social equity hinges on ensuring equitable access to services and redistributing resources to address disparities at a macro level of a municipality, town, city, or nation. Although the social equity focus has led to a substantial improvement in the economic, and social conditions of people, the patterns of inequities and exclusion along various characteristics, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and status, persist in society (Gooden 2023). In many cases, these inequities intersect and reinforce one another, making the situation worse. Some scholars have also warned about the reversible, fragmented, and superficial nature of progress on the social equity front (Georgeac and Rattan 2022). Furthering the goals of social equity remains one of the most challenging tasks that public administration faces, and its leaders have the primary responsibility of removing the roadblocks to equity and inclusion.

It is often assumed that leaders are inclusive. Furthermore, like all humans, leaders are predisposed to describe personal qualities in favorable terms like moral superiority,

employee-centric focus, integrity, and inclusivity (Alvesson and Johnsson 2018). These assumptions are contentious as individuals grapple with cognitive limitations such as unconscious biases, deep-rooted beliefs, and heuristics that can potentially affect decision-making. For example, decision-makers exhibit present bias (O'Donoghue and Rabin 1999) and ignore the social cost of their actions in the long term in favor of immediate benefits. The leaders often lack the time and resources to consider all possible decision trees, also known as bounded rationality (Simon 2013), and indulge in fast, automatic, intuitive thinking (Kahneman 2011). Cognitive limitations subtly influence the actions and decisions of public administrators (Bellé, Cantarelli, and Belardinelli 2018; Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2016) and tend to propagate exclusionary practices. Scholars have highlighted how certain people have been marginalized by the systems intended to serve them (Gooden 2023). An inclusive leadership demands integrating diverse identities, perspectives, and voices into core work and decision-making processes (Ely and Thomas 2001). Individuals, organizations, and society can benefit significantly as a result of improving a leader's inclusive tendencies through 1) discovering characteristics that contribute to such behavior, 2) devising ways to measure them, and 3) training leaders so that they are better situated to appreciate and leverage these precursors to engage with diverse individuals and address marginalization.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of an Inclusive Leader in Public Organizations

Research on inclusive leadership has grown considerably, highlighting its theoretical and practical significance (Shore and Chung 2021; Veli Korkmaz et al. 2022). So far, the analytical focus on inclusive leadership has been limited to the interpersonal dyadic level in organizations concerned with employees and their relationship with leaders, both in general and public administration literature. Regardless, the organizational focus has allowed the researchers to comprehend the nomological essence of an inclusive leader, that is, antecedents and consequences of a leader's action for the employees and organization. However, the systematic examination of an inclusive leader has contributed to a limited extent to understanding its precursors in the backdrop of the larger community and society that public administrators serve. The broader context and disparate values in public administration necessitate looking “beyond the dyadic” from manager-employees to a more comprehensive consideration of actors including employees, communities, and emerging partners in governance like the private, nonprofit sectors, and advocacy groups. The contribution of an inclusive leader in a public organization to further the goals of social equity and justice is not currently articulated. One example is the lack of understanding of the antecedents of an inclusive leader. This study responds to this call and thus addresses an important void in the literature.

This article aims to provide an overview of an in-

clusive leader in public administration and recommend future directions. We attempt to accomplish this by developing a comprehensive theory on antecedents, or factors that have the potential to promote inclusive tendencies of a leader. We illustrate our theory with a model depicted in Figure 1. Our theory identifies individual characteristics of leaders in public administration that promote inclusive leadership, based on prior research, empirical support, and theoretical foundations. We also highlight the moderating variables that affect the strength of leaders' inclusive behaviors. The article contributes to the public administration and leadership literature in two ways. First, inclusive leadership is often studied at the micro (individual) or meso (organizational) level but is understudied at the macro (societal) level, which is crucial for public administrators serving citizens. Second, this research goes beyond the manager-employee focus of the generic management literature motivated by performance, innovation, and market advantages, to consider the broader influence that a public administrator has on the community to promote the core values of social equity. Before the introduction of our theoretical model, we present a brief overview of inclusive leadership research.

Overview of Inclusive Leadership

The concept of an inclusive leader is not new. Several aspects of an inclusive leader like empathy, respect, and

the value of each individual's role in society, have found a mention in ancient religious texts, laying the groundwork for inclusive leadership principles. Social and political movements across the world saw the emergence of leaders who were inclusive and successful in bringing people together from all religions, languages, castes, and genders, as seen in the Indian freedom struggle. Martin Luther King Jr. championed the principles of equality, and social justice, striving to include all segments of society. Their approach involved listening to and valuing everyone's voice, particularly the marginalized, and encouraging mass participation in social movements.

In communities like the LGBTQIA+ and people with disabilities, leaders have defied the conventional leadership approaches to demonstrate collectivism to foster stronger bonds and drive positive changes. The shared vision and decision-making of leaders like Peter De Waal, a foundational member of Campaign Against Moral Persecution (CAMP), created an everlasting legacy of marriage equality and inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community in Australia and the world. Similarly, Academy Award-winning actress Marlee Matlin worked relentlessly to advocate equal opportunities for the deaf community in education, employment, and entertainment. Her work succeeded in the addition of subtitles in the media and contributed to mainstreaming the deaf community. There have been innumerable such instances of inclusive leaders in the past.

Regardless, awareness about the importance of inclusion and equity emerged after the mid-20th century civil rights movements that highlighted inequities and discrimination. The idea of inclusion gained the attention of researchers and scholars and this led to deeper insights into the benefits of diverse teams and inclusive practices and how a leader can support them. The modern concept of an inclusive leader saw its emergence in social psychology literature in the 1990s (Thompson and Matkin 2020). Since then, there has been a preponderance of research on inclusive leadership and its impact on work groups.

An inclusive leader has been explained in several ways. Nembhard and Edmondson defined a leader's inclusiveness as "words and deeds by a leader or leaders that indicate an invitation and appreciation for others' contributions" (2006, 927). Others have described an inclusive leader as one "who exhibits visibility, accessibility, and availability in their interactions with followers (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, and Ziv 2010, 250). Randel and others

explicitly referred to a leader's behaviors as an instrument of inclusive leadership by stating "a set of leader behaviors that are focused on facilitating group [team] members feeling part of the group [team] and retaining their sense of individuality while contributing to group [team] processes and outcomes" (2018, 191). Such behaviors of a leader focus on supporting individuals to feel a part of the workgroup, ensure fairness and equity, encourage diverse perspectives, and provide opportunities for shared decision-making (Randel et al. 2018).

A leader's behavior is crucial to an individual's feeling of inclusion and exclusion. Mor Barak, Cherin, and Berkman first measured the feeling of in/exclusion among employees on a scale of 0–10, affirming the role of a leader in ensuring inclusion in a workgroup (1998). Inclusive practices of a leader induce positive effects on employees, such as providing psychological safety (Nembhard and Edmondson 2006), promoting creativity (Carmeli, Reiter-Palmon, and Ziv 2010), team motivation (Ye, Wang, and Guo 2019), increasing perception of organizational justice (Hoang, Suh, and Sabharwal 2022), and enhancing work engagement (Choi, Tran, and Park 2015). A leader's inclusiveness is of particular significance when the team has diverse individuals. A study by Australian researchers suggested that inclusive leaders enhance cohesion through greater group identification and reduce the perception of status differences in diverse groups (Mitchell et al. 2015). They encourage diversity by actively seeking out varying perspectives (Mor Barak and Daya 2013; Shore et al. 2010) and strengthening the relational process by pursuing deep-level similarities in personalities, interests, and values (Zheng et al. 2017).

The researchers (mentioned here) have invoked social theories like Social Learning Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Reciprocity Theory to explain enhanced cohesion in groups as an outcome of inclusive leadership. Social Learning Theory mentions that individuals tend to adopt supportive and positive behaviors a leader displays in workgroup interactions (Bandura 1977). The notion of reciprocity in social exchange theory (Blau 1964) elucidates how the conduct of a leader can impact participation. Just as positive leader-follower interactions often lead to positive reciprocity, adverse interactions like exclusion can establish norms of negative reciprocity (Gould-Williams and Davies 2005). Besides addressing the underlying leader-follower exchange process, inclusive leadership theorists have also aimed to address issues

of individuals' needs that are pertinent to exclusion and marginalization. The Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (ODT), which proposed that the social identity of an individual can be understood as a reconciliation between the contrasting needs for assimilation and differentiation from others (Brewer 1991), provided a basis for an inclusive leader as the one who can address the ambiguity of psychological needs of the followers (Ashikali 2023; Randel et al. 2018). Based on the theoretical groundings and evolving knowledge in the field, researchers have tried to conceptualize an inclusive leader.

Randel proposed an initial model comprising of three antecedents, namely humility, cognitive complexity, and pro-diversity beliefs that affect the development and use of inclusive behaviors by a leader, meaning the presence of these factors promotes inclusive behaviors and the absence thereof inhibits it (2018). Ashikali who proposed and tested personal and organizational determinants of inclusive leadership in public sector organizations, affirmed humility to be an important predictor besides flexible organizational culture (2023). With this premise, we build on existing research to delineate factors through theoretical examination that contribute to the development of an inclusive leader in public administration.

Inclusive Leader for Public Administration

The current definitions and understanding of an inclusive leader focus on both interpersonal and intrapersonal traits of a leader, that is, what a leader does and how a leader thinks, but within a limited space of manager-follower dyadic. Employing the same definition to public administrators can be flawed as they are capable of affecting both the micro and the macro systems, particularly those holding high-level executive or senior management positions, such as city manager, deputy/assistant city manager, or department head. Considering the span of influence, we define an inclusive public administrator as one who advances the social goals of democratic participation, equity, and justice by actively addressing the issues of marginalization and values every individual by providing a sense of uniqueness and belongingness. Based on this definition, we delineate our examination of the antecedents of an inclusive leader in two parts: macro antecedents and micro antecedents. Macro refers to collective phenomena such as community, society, and organization and includes multiple actors and groups. Micro refers to interpersonal phe-

nomena between individuals such as their preferences and behaviors. Thus, the distinction between macro and micro antecedents corresponds to how they shape the in/exclusion of "individual" versus "collective."

We propose two macro antecedents, Social Justice Considerations and Collaborative Approach, and five micro antecedents, which include Humility, Empathy, Emotional Intelligence, Ethical Conduct, and Cognitive Complexity. Further, another dimension found highly relevant to inclusion is Pro-diversity Beliefs, which is the degree to which a leader perceives the benefits of diversity and the degree to which the leader recognizes each member's differences as strengths. Based on our understanding of this concept, it can be considered as a moderator that has the potential to enhance or suppress the relationship between antecedents of a leader and inclusive behaviors. Each of the concepts discussed is deep and nuanced and may appear overlapping. However, based on the evidence from the literature, we treat them as distinct. The antecedents have both an intrapersonal and interpersonal component as they are meaningless if not exhibited through behavior. A conceptual model to visualize the relationship between the antecedents and outcome, that is, an Inclusive Leader, is shown in Figure 1.

The following sections examine how macro and micro antecedents can enhance a leader's ability to transform a sense of alienation into belongingness among governance partners, thus addressing the concerns of social equity in public administration. First, we examine the macro antecedents followed by micro antecedents.

Macro Antecedents

Social Justice Considerations

Public administrators are perceived by people as representatives of the government in society (Blessett 2023). They are responsible for many important judiciary-type functions like allocating resources, resolving conflicts, and, most importantly, protecting the rights of individuals. Individuals dealing with authorities and institutions are powerfully affected by their sense of justice which is separate from what they might gain or lose in a particular setting. A leader acting out of prejudices, biases, and personal preferences, tends to lose the trust of the constituents, and promotes and maintains oppressive structures leading to grievances from disproportionate sharing of benefits and burdens, conflicts, and exclusion. Whether it is members of the community or

employees, people push back against what they experience to be unfair. If a leader says, “I’m going to treat you fairly,” “I’m going to consider your perspectives in decisions,” and “I’m going to explain my decisions,” it builds trust as the individuals feel that they are getting due consideration and justice.

Social justice is referred to as “justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society” (Blessett 2018,1). Scholars of public administration have acknowledged it as a key prerequisite for social equity (Stivers et al. 2023). Social justice which manifests in processes and outcomes that eliminate the power differential between “haves” and “have-nots,” is not just a process but a goal of public service (Wright II 2023).

Scholars have termed social justice as “healing justice” (Chordiya and Protonentis 2024, 128) as it works to mitigate the systemic damages inflicted by societal structures of oppression. Social justice consideration brings about a change in the implicit cognition of an individual prone to prejudices and biases and prone to othering. A leader who aims to bring social justice to fruition engages in a critical understanding of oppression and its roles in systemic exclusion. The awareness leads to a cycle of transformation for systemic change towards greater inclusion and social equity, beginning with an illuminating intrapersonal phase that transforms a leader’s worldview. The leader proceeds to dismantle stereotypes and prejudices and limits behaviors like oppressive language. The intrapersonal progression is followed by interpersonal communication in which the leader reaches out to others for feedback and builds a community with similar people for support and different people for alternate viewpoints (Adams 2007). The inclination towards social justice is exhibited in an intrinsic motivation to create systemic changes and to engage in just and equitable behaviors. Such a leader challenges normative assumptions about people, deservingness, and worth and makes a continuous and conscious effort to actively reach out to individuals. They promote transparency, provide explanations, respect people, address their concerns, and treat them with dignity. They are responsive, unbiased, accountable, and encourage engagement.

Justice and fairness are crucial elements of an inclusive leader and these characteristics signal the integration motives of a leader (Randel et al. 2018; Sabharwal 2014). However, the paths to equity and inclusion ex-

tend beyond a leader’s penchant for being fair and just toward active engagement of all the stakeholders in governance.

Collaborative Approach

A leader is the most important factor in promoting the active engagement of diverse individuals and bringing collaborative arrangements to a course of action. They bring together actors to decide on issues of common interest through formal and informal interactions and to facilitate the co-creation of rules and structures governing relationships. They believe in a process that encompasses shared norms and mutually beneficial interactions (Roberts and Bradley 1991). The fusion leads to a more holistic approach to governance, leveraging collective expertise to tackle complex societal issues.

Collaboration generates social capital through mutuality and shared norms. The genesis of collective values may be attributed to a demanding or coercive force in the form of a sense of obligation between the participants that is, “I will do, if you do.” The sense of obligation is inherently linked to forming a collective “we” that guides and self-regulates collaborative efforts. When a leader facilitates the voluntary coming together of people for interdependent collaboration, it redirects the focus from individual goals to collective goals. Individuals are obligated to meet the group’s shared expectations. The human sense of obligation acts as a self-conscious motivation that promotes cooperation and coproduction in diverse teams (Tomasello 2020).

Further, the three mechanisms embedded in collaboration—value attainment, cognition, and motivation—generate a sense of equity and value in the individuals (Locke and Schweiger 1979). Value attainment affects the morale and satisfaction of the participants by allowing them to experience greater self-respect and a feeling of equality, as an outcome of the opportunity to express their values. The other two mechanisms, cognition and motivation, reduce alienation among the participants due to their willingness to share information with the leader. The process of participation increases a team member’s trust, sense of control, and involvement with the organization, which causes less resistance to change and more acceptance of—and commitment to—outside-the-box thinking (Locke and Schweiger 1979).

It is crucial for an inclusive public leader to be collaborative because collaboration fosters stronger partnerships among agencies, citizens, and other social

players, enhancing the effectiveness of public administration (McGuire, Agranoff, and Silvia 2010; Vigoda 2002). Moreover, by engaging in collaborative efforts, leaders can promote active participation by citizens, ensuring that governance is more responsive and inclusive.

Due to the complex interplay of personalities, values, and interests, the collaborative process has the potential for conflicts. A collaborative leader ensures that everyone sees the bigger picture alongside other people's perspectives, establishes trust, and provides equal information to all parties to reach a consensus. It is observed that women and underrepresented minorities often suffer disproportionately in a collaborative setting as they might be given limited opportunity to express their views resulting in a lower level of cohesion (Cavazos and Nixon 2024). In such situations, a leader's role is to provide enhanced opportunities for communication like providing safe space and access to leadership opportunities to the underrepresented. Enhancing communication to build connections and bridge differences can result in the alliance of winners.

The overarching inclusive intentions of a leader may not result in desirable outcomes as the feelings and intentions are sometimes misaligned. If a leader is able to acknowledge their own limitations, practice inclusive behaviors, and implement decision-making processes that are informed, transparent, and consistent, it can work as an effective strategy for inclusion. The following intrapersonal aspects can assist a leader to become aware of their inner self and refine their behavior to guide interactions in public service.

Micro Antecedents

Humility

Most individuals join public service because they have convictions about the answers to social problems like healthcare, education for all, reducing poverty, generating revenue, or improving transport systems (Perry and Wise 1990). These convictions help a leader solve complex problems. However, convictions become a problem when leaders think they have all the right answers. An understanding that "I could be wrong, and the other person can be right" comes with humility.

Humility has been theorized as a pivotal element of inclusive leadership. It fosters a sense of belonging and individual identity among team members (Randel et al. 2018). It is the first attribute of an inclusive leader

and has found support in empirical research (Ashikali 2023).

Historically perceived as an unleader-like virtue, humility has been broadly understood as low self-assessment of self or debasing oneself (Morris, Brotheridge, and Urbanski 2005). It comes across as an intrapersonal attribute but encompasses strong interpersonal aspects. Researchers have examined humility in terms of three dimensions: evaluating oneself openly and honestly; self-awareness; valuing and praising the strengths and contributions of others; and remaining open to feedback and input from others (Manix 2022). Broadly, humility centers on the fact that an individual cannot know everything about everyone else and admits fallibility.

However, evaluating oneself or having a sense of one's flaws or limitations does not mean that one would be motivated to admit them or mitigate them. What makes a leader's humility central to humanity is to take a step further than just to admit mistakes but also to take ownership of one's limitations. The ownership signals that a leader not only acknowledges their limitations but admits them and has a desire to correct them. The acknowledgment that one could be wrong and take responsibility to correct the wrong is rooted in the understanding of power and privileges and a concern to forge new relationships. This is a pro-relational dimension of humility resulting in enhanced affinity between the leader and the underprivileged.

Moreover, accepting information from others about the limitations of one's perspective signals valuing the idea, experience, knowledge, and perspective, and signifies valuing the individuals. It is a way of acknowledging that the assessment of the leader by others matters to the leader. The openness to evolve based on others' feedback preserves and strengthens the relationship between the leader and followers. As Spezio, Peterson, and Roberts explain, openness to others means "the inclusion of the other as valued together (inseparably) with the self" (2018, 6). Humility is an inherently other-oriented attitude of a leader that not only recognizes the intrinsic value of the other but decenters concern for self and the need to defend one's convictions and beliefs.

Self-awareness, self-reflection, and lifelong learning, the key aspects of humility cultivated by a leader through active listening, being present, and not assuming but instead respectfully asking the person being engaged about their life experiences, values, and beliefs,

provide individuals a sense of belongingness. By being humble, public administrators can better understand what is important for the person being served and how to express, retain, and continue the engagement. A leader's humility is central to advancing inclusion and social equity. It improves discourse, practices, and service delivery through continuous self-awareness (such as critical self-reflection and understanding of power and privilege), sustained actions (like community alliances), and it ultimately leads to relational empowerment of individuals and the community (Pham et al. 2021).

Empathy

Empathy and humility are often considered complementary in creating more compassionate and understanding interpersonal relationships. However, humility is a self-centric characteristic, while empathy is other-centric. Due to its other-centric focus, empathy has gained steady importance as a fundamental value in public administration and has a service orientation (Edlins 2019; Meyer, Johnson, and McCandless 2022).

Nevertheless, the conceptualization of empathy remains somewhat elusive (Edlins 2019). Often used interchangeably with compassion, empathy is visualized as an "imaginative act of stepping into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide our actions" (Krznaric 2015, 5). However, the concept surpasses imagination to an emotional level that encompasses an awareness of the emotional state of another individual and an understanding of their reactions (Edlins and Dolamore 2018). Empathy entails both an emotional and imaginative element that connects "us" and "them" in interactions (Dolamore 2021). It is an effective tool at a leader's disposal for shifting from a self-interest focus to a common-interest focus (Krznaric 2015).

The practice of empathy is an enriching and cohesive experience for both the giver and receiver (Edlins 2019). For the receiver, it affects their emotions in a manner that reinforces the affirming nature of the interaction, promoting affinity. For the empathetic individual who participates in recognizing shared emotions, it deepens their connection with others during the interaction and promotes approachability, cooperation, and unity. Thus, empathy can effectively work as a force for creating solidarity.

Empathy has the potential to power social change

and alter the status quo. Many social movements have empathy as their driver. Empathizing with others, especially with underrepresented minorities or marginalized social groups, creates a moral impetus for the leader to treat them equally, enabling them to become agents of social change (Krznaric 2015). For instance, people often blame individuals experiencing homelessness as if it is a matter of choice, rather than acknowledging the structural inequities, like racism, that are responsible for exacerbating the problem. An empathetic public administrator goes among the people experiencing homelessness to listen and understand homelessness from their perspective, not self, and tries to gain their confidence in rooting out structural conditions. An understanding of the reasons causing homelessness helps to change the narrative around homelessness, reducing the shame surrounding the issue and engaging those in a plan of action. The individuals feel understood and heard, providing a sense of legitimacy and validation for their concerns and struggles. When individuals feel that their perspectives are genuinely considered and valued, they are more likely to trust the intentions of the leader and show greater willingness to participate with other stakeholders in inclusionary initiatives.

Emotional Intelligence

Considering the diversity of stakeholders in public administration, conflicts and disagreements are inevitable. However, the leader can address the differing opinions that define equity and inclusion in the process of governance. Inclusion, which is an emotionally intense task, requires a leader to be equipped with emotional competencies to navigate the complexities of interpersonal relationships, which can be impeded by raw emotional reactions. The leaders must be able to sense the situation instantaneously and decide when and how to act upon it. Ignoring this synthesis of analysis, emotions, judgments, and communications can lead to unconstructive interpersonal exchanges and alienation. The emotional intelligence of the leader equips them to navigate tense situations with poise, fostering constructive dialogue and nurturing resolutions grounded in mutual understanding. We move next into the nature of emotional intelligence for leaders in public administration, transcending mere emotional reactions.

Emotional intelligence, popularly referred to as EQ, is the ability of an individual to understand, manage, and express one's emotions, alongside the ability to per-

ceive and navigate the emotions of others (Goleman 2011). It represents a combination of cognition and emotions that allows the leader to unlock the understanding of human emotions in self and others and to utilize this knowledge to inform their actions. Unlike raw emotional responses, emotional intelligence presents a subtle, nuanced approach to decision-making.

A sequential model of emotional intelligence incorporates emotional perception (the ability to recognize emotions in self and others), emotional understanding (awareness of the roots and outcomes of emotions), and emotional regulation (altering how one experiences and expresses emotions) as its main elements (Joseph and Newman 2010). As an example, an emotionally intelligent leader will keenly perceive the emotions of those marginalized (emotional perception), understand how those emotions influence their perceptions of the public officials (emotional understanding), and carefully regulate their emotional expressions to provide emotional healing (emotional regulation), easily putting followers' needs first, and overcoming any negative emotions (Antonakis, Ashkanasy, and Dasborough 2009). A leader high in emotional intelligence possesses the sensitivity to understand everyone's unique needs and the capacity to soothe others as compared to less emotionally intelligent leaders (Goleman 2012; Humphrey 2002). Further, such a leader accepts risks as a necessary part of the process of inclusion. They are more willing to grant control or influence to the stakeholders in decision-making as they are adept at managing emotions like frustration or disappointment (emotional regulation) associated with the process, allowing the followers to achieve their full potential and to feel valued (Liden et al. 2008).

A leader with enhanced emotional intelligence truly understands the pulse of the constituents and is endowed with the ability to create genuine connections with the stakeholders that transcend bureaucratic barriers. Further, communicating and conveying information to a heterogeneous audience requires emotional intelligence to craft messages that resonate with the apprehensions and emotions of the stakeholders, particularly the marginalized, amplifying people's trust and cooperation. By tempering emotional reactions, a leader can make informed decisions that emphasize larger public interest over short-term goals, promoting social equity. A high emotional intelligence demonstrates a heightened aptitude of the leader for factoring in the emotional facets

of their decisions. This fosters a more comprehensive and ethical decision-making process, a trait particularly crucial when citizens' welfare hangs in the balance.

Ethical Conduct

Public administrators are under continuous scrutiny for their decisions and actions as citizens, employees, and other partners assess the extent to which public officials prioritize their expectations by evaluating how decisions are made or how and for whom services are delivered. While unethical leader behaviors like manipulation, breach of trust, and unfair treatment of people encourage counterproductive behaviors in others, such as non-participation and avoidance, ethical conduct can reduce deviant behaviors by fostering a sense of fairness, transparency, and positive reciprocity that makes the association meaningful for people. For instance, a city leader who is ethical promotes transparent practices in public finance by eliminating discrimination and eliminating disparities based on gender, race, and disadvantaged business status that persist in business development, access to capital, and contracting opportunities.

The ethical conduct of a leader is manifested behaviorally in three ways: 1) being an ethical role model to others, 2) treating people fairly, and 3) actively managing ethics in the organization (Hassan, Wright, and Yukl 2014). While the first two attributes refer to moral character and exemplify moral values such as honesty, integrity, and altruism, even when faced with adversity, risks, or pressures, the third element is related to establishing systems that can aid in promoting ethical practices. Individuals look up to the leader as a role model and subsequently emulate their behavior. When a leader's behavior is ethical, it sets a strong example for others who use it to guide their actions and align their behavior (Dinh et al. 2014). Dense patterns of interpersonal relationships emerge due to agreement and sharing of norms of conduct, as people with similar values and attitudes tend to create stronger ties (Brass, Butterfield, and Skaggs 1998). A sense of fairness and justice makes marginalized individuals feel comfortable raising their concerns and discussing sensitive issues, promoting equity and a sense of belongingness.

In organizations, a leader develops sustainable ethical practices through increasing awareness, and reflection at the individual and collective levels (Tremblay, Martineau, and Pauchant 2017). The ethical practices are indicative of participation and consultative mecha-

nisms and highlight the extent to which the stakeholders are involved in dialogues and initiatives. This echoes social responsibility in the form of the relationship of the organization with its society. An ethical leader is not just mindful of their own moral compass. The leader emphasizes “ethical co-determination,” meaning encouraging and valuing different perspectives and participation of stakeholders in evolving and implementing ethical standards that guide behavior within the organization and in relation to the community (Anechiarico and Segal 2020). Measures are developed in consultation, rather than being handed down from the top. Such an approach is more effective as the stakeholders are more likely to uphold and follow them, forming a cohesive and moral community.

However, varying ethical norms across cultures and groups create a challenge to ethical practices. What may seem ethical to one person may be unethical for the other. When ethical perceptions differ, it can impact decision-making, trust, and cohesion. Ethical ambiguity demands a leader to be transparent, articulate their values clearly, and align actions with organizational principles. Encouraging open dialogue to understand differing viewpoints, consultation of staff and stakeholders, nonwritten standard setting, and adapting a flexible, empathetic approach can help reconcile conflicts and build consensus. Balancing diverse ethical perspectives can ultimately strengthen a leader’s credibility and the team’s unity, fostering a culture of mutual respect and ethical integrity. Following the established ethical models, a professional code of conduct can also be helpful (Ondrová 2017).

A leader’s ethical stance in navigating complex challenges is determined by the interaction of situational factors, such as context, alongside cognitive components, such as moral reasoning and cognitive complexity, for decision-making.

Cognitive Complexity

Consider a city manager meeting to discuss issues affecting the community with the citizen advisory council which consists of community members from diverse backgrounds and cultures. One member from a traditionally introverted culture in the group does not participate much. The leader may think that the person is quiet because they come from a particular culture; this is a very simplistic way of thinking. Further, the leader may think that the person might be thoughtful

and reflective, which is a more complex way of thinking as it presents a different line of thought and provides two distinct ideas. Further, the leader may think that the person hails from a traditionally introverted culture and they are also reflective. This perception appreciates how the culture and nature combine to bring a unique perspective. Any line of thought can be considered along the complexity dimension. A leader with high cognitive complexity would avoid stereotyping the behavior of this person as mere cultural conformity. Instead, they would consider other factors like personal attributes, previous experiences, and current situation. The city manager might then engage this team member in one-on-one conversations to better understand their perspective and find ways to support their active participation.

Cognitive complexity (CC) reflects how complexly or simply a person thinks about a particular issue, situation, or another individual. The ability of an individual to engage in cognitive work by using a variety of perspectives when thinking about problems, situations, decisions, or individuals is known as cognitive complexity (Cheng and Chang 2010). A concept introduced by James Bieri, CC characterizes individuals’ capacity to dissect information into smaller parts when perceiving their environment (1955). However, over time, the evolution of the concept has led to incorporating not only differentiation but also the degree of integration, which is now deemed a more important aspect. Cognitive integration is the capability of an individual to organize complex information by combining smaller units of information to form conceptual frameworks (Green 2004). Seemingly paradoxical, cognitive differentiation and integration are highly correlated, as effective differentiation is a prerequisite for effective integration (Carroll and Bright 2010). Individuals with high CC exhibit more consistent processing of conflicting information due to their enhanced “integration” abilities, which allow them to construct a more flexible cognitive system (Ikegami 1983).

Ikegami delved into the mechanisms of integration in individuals and illustrated that those with low CC tend to heavily favor a single dimension within their cognitive space when distinguishing people, even as the number of information dimensions increases (1983). In contrast, individuals with high CC employ a highly organized cognitive space that evenly weighs multiple dimensions when distinguishing in-

dividuals. The adaptable cognitive framework allows a leader to accommodate seemingly contradictory information, such as “women are emotional” and a “rational female worker,” without encountering inherent contradictions (Kobayashi and Tanaka 2022). Furthermore, the ability to simultaneously consider multiple dimensions of information reduces discrimination by ensuring that data from various dimensions are uniformly integrated. Thus, when evaluating traits associated with African Americans, such as “poor” or “criminal,” which are typical stereotypes in the context of African Americans, individuals who weigh multiple dimensions can also simultaneously access information about nonstereotypical attributes, such as “smart,” “urban,” “early riser,” “educated,” or “a music lover.” Consequently, employing multiple dimensions can diminish both positive and negative stereotypical perceptions more effectively than solely focusing on stereotypical dimensions. Thus, individuals with high CC will likely exhibit weaker stereotypical perceptions than those with low CC.

Multidimensional thinking and adaptable cognitive abilities can help a public administrator navigate the complexities of present-day public administration. Researchers have argued that CC increases the likelihood of a leader engaging in inclusive leadership (Randel et al. 2018). A public administrator with a high level of CC possesses a multidimensional view of complex situations, allowing for differentiation and integration in information processing at the social level, reducing implicit biases (Kovářová and Filip 2015; Woznyj et al. 2019). The aspect of differentiation focuses on the perception of individual differences, which underlines a leader’s proclivity to openness to diverse perspectives and reflects an appreciation of an individual’s uniqueness (Nishii 2013). In such an environment, people can freely express their social identities, even if they deviate from the mainstream or majority groups (Dwertmann and Boehm 2016; Nishii 2013). The second dimension, integration, involves a leader’s capacity to create a mind map of various permutations and combinations of factors to produce optimum outcomes. Cognitive complexity enables a leader to recognize the multifaceted nature of individuals and integrate diverse viewpoints for greater inclusion and more equitable solutions and practices. Further, we propose the macro and micro antecedents are likely to gain inherent strength from a leader’s beliefs in the value of diversity.

Pro-Diversity Beliefs

Advocates for diversity maintain that increased diversity leads to better outcomes in every context. This includes reduced interpersonal bias, greater group cohesion in diverse groups, improved performance, and positive attitudes (Leslie et al. 2020) as such beliefs mediate and moderate human knowledge, behavior, and expectations (Helfat and Peteraf 2014; Rokeach 1972).

Understanding how beliefs affect behaviors and attitudes is essential for unraveling the effectiveness of public administrators in responding to marginalization and exclusionary practices. Individuals inherently desire consistency in beliefs and actions (Rokeach 1972). If their beliefs and values do not match their actions, they might feel cognitive dissonance and will likely seek to change their actions to match their beliefs. A pro-diversity mindset advances a leader’s understanding of incorporating different ways to create a greater sense of belongingness in the workgroups (Randel et al. 2018). On a broader societal level, public officials who appreciate diversity feel less threatened by persons of different genders, races, or ethnicities and hence exhibit a lesser intention to discriminate against them (Kauff, Asbrock, and Schmid 2020). The pro-diversity beliefs of a leader, thus, communicate the importance of inclusive behaviors and garner support for their commitment from other group members who emulate this behavior (Ng and Sears 2018). Pro-diversity beliefs propagate and advance the inclusion process and eliminate discrimination in public administration, thus fostering greater equity (Chordiya 2021).

Conclusion

In this article, we take the first step in creating a comprehensive framework of an inclusive leader in public organizations by going beyond the leader-follower relationship to delve into the expansive domain of community and society. We discuss both macro and micro antecedents of an inclusive leader. We propose antecedents of an inclusive public leader, including cognitive and emotional competence, social justice orientation, collaborative approach, and pro-diversity beliefs. These factors can be important in providing public administration leadership with important perspectives to address the issues of social equity and justice. Public organizations and their human resource departments can encourage, train, and help managers develop these char-

acteristics. Performance assessment can also incorporate elements of the antecedents in the form of measurable questions like, what is the number of listening sessions or town halls organized, or what is the share of minority-owned businesses in annual contracts. This study also enhances the knowledge and skills that students need to be future leaders when addressing wicked problems.

While our effort is comprehensive, there is room for expansion to include more variables. Our analysis of the antecedents is broadly conceptual and requires further elaboration to incorporate specific propositions for empirical investigation. A measure in the form of a testable scale of inclusive leadership based on theoretical concepts can be developed to test the core relationships. The inclusive leadership scale can measure and quantify leaders' inclusive tendencies and behaviors in the public sector and guide promoting inclusive practices in public service in the 21st century.

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Namrta Sharma (she/her) (Namrta.sharma@utdallas.edu) is a doctoral student in Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Dallas, with research interests focusing on social equity, inclusion, and leadership. She has over two decades of experience in various leadership roles in the Department of Agriculture, Government of India, particularly in the field of human resources.

Meghna Sabharwal (she/her) (Meghna.sabharwal@utdallas.edu) is a professor at the University of Texas at Dallas. A NAPA fellow, her research focuses on diversity, equity, and inclusion. She has published five books and over 75 journal articles and chapters and has won six best paper awards. She is the editor-in-chief of the *Review of Public Personnel Administration*.