

# Workplace Inclusion: A Social Network Perspective

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## Abstract

Diversity, equity and inclusion promises great benefits to organizations, their members, and society, but organizations often fail to realize this potential. A growing body of research on inclusion highlights potential areas for intervention, but substantially more research in this area is needed. We begin to address this gap by integrating the psychological literature on belonging with a social network perspective. A sense of belonging arises when individuals feel that they are valued by peers and their organization, that their social gestures towards others are reciprocated, and that they fit into the organization and its social structure. Each of these concepts can be operationalized in social network terms, and understanding these concepts will also contribute to our understanding of social networks. This theoretical integration allows us to begin to interrogate the ways that the effects of occupying different social network positions may have different effects on inclusion, in terms of value, reciprocity and fit, for people with marginalized identities compared with majority group members. We posit main effects of three well-established network measures and of social identity on the individual experience of inclusion, then develop mediating and moderating relationships. We close with a call for a richer integration of structural and psychological theories of organizational behavior.

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## Introduction

In 2018, Monroe Gamble, a recent college graduate, joined the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco as a research assistant. His hiring was unremarkable, save for the fact that he was Black. In fact, he was the first African-American ever to hold a research assistant job at the San Francisco Fed. And despite several summers spent working on economics research projects with college professors, he immediately felt out of place at the Fed, struggled to find meaningful work, and was soon looking to leave (New York Times 2021).

Recent years have seen a dramatic surge of research interest in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the field of organizational behavior, as many organizations seek to foster a more inclusive and representative workforce. Accumulating evidence indicates that diversity, equity, and inclusion bring numerous benefits to organizations, including richer employee engagement (Pearce & Randel, 2004; Shore & Chung, 2022), improved team decision-making (Carter & Phillips, 2017), and greater creativity and organizational innovation (Galinsky et al., 2015; Hundschell et al., 2022).

In search of evidence that will help promote this set of values, and allow organizations to achieve these benefits, research has proliferated on how to promote diversity by changing hiring practices (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Flory et al., 2021; Quillian et al., 2017), and how to make compensation (Goldin, 2014; Grodsky & Pager, 2001)(Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Flory et al., 2021; Quillian et al., 2017)(Goldin, 2014; Grodsky & Pager, 2001) and promotion (Baldi & McBRIER, 1997; R. A. Smith,

2005)e.g., (Baldi & McBRIER, 1997; R. A. Smith, 2005) rates more equitable. But far less explored is the third leg of the DEI tripod: inclusion. Inclusion is the involvement, participation, and acceptance of diverse individuals and perspectives in an organization (Mor Barak, 2015). Simply increasing the diversity of teams and organizations fails to achieve their full potential if people do not feel included. Without solid evidence on how to build inclusion, many organizations still struggle to create and maintain a diverse workforce because, very simply, when employees do not feel included, they will experience less well being and ability to flourish in their roles and will not stay long in the organization (Chen & Tang, 2018; Jansen et al., 2017; Mor Barak, 2015). In short, without inclusion, organizations fail to harness the potential benefits of diversity, as the all-too-common case of Monroe Gamble illustrates.

In this paper, we review the nascent literature on organizational inclusion, including its foundations in the psychological concept of belonging. We conceptualize belonging as the psychological experience of feeling value, reciprocity, and fit with one's organizational environment (Mahar et al., 2013). Building on this foundation, we argue that these bases of psychological belonging -- and the organizational inclusion that they foster -- can be measured and observed by integrating theories of belonging with a social network perspective. In addition, researchers have found that intervening on a person's position or engagement within their social organization can promote belonging (Turetsky et al., 2020). Using the psychology, organizational behavior, and social network literatures, we discuss potential ways that accounting for informal social networks may augment research on belonging in organizational settings.

Finally, we examine how marginalization may influence and moderate the social relationships of people with historically underrepresented identities, which may affect their sense of belonging and their inclusion in their organizations. Although multiple different forms of marginalization impact a person's sense of belonging, we will focus most heavily on race and the experiences of Black Americans. Specifically, we highlight the ways that different network affordances may create feelings of value, reciprocity and fit to differing degrees for people from minoritized groups.

## Organizational Benefits of Inclusion

One way organizations can help individuals experience the highest levels of well being and contribute to their fullest potential is to promote inclusion among their members.

Inclusive organizations promote belonging and support member uniqueness (Pearce & Randel, 2004; Shore & Chung, 2022). Organizations, as social systems, create inclusion through their policies and norms (Mahar et al., 2013). In turn, these social systems shape people's day to day psychological experiences within the organization. Psychological belonging is a subjective social experience that is indicated by social relationships and interactions that confirm one's **value, reciprocity, and fit** (Mahar et al., 2013).

Having employees who feel a sense of inclusion is beneficial to organizations. In an inclusive organizational environment, group members contribute their skills, and organizations reciprocate through individualized support (Pearce & Randel, 2004).

Employees who feel supported and included are more likely to identify with the

organization which, in turn, is associated with people supporting the organization's goals (Edwards, 2005; He & Brown, 2013; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). In workplaces, people who feel more included and have higher identification with their organization are also more motivated, more engaged in work activities, and perform better (Pearce & Randel, 2004; Wegge et al., 2006). In addition, organizations that promote inclusion benefit from increased retention, reduced absenteeism, and improved organizational performance (Chen & Tang, 2018; Jansen et al., 2017; Leask & Carroll, 2011). Additionally, diversity research suggests that integrating unique and diverse perspectives can enhance innovative practices (Garcia-Prieto et al., 2003; Jehn et al., 2008).

### Individual Benefits of Workplace Inclusion

Fostering inclusion is also good for individual group members. Feeling included promotes positive feelings associated with the organization and self-identification with the organization (Ronzi et al., 2018), and is also associated with health and well being (Eisenberger, 2012; Hartung et al., 2015). When people are able to identify with their organization, they may also find positive aspects of themselves, which can promote self-esteem (Lee & Robbins, 1998). Feeling included within an organization also fosters positive social relationships and opportunities to give and receive support. Social support within an organization can help individuals feel safe, foster emotional support, and build economic opportunity (H. S. Friedman, 2011; Hartung et al., 2015; Lee & Robbins, 1998; Ronzi et al., 2018).

In contrast, ostracism or exclusion from the workplace can lead to depressive symptoms and loneliness (Howard et al., 2020; Williams & Nida, 2011). Exclusion in a group may

also signify social threats within the organization, which may increase stress, reduce motivation, and cause individuals to withdraw their participation and ultimately leave the organization (Hitlan et al., 2006). Building inclusion allows workers to thrive within and outside the organization by building self-esteem, social support, and commitments that can promote the organization's goals (Chen & Tang, 2018; Pearce & Randel, 2004).

#### Belonging: A Psychological Feature of Inclusion

Psychological belonging is a necessary feature of inclusion. Belonging is a subjective feeling that an individual is an integral part of the social systems around them. In their need-to-belong hypothesis, Baumeister and Leary proposed that individuals are motivated to find and maintain lasting positive interactions. According to this perspective: "Individuals must have frequent positive interactions, and these interpersonal interactions should be enduring and have affective concern for one another" (Baumeister & Leary, pg. 1, 1995). Within the organizational behavior literature, belonging is also often associated with the adjacent concept of organizational identification. Organization identification is "the perception of oneness with" the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 104). Like belonging, having high identification with the organization is associated with additional effort toward the organization's goals or "going the extra mile on behalf of the organization" (Rousseau, 1998, p. 218).

In a review of belonging literature, Mahar (2013) further specifies the origins of the subjective feeling of belonging, highlighting the "subjective feeling of value and respect derived from a reciprocal relationship to an external referent built on a foundation of shared experiences, beliefs or personal characteristics." Building on this work, we

conceptualize organizational belonging in terms of three core concepts: ***value, reciprocity, and fit.***

According to Mahar, for an individual to have a sense of belonging within an organization, they must feel valued. Feeling valued within an organization stems from being respected and recognized for contributions by others (Pierce et al., [1989](#)). For instance, when a manager trusts and respects an individual's contribution to the organization, this can be indicative of, and create, a sense that the person is valued (Fairhurst, [1993](#); Graen and Uhl-Bien, [1991](#), [1995](#)).

Individuals must also have reciprocal relationships with other people, in which both have shared feelings about one another (Liu et al., 2013, 2013; Mahar et al., 2013).

Reciprocity is the degree to which one's social connections offer a proportionate exchange of positive feelings, time, material, and commitment (Eisenberger et al., 2001; Gouldner, 1960; Uhl-Bien & Maslyn, 2003). We extend this to organizational reciprocity. "Individuals must get something in return for their contributions to the group" (Molm, 2010), pg 1). In a review of interventions aimed at increasing belonging within schools, Allen et al. (2021) found the most successful ones focused on promoting positive social relationships with peers and mentors or involved reflection-based activities that emphasized students' strengths and motivations. Building larger and stronger social relationships can inform one's sense of value to a community. By having students behave in ways that promote positive social interactions or behaving prosocially,

students may benefit from reciprocal investments or social support. Over time, this can lead to returned investment or social support (Kuperminc et al., [2019a](#)).

When individuals perceive that their organization invests in them and provides accessible, beneficial resources, they experience high perceived organizational support. Eisenberg (2016) found that this support motivates individuals to engage in additional work and actions to help the organization achieve its goals. Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) examines the relationship between managers and employees, highlighting that high-quality LMX relationships are based on trust, support, and mutual good faith, leading to increased influence and decision-making power for employees. In contrast, low-quality LMX relationships are transactional and can lead to employee disengagement. High-quality relationships foster reciprocity, benefiting both parties beyond mere transactions. Additionally, individuals must align with the group's values and be recognized for their valued characteristics by the organization.

Lastly, individuals must feel they “fit in.” Organizational fit is the compatibility between an organization and an individual (Cable & Judge, 1996; Kristof, 1996). Typically defined as person-organization fit, this relationship is important for retention, job application, and job performance (Hoffman & Woehr, 2006; Kristof, 1996). Interventions that emphasize leveraging one’s strengths and motivations may allow people to recognize their value to the organization or create alignment between their motivations and the organization, their fit (Allen et al., 2022; Holt et al., 2008). Two distinctions in person-organization fit have been conceptualized. Supplementary fit occurs when a person shares characteristics similar to those held by other individuals in the organization. They are a



fit because they match or are aligned. Complementary fit is when a person offers unique characteristics or fills in missing characteristics or skills. In this case their fit fills a hole or gap within the organization (Kristof, 1996).

Features of a Sense of Belonging in a Group	Organizational Inclusion
Value	Others appreciate the individual and let them know; the individual feels their presence or contribution is recognized and respected.
Reciprocity	The degree to which one's social connections offer a proportionate exchange of positive emotional, time, material, and commitment; The individual has access to organizational resources: information, support, investment
Fit	The individual's goals are aligned with the organizational goals; the individual identifies with the organization and feels they have a clear place.

**Table 1: Overview of Belonging**

Organizations that seek to be inclusive can create inclusive policies or foster inclusive leadership practices that promote relationships and social interactions that engender feelings of value, reciprocity, or fit across a broad range of members and to their unique social identities (Booyesen, 2013; Mor Barak, 2015). In addition to these structural elements, psychologists have also conducted successful interventions to increase individual people's sense of belonging. For instance, successful interventions have included prompting people to reflect on their involvement in social relationships, promoting increased engagement in a social environment, or having people indirectly give or behave prosocially towards a community. For example, (Linos et al., 2021)<sup>1</sup>, applied a belonging intervention to reduce burnout and foster social connection amongst frontline workers. In the intervention, 911 dispatchers across nine US cities were given messages of support from other dispatchers across other cities. For six-weeks, dispatchers were also asked to write messages of support to another

dispatcher with professional advice or ways they cope with difficulties of the work. The intervention was framed as an opportunity to give back to the dispatcher community and network. The researchers measured dispatcher feelings of burnout and dispatcher turnover four months after the intervention. They found that dispatchers who participated in the intervention displayed reduced burnout, increased feelings of social belonging, and had lower turnover rates relative to the participant dispatchers in the control condition who did not receive the intervention. More broadly, through greater belonging, a range of interventions have resulted in increased performance, higher engagement, and reduced absenteeism (Holt et al. 2008; Kuperminc et al., [2019a](#); Lewis et al., 2006).

#### Using Social Networks to Understand Belonging

The presence (or absence) and the strength of social ties within an organization, as well as the configuration of those ties, may be cues of one's value, reciprocity, or fit in an organization and may be tied to overall belonging. Networks can be used to represent and model such social patterns among individuals. As such, social networks provide a tool for modeling and understanding the social environments of organizations, and operationalizing key aspects of belonging such as value, reciprocity and fit.

There are many different social networks within a given organization, including both formal hierarchies (represented by the organizational chart) and informal networks of communication, friendship, professional advice, and other exchanges. *Informal networks* include the relationships, norms, and values often invisible within organization charts ("Mechanistic and Organic Systems," 2006). Informal networks model the "water

cooler chats,” text threads, and personal relationships that paint the daily interactions and social relationships within organizational life. Prior research has used informal networks to predict job satisfaction, retention, organizational identification, and numerous other outcomes (Jones & Volpe, 2011; Yang et al., 2012), showing how an individual's connections and personal interactions may relate to their workplace experience. Although there are many different (and heterogeneous) types of relationships that are included under the general umbrella of informal networks (e.g., emotional support vs. professional advice vs. email communication), we will treat this as a category for the purpose of this review.

As organizations work towards inclusion, mapping informal networks and their relationships to a person's sense of belonging offers a tool for researchers and managers to understand an organization's social norms and systems that promote or detract from inclusion. To do this, research must link the psychological features of belonging to specific network structures. Here, both individual interactions and social relationships, as well as broader patterns within the larger organizational (network) structure may inform individuals' sense of belonging, as indicated by value, reciprocity and fit. Researchers and organizations might therefore map these networks to draw inferences about their members' social experiences and relationships, and provide information about the psychological underpinnings of belonging.

### Marginalization and network-belonging relationships

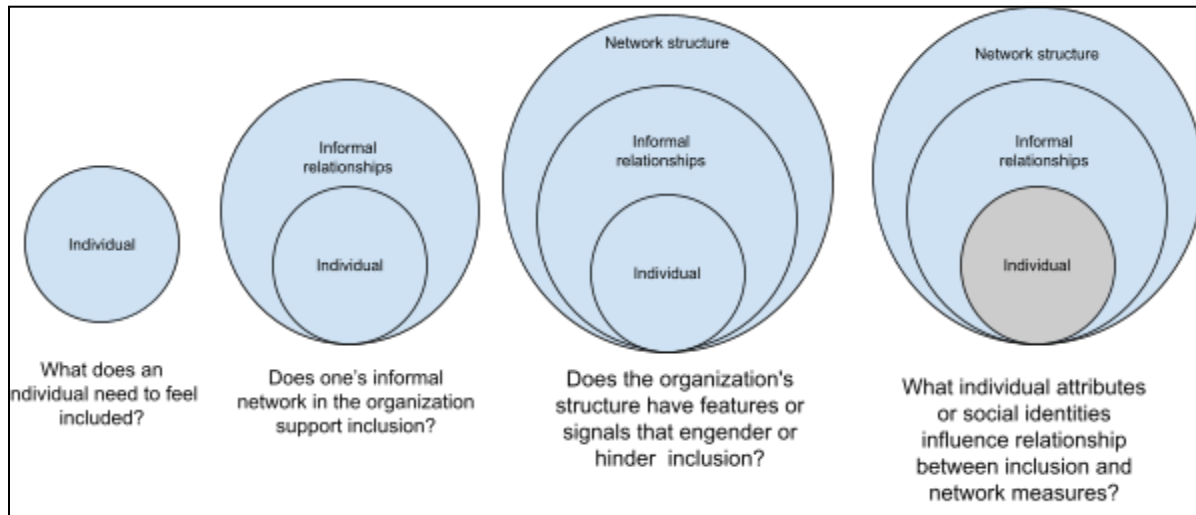
Finally, we examine how individuals' attributes may interact with the relationship between network features and belonging. Social systems of inequality, such as racism,

sexism, ableism, and more, can influence the social experience of different groups within organizational settings. Specifically, holding a historically marginalized identity influences the relationship between a person's network position, ties and structure, and the benefits they might derive (Ibarra, 1992, 1992, 1993; Krinsky & Crossley, 2015).

Members of marginalized groups often face social exclusion, discrimination, and reduced access to resources, which have direct, adverse effects on belonging (Ibarra, 1993, 1995; Remedios & Snyder, 2018, 2018; Settles et al., 2019; Stevens et al., 2018). In short, marginalized individuals face an uphill pathway to belonging within many organizations (Ibarra, 1993; Kanter, 1977; Lewis & Simpson, 2012). Organizations such as workplaces operate within larger systems and thus contain and perpetuate inequities (Ibarra, 1995). Indeed, a large body of research has documented the presence of inequality and inequity within organizations (Ibarra, 1993, 1995) and the negative impacts on members of marginalized groups (Lewis & Simpson, 2012). Beyond the large body of studies that have documented ways in which marginalized individuals are excluded within organizations and isolated socially, we extend this work to highlight how a network perspective may reveal processes of social exclusion and produce novel hypotheses about how marginalized individuals may feel a reduced sense of belonging.

In particular, we highlight how marginalization may moderate the relationship between network structures and belonging (i.e., value, reciprocity and fit). Marginalized groups face stigmatization, negative stereotypes, and underrepresentation and must build relationships and allyship with individuals who are dissimilar in their social identity or

experiences (Lewis & Simpson, 2012). Each of these can influence the meaning or strength of relationships that people from marginalized groups experience, compared to relationships among non-marginalized individuals. Therefore, we argue that marginalization may interact with network properties to influence a sense of belonging.



**Figure 1** visualizes our approach to using networks to examine inclusion. In the following sections, we will discuss the features of individual belonging—value, reciprocity, fit— as levers that may help an individual derive a sense of inclusion at work, and how individual attributes and social identities influence relationships between a person’s social network position and sense of belonging.

### Informal Networks – Drivers of Belonging

The psychological experiences of belonging within an organization are derived in part from social relationships and social experiences. People are adept at perceiving social and hierarchical relationships within organizations (E. B. Smith et al., 2020). Individuals may use information about the social environment to determine the extent to which they are valued, experience reciprocity, or fit within the organization (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Tyler & Blader, 2003). We

argue that value, reciprocity, and fit might be modeled, respectively, by particular social network properties, including the node centrality, edge reciprocity, and overall network properties of informal networks. As noted above, there are multiple types of informal social networks (cite). In the following, we will focus on network features in social networks where individuals rely on others to perform their jobs such as information exchange, advice, and collaboration networks. Other informal networks we explore or consider include networks based on emotional support, friendship, and mentorship. As more research begins to apply use of network analysis to the theoretical and empirical analysis of inclusion, additional measures and network types could be explored.

	Level of Analysis	Node
Value: <i>One feels valued or respected for their contributions or membership</i>	Node	<u>Centrality:</u> Occupying a more central position in the network signals one's value to the organization.
Reciprocity <i>One can access the resources of the organization; one is invested in or supported by the organization</i>	Tie	<u>Bidirectional ties:</u> Individuals with more reciprocated ties are affirmed they belong
Fit <i>Aligned with the organization's goals; characteristics are aligned with the organization</i>	Network	<u>Equivalence:</u> Individuals who have equivalent social roles know they are recognized within the organization and have more peers to go to for support

**Table 2. Proposed links between value, reciprocity and fit with network features**

### Being Valued in Informal Networks

Within organizations, network centrality is one measure of an individuals' importance or influence. In some cases, one's influence (or centrality) is derived from how connected

the person is within the organization. In other measures of centrality, one's influence is derived from their connection to other influential members. Higher centrality in informal networks supports employee retention, socialization, and increased organizational identification (Ballinger et al., 2016; Brass & Burkhardt, 1993; Jones & Volpe, 2011; Porter et al., 2019). In addition, informal networks are sources of information exchange and resource exchange; being highly central is a signal of being valued and providing value within a network (Freeman et al., 1979). Sociologists have also shown that being sought out or highly connected within a network can give individuals authority, which also may support feelings of value (Astley & Sachdeva, 1984).

#### Centrality & Value

One method to measure centrality is the number of connections a person has within the network (Freeman 1979). The number of connections within information and communication networks may indicate one's value within an organization. More connections within these networks imply more access to information and knowledge, which can serve as individual and social assets (Turner et al., 2014). Shore et al. (2011) described information as the primary exchange resource within organizations (Shore et al.). Being central in the information network may mean being a valued source of information, that individuals want to share information with the member or come to the member for information (Saito et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2015).

Greater centrality in information and advice-sharing networks can enhance the feeling of value. (Grosser et al., 2023) examined the association between being nominated as a source of information by others (i.e., in-degree centrality in the informal information

network) and a sense of inclusion to examine if being prominent in the information network impacted inclusion. Studying employees in a large pharmaceutical company, they asked respondents the degree to which they felt included in the organization, participated in the activities at the organization, and the degree to which they felt like an outsider within the workplace. The respondents were also asked who they turned to for information within the company to complete their daily tasks and their work. The researchers hypothesized that individuals likely understood their importance and value to the organization by being highly nominated within the information network. Consistent with their hypothesis, members who had higher in-degree centrality, the number of people who nominated them as a source of information, had a greater overall sense of inclusion. This finding is consistent with the idea that network centrality can signal being valued, and being more central to the network may promote belonging, though those who feel more valued may also perform behaviors that result in centrality.

Other research also finds that being central in support networks is associated with perceived inclusion within the organization. For instance, in a study of young teachers in a teacher education program, Bjorklund et al (2020) found that teachers who reported that they were supported by or received advice from a larger number of peers had a higher sense of belonging. Here, belonging consisted of levels of support and commitment to the program. Likewise, for the teachers, higher indegree centrality in the support networks also increased self-efficacy of their teaching practice, operationalized as their ability to lead a classroom, engage students, and develop strategies for classroom instruction (Bjorklund et al., 2020).



Centrality in networks based on professional support or information can also symbolize individuals' decision-making ability and promote self-esteem about the individual's capability. For instance, being sought after for information or having others reach out to you for support might be indicative of one's own expertise or skill. In the study on teacher support networks, being central not only promoted one's sense of belonging, but one's self-efficacy or belief in their own teaching ability (Bjorklund et al. 2020). Having a high number of indegree connections is also affirming, in that one can recognize their influence within an organization (Brass & Burkhardt, 1993).

In contrast, being peripheral or excluded from informal networks based on competence or knowledge (information networks, mentorship networks, advice networks) can heighten the sense of being "invisible" or devaluing one's contributions. (Farh, 2021; M. Barak 2017). First, individuals may be actively left out of important information to better complete their work. Second, exclusion may cause individuals to feel that their contributions or skills are not recognized and that their abilities may not be overall beneficial to members of the organization.

Networks based on social interactions or friendships provide additional opportunities to learn about the perceptions of a person's value within an organization or may indicate that individuals are socially valued. Indirect associations between centrality in other types of informal networks based on friendship or liking and belonging have also been identified. Individuals with a higher indegree centrality in a friendship network within the

organization display better job performance (Ahuja et al., 2003; Baldwin et al., 1997), and faster career advancement. Ahuja et al. (2003) examined both communication and friendship networks amongst a cohort of MBA students. MBA students were asked to list who they are friends with and who they communicate to complete work. Centrality in both communication and friendship networks were associated with students performing better in classes. However, friendship centrality was a stronger predictor over communication network for satisfaction in the program, individual performance in terms of grades and overall gpa, and performance on team projects.

In summary, we argue that being highly connected or central within a network can enhance one's experience of inclusion. Being centrally connected in information and friendship networks can show that an individual has influence, knowledge, or resources that others seek out or value. Social connections are signals of one's value and can promote belonging.

**Proposition 1:** In-degree centrality, a network-based indicator of how people feel valued by their organization, is associated with organizational inclusion.

## Reciprocity in Informal Networks

Tie reciprocity, a network-based indicator of the extent to which people's social interactions are reciprocated in their organization, may serve as a second indicator of organizational inclusion. Individuals may use information about their informal networks to determine if their social outreach and support provided to others is being reciprocated. For example, if one person shares information with a colleague, and that

person reciprocates, their relationship is bidirectional. Bidirectional ties are considered stronger ties than one-direction ties (Almaatouq et al., 2016; Granovetter, 1973; Hansen, 1999; Tortoriello et al., 2011). Strong ties tend to have more frequent interactions, greater offering of resources, and tend to be more consistent and valuable social resources. In comparison weak ties have less frequent interactions, but may offer novel information or resources (Granovetter, 1973; Jack, 2005). According to Rook's equity theory (1987), people expect their social investments to be met with equal investment. In fact, inequitable relationships can cause resentment. At times, organizations— particularly with high levels of cooperation—require individuals to rely on others to provide their personal resources—time, knowledge, skills, effort—in order to complete their tasks. Aligned with strong ties, having more congruent relationships or bidirectional ties within a network implies more investment and a more equitable exchange of resources, which should promote a sense of belonging.

#### Reciprocity and bidirectional ties

Conceptually, if two individuals nominate each other when asked "who are you friends with?", this means both individuals acknowledge the friendship; thus, the relationship is meaningful to both. In contrast, there is an imbalance if only one person nominates the other. Friendships with an imbalance, where one person perceives the relationship as stronger or more beneficial than the other, are less stable (Vaquera & Kao, 2008; Zerubavel et al., 2015). Individuals cannot consistently rely on resources in a one-directional relationship, which may lead the relationship to decay. In bidirectional ties, individuals exchange resources back and forth. Norms of reciprocity and trust are

likely established where individuals have an equal sense of the relationship and equivocal investment of personal support (Gouldner, 1960).

Having more reciprocal ties means that social resources are consistently available and match the social investments the individual is contributing. Networks with greater bidirectional ties indicate higher reciprocity and should support belonging. Vaquera and Kao (2008) looked across 80 schools to determine if having a reciprocated best friend impacted students' academic performance and self-reported sense of belonging, as well as GPA. Students could nominate up to 10 best friends (five male, five female). Reciprocity was measured as the percentage of bidirectional ties in their friend network. Students with high levels of reciprocity in their networks also reported a greater sense of belonging. In addition, consistent with previous analyses on belonging and performance, these students with reciprocated relationships were more likely to have higher GPAs.

Bidirectional network ties, in which individuals share knowledge or information, can also influence teams. Myers (2021) examined bidirectional and reciprocal relationships of vicarious learning. The study measured the level at which members of consulting teams listened to or found meaning in the experiences or knowledge of other members within their team. Myers draws two conclusions from their findings. Since information is a resource of the organization, when teams have a high number of reciprocal relationships, multiple perspectives and thus multiple insights can be gleaned from the information; in the project units, membership on a team with higher numbers of

bidirectional ties provided access to more perspectives members could gain while working on the project. More broadly, greater access to others' perspectives enhances an individual's skills and knowledge by providing multiple takes and ways of thinking towards a specific problem. Myers suggests that resources exchanged in information or knowledge networks also provide individuals with a portfolio of skills and perspectives they can use when facing future problems. Although this work doesn't directly measure belonging, future research could examine how reciprocity in knowledge enhances belonging through access to resources.

Myers (2021) also claims that the enhanced performance from greater reciprocity may be due to a shared mental schema. Suppose group members share information, and the information is bidirectional. In that case, members share a similar mental model and are aware of each other's modes of thinking. In addition, increased reciprocity in the network reduces information gaps and dissimilarity in individuals' social relations. Thus, individuals are aligned with information and aware of the skills and gaps within their group. If individuals have social connections and similar types of thinking (Parkinson et al., 2018), they have information on their skills and role within the organization, which may foster a sense of belonging.

**Proposition 2:** Tie reciprocity, a network-based indicator of how people feel their social interactions are reciprocated in their organization, is associated with organizational inclusion.

### Fit in Informal Networks

Structural equivalence, a network-based indicator of the extent to which people have peers who occupy similar positions in their organization, may serve as a third indicator

of organizational inclusion. Research on the psychology of organizational fit suggests that individuals must perceive that people within their focal group have shared experiences and characteristics like their own. Thus, individuals may use informal networks to find colleagues with similar roles and experiences within the workplace or seek out employees with similar values. Attributes of similarity or dissimilarity can be determined by the structural pattern of their social network connections. A special case of this occurs when two individuals share the same number of ties with the same directional patterns to the same actors, in which case they are considered to be structurally equivalent. The “two individuals are [are both members] of, precisely, the same social circles” (Pizarro, 2007) .

Structurally equivalent individuals often adopt similar perceptions or attitudes due to having similar peers, connections, and exposure to the same information. Social equivalents who are friends are social references and important sources of knowledge (Shah, 1998). Being structurally equivalent to other members in the organization should therefore promote belonging by increased perception of fit or shared experience. Within large organization networks, complete structural equivalence may be unlikely, given individuals have many, heterogeneous opportunities to build social relationships (Pizarro, 2007).

Having a structural equivalent also confirms that the role a person occupies is legitimate. If an individual occupies a similar role to someone else in the organization, they have a supplementary fit, meaning they share a social role with others in the

organization (Shah, 1998; Zagenczyk et al., 2010). Supplementary fits can be sources of reference for one's experience or position in the network or sources of information for comparison and with which to validate one's fit. In comparison, having no structural similarity means individuals may not have a social referent to compare and feel shared experience.

Complementary fits are individuals who have unique roles within the organization, which can also provide benefits related to belonging (Cable & Judge, 1996). However, complementary fits likely have no social equivalence and probably benefit through different mechanisms related to uniqueness. Uniqueness likely offers one validation through being valued as a novel resource or skill, as opposed to being socially aligned or in solidarity with others (Cable & Edwards, 2004; Rogers & Ashforth, 2017).

More generally, to illustrate, imagine a large company with multiple teams. Each team has different individuals. Person A is part of the car team and has ties to two coworkers and their boss. Person B is on the marketing team and has ties to one coworker and their boss. Product Manager C is on the HR team and has ties to two coworkers and their boss. Here person A and Person C both have two coworker ties and a boss tie. These individuals are regularly equivalent. Researchers may consider these two individuals to occupy similar social or job roles. Equivalence allows network scientists to identify the presence of patterns, or repetitive blocks that build a network. For social scholars equivalence in networks suggests that similar social roles and norms may permeate within the network.

## Fit & Equivalence

Structural equivalence thus offers one potential network-based indicator of how people feel like they fit within their organization, which in turn may be associated with organizational inclusion by increasing feelings of belonging. In information or knowledge networks, this equivalence confirms one's skills or influence within the organization (Shah, 1998). A structural equivalent in the network can confirm one's experiences by determining if their equivalent has similar attitudes or challenges within the organization (Shah, 1998).

Based on Festinger's social comparison theory, individuals comprehend their own capacities or importance by comparing themselves to others (Festinger, 1954). Individuals may compare their similarities or dissimilarities to certain individuals in the organization to determine their sense of belonging. Individuals may compare themselves to high-performing members of the organization to determine if they have some structural equivalence. For instance, do they have similar social ties, relationships, or access to resources, as people who are repeatedly rewarded? Exemplary members or members who receive the greatest benefits or praise within the organization are insiders and can be an aspirational status to achieve (Stamper & Masterson, 2002). In this case individuals may feel a greater sense of belonging by having equivalence to individuals who are regarded in high standing in the organization.

**Proposition 3:** Structural equivalence, a network-based indicator of how people feel like they fit within their organization, is associated with organizational inclusion.



## Marginalization and Social Networks

Thus far, we have reviewed the literature to develop novel theory about the role of informal social network positions in creating the subjective experience of belonging to one's organization. But research has also shown consistent evidence of inequities in how people's diverse identities shape these experiences (e.g., Brands et al 2022 in AOM Annals; Zhang, Aven & Kleinbaum 2024 in ASQ; Ibarra 1995). In this section, we examine the ways in which marginalized racial identity -- particularly for Black Americans -- might affect these theoretical propositions, and highlight the need for substantially more research in this arena.

The geographer Marco Antonsich (Antonsich, 2010) argued that belonging encompasses two dimensions: the personal, emotional identification of "feeling at home" and the sociopolitical process of choosing and being excluded. Emotional identification is built on positive affective experiences, which are induced, at least in part, by social network position, as we have explored in this review. In this second sociopolitical dimension, Antonsich states that through socialization and politics, individuals go on to discover where they are accepted and from which groups they may be excluded (inclusion/exclusion boundaries). Belonging may be extended or limited based on social categories. In some cases, individuals may be denied membership and cannot belong. In the following section, we review what we mean by marginalization. We then offer propositions specifying how marginalization may influence people's sense of value, reciprocity, and fit, and how they change how centrality, reciprocal ties, and structural equivalence relate to a sense of belonging.

### What is Marginalization?

Marginalization is the isolation or distancing of certain individuals or groups in society, typically based on social characteristics derived from systems of oppression (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Systems such as racism or sexism have created political, economic, and structural inequities that advantage individuals who possess certain characteristics and disadvantage others of different identities or characteristics (Feagin, 1987). Such systems are historically and culturally ingrained and thus shape attitudes and behaviors towards individuals belonging to specific groups (Berry & Bell, 2012; Quinn, 2020).

While Black American employment in organizations has proliferated following the Civil Rights movements and policies such as affirmative action, Black workers have consistently faced hurdles in the social processes of workplaces of predominantly White organizations which have limited their career access, mobility, and opportunity (Baldi & McBRIER, 1997; Berry & Bell, 2012; Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Grodsky & Pager, 2001). Voluminous research has explored the various factors that underlie the effect of marginalization on organizational attainment (e.g., (Berry & Bell, 2012; Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Grodsky & Pager, 2001), and we focus on its effect on the experience of workplace inclusion. We argue that the marginalization that Black Americans experience in organizations affects their experience of belonging (value, reciprocity and fit), both directly and also indirectly, mediated by network properties. Further, we argue for moderation effects, in which the effects of centrality, bidirectional ties and structural equivalence differ by race. Specifically, we argue that the marginalization that Black Americans experience in organizations can be attributed, at least in part, to two factors: main effects of marginalization on belonging (value,

reciprocity and fit), mediated by network properties; moderation effects where the impact of centrality, bidirectional ties and structural equivalence, on value, reciprocity and fit, respectively, differ by race.

### Mediating Effects of Marginalization on Belonging

Negative stereotypes are one way that marginalization can impact belonging. We argued above that network centrality impacts belonging, and network centrality within informal informational and communication networks is a function of how others view each node in the network. Anti-Black stereotypes are one powerful force that shapes perceptions of and social interactions with Black workers (Berry & Bell, 2012; Remedios & Snyder, 2018), which may lead Black workers to have lower network centrality, and therefore less belonging in predominantly White organizations. Stereotypes have been mapped across multiple dimensions; two dimensions that are often focal, described by the Stereotype Content Model are competence, and warmth, by (Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2007). Competence is associated with traits such as intelligence, skill, and ability. Warmth is associated with empathy, kindness, and thoughtfulness. Black workers are often stereotyped as lacking both competence and warmth (Gilbert et al., 2003; Knight et al., 2003). Within work contexts, stereotypes around competence may limit career growth or hiring. However, people's emotional evaluations, or how they feel about someone, determine whom they go to for job- or task-related advice (Casciaro & Lobo, 2008; Casciaro et al., 2022). People prefer individuals who they feel good about as colleagues on projects within the workplace. Anti-Black perceptions of Black workers as aggressive or arrogant have been reported (Franklin, 2022; Gilbert et al., 2003;

Remedios & Snyder, 2018; Rosette et al., 2018) and may limit the social interactions non-Black workers are willing to engage in with Black colleagues (Franklin, 2022; Gilbert et al., 2003; Knight et al., 2003).

In addition, these stereotypes are more perniciously applied to Black women and consequently deeply impact their ability to build relationships in informal networks. Wingfield (2013) found that although Black male workers were able to make headway within White insider's club in their organizations and build personal colleagues, Black professional women were more likely to feel entirely cut-off from the social relationships of work. While White women have articulated a glass-ceiling that limits career advancement, Black women have discussed an opaque and unbreakable "concrete ceiling, whereby opportunities for career advancement are significantly reduced or nonexistent (Ray & Davis, 1988)."

**Proposition 4:** Black people will have lower network centrality than White people. As a result of (i.e., mediated by) their lower network centrality, Black people will experience less organizational belonging than White people.

Another way that marginalization can impact belonging operates through homophily, a psychological process in which people favor building connections with similar others (McPherson et al., 2001). Homophily plays a powerful role in determining both network tie formation and tie strength, such that having more people "like me" in an organization increases the likelihood of forming strong, bidirectional ties (R. Friedman et al., 1998; Ibarra, 1995). People who are in social categories that are discriminated against or marginalized are often underrepresented within organizations, which can further

promote social exclusion (Ibarra, 1995; Kanter, 1977; Lewis & Simpson, 2012). Due to underrepresentation, Black workers will have fewer strong, racially homophilous ties. To the extent that homophily is a determinant of reciprocity, they will experience less tie reciprocity -- and, therefore, less belonging -- than White people. Consistent with this possibility, Ibarra (1995) examined the role of homophily in managerial relationships and found that homophily and under-representation limit social relationships for Black workers. Due to the confluence of the effects of homophily with their underrepresentation within organizations, Black individuals in the four Fortune 500 firms Ibarra (1995) studied had fewer opportunities to build social relationships and, consequently, to participate in the information exchange within the organization. She found evidence that all groups preferred social relationships with individuals who shared either their racial or gender identity, a finding that more recent research has corroborated (Lu 2022 in JPSP). As such, due to the availability of fewer people with similar identities within the organization, Black workers had fewer intimate connections. Black workers had more diverse connections overall due to the lack of availability of similar others, but these connections were less close and had less overlap between managerial roles and the participant's social connections.

Similarly, in interviews among Silicon Valley tech workers, Franklin (2020) found that Black workers, who typically made up 2% of the workforce in Silicon Valley companies, were often tasked with initiating relationships and reaching out to build connections with their non-Black colleagues. Here, the building of meaningful connections with members

of the majority group comprised a form of “relational labor” that Black individuals had to endure and that was usually not fully reciprocated (Franklin 2020).

**Proposition 5:** Black people will experience less tie reciprocity than White people. As a result of (i.e., mediated by) their lower tie reciprocity, Black people will experience less organizational belonging than White people.

Third, if marginalized individuals achieve leadership positions, they may experience significant backlash by the dominant group (Rudman et al., 2012). One case in which dominant groups may attempt to reinforce a social hierarchy against vanguards, or marginalized individuals who step beyond the typical (racial/gender) status hierarchy, is by exclusion, increased discrimination, or withdrawal of support (Phelan & Rudman, 2010; Rudman et al., 2012). In this case, marginalized people may be less likely to have same race **structural equivalents** who can provide both emotional and informational support, particularly as they progress in rank, resulting in lower perceptions of fit and belonging. As argued above, having structural equivalents can increase confidence in the fit and usefulness of a particular position within an organization, and this may be particularly powerful if those structural equivalents share key life experiences. By contrast, lack of same-race structural equivalents may result in belonging uncertainty, which refers to the lack of clarity or certainty individuals may experience regarding their sense of belonging within a particular group, community, or social context (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

**Proposition 6:** Black people will experience less structural equivalence than White people. As a result of (i.e., mediated by) their lower structural equivalence in leadership positions, Black people will experience less organizational belonging than White people.

### Moderating Effects of Marginalization on Belonging

Having many ties may contribute to a sense of being valued and belonging. But at times, it may also contribute to feelings of hypervisibility and exposure that, paradoxically, undermine one's sense of belonging. Hypervisibility is the feeling that one's presence within an organization is overly scrutinized and magnified (Buchanan & Settles, 2019; Settles et al., 2019). Marginalized individuals describe this magnification as shaped by their differences and stigmatization (Buchanan & Settles, 2019).

In 'tokenism' theory, Kanter (1977) discusses the social processes marginalized individuals must go through when they are underrepresented in the organization. Kanter's theory focuses on proportional representation, the percentage of people with a given marginalized identity within the organization. Kanter argues that in cases where a marginalized individual is highly tokenized—such that they are one of very few representatives of their group—they experience heightened visibility and increased stereotyping based on their social difference. This hypervisibility paired with negative stereotyping creates “scrutiny based on the perceived difference,” (Settles, 2014). Hypervisibility is associated with surveillance of an individual's performance, discrimination, magnification of mistakes, and the inability to control one's perception in the organization (Brighenti, 2007; Kanter, 1977; Lewis & Simpson, 2010). This increased visibility leads to vigilance about impression management, which may cause stigmatized individuals to feel pressure to perform above others. Kanter (1977) also argued that the visibility of people's identities causes non-marginalized workers to heighten their attention to stereotypes or perceived differences. In response,

marginalized workers feel a stronger threat to assimilate, to play down differences in their identity, and to be more attentive to how they are perceived (Kanter, 1977; Settles et al., 2019).

Being highly central in a network as marginalized individual means increased social interactions and visibility in the organization. While this may come with benefits, this heightened visibility may feel they must be or are socially treated as a “representative” of their group (Kanter, 1977). When people are more central in their social networks, their actions may be subject to more scrutiny, impression management, and a feeling to play down one’s differences, thus magnifying racialized effects of hypervisibility.

**Proposition 7:** Network centrality interacts with marginalized racial identity in their joint effect on belonging, such that the effect of network centrality on belonging is weaker in Black Americans than in White Americans.

Individuals from historically marginalized identity groups can develop negative internalizations of oppressive systems (David, 2014; David et al., 2019). These negative internal perceptions may lead individuals to feel an imposter syndrome or to experience stereotype threats. The threats to one’s social identity may enhance the search or feeling of negative cues around one’s belonging or acceptance (Murph et al.s, 2007; Murphy & Taylor, 2012; Steele, 2010). In a particularly compelling study, Walton and Cohen (2011) found that one way to help Black students overcome uncertainty about their sense of belonging in a predominantly White university was to reinforce their sense of social connection to others who had experienced adversity. Students read about others' experiences of overcoming social adversity in school and then created



supportive messages for future students. This intervention helped them internalize the idea that social adversity can be overcome, see themselves as benefactors, and invest in the well-being of their peers.

Also consistent with the idea that reciprocity may be particularly important in fostering a sense of belonging for people in minoritized groups, Arnett (2023) found that when professionals at networking events shared personal and intimate stories about their racial or ethnic identities—such as the adversities they had overcome or their cultural habits and beliefs—White professionals felt a stronger sense of connection and interest in the employee sharing the rich cultural identity. These social identity disclosures led to an increased sense of liking among both majority, White professionals and minoritized non-White professionals.

At times of hypervisibility, strong emotional support will be especially important. And strong, reciprocal ties are an important source of emotional support (Vaquera & Kao 2008). Therefore, reciprocal ties will be especially important to members of marginalized identity groups as they deal with race-based hypervisibility.

Being seen and invested in as a marginalized individual can sometimes feel like an unexpected surprise. While organizations may claim aspects of diversity or promote diversity, Black employees may feel unheard about their cultural challenges, they may feel unable to have open discussions about their experience at work, and feel excluded from the social life of the organization (Arnett, 2023; Buchanan & Settles, 2019). For

Black employees experiences can culminate in feeling invisible and excluded. Thus the sense of being seen or invested in could be of heightened importance. In Franklin (2022), a Black employee at the tech firm discussed her relationship with an Indian manager, “He asked her about issues close to her heart, such as her children and her social justice work – indicating the existence of a micro boundary around the relationship” (Franklin, 2022, pg, 14) Similarly, studies on Black professional networks show that the benefits of these networks are enhanced mentorship, which employees feel they may not get at their main place of employment (R. Friedman et al., 1998; Ibarra, 1995). To this extent, Black employees have to put additional relational labor to build these social ties at times, and may feel a heightened sense of belonging which this investment is met with authentic and reciprocated social strength.

**Proposition 8:** Tie reciprocity interacts with marginalized racial identity in their joint effect on belonging, such that the effect of reciprocity on belonging is stronger in Black people than in White people.

#### Homophily Effects of Marginalization on Belonging

But because hypervisibility is explicitly linked with race, it may be difficult for Black Americans to get race-related social support from their non-Black colleagues, even those with whom they are close. For example, in their study of Silicon Valley coworkers, Franklin (2022) found that non-Black workers were unwilling to discuss issues of race, the lack of Black presence in their workplace, and while acknowledging that Black workers’ experiences were difficult, they believed it may not be their place to discuss. Other empirical research has found that Black workers benefit from building

homophilous ties with other Black professionals (R. Friedman et al., 1998; Gilkes Borr, 2019; Ibarra, 1995). Typically these relationships are enhanced through enhanced mentoring and promote career optimism (R. Friedman et al., 1998). Therefore, for Black workers, **reciprocity with same-race alters** may have a stronger effect on belonging than reciprocity with other-race alters. For White workers, we expect no such difference.

**Proposition 9:** For Black people, reciprocity with same-race alters may have a stronger effect on belonging than reciprocity with other-race alters. For White people, we expect no such difference.

As mentioned in Kanter's (1997) theory on tokenization, reduced representation activates experiences of hypervisibility and vigilance for impression management. In addition, Black workers may experience less social ties with high position individuals within an organization, which may reduce sense of investment or belonging (Elliott & Smith, 2004). This may make Black individuals feel a sense of exclusion as well. Black workers may be more likely to look to racially similar social referents to ensure that their experiences are socially valid.

Hypervisibility results from tokenization and may enhance the perception of social exclusion (Kanter 1977). But the more Black people occupy structural roles that are also occupied by Black colleagues, the less they will feel excluded and the more they will feel a sense of fit with and belonging in the organization. Therefore:

**Proposition 10:** For Black workers, same-race structural equivalents will have a stronger effect on belonging than other-race structural equivalents. For White workers, we expect no such difference.

## CONCLUSION

While organizations continue to champion DEI by doing things like committing to diversity goals, or developing programs to promote equity, many of these commitments have fallen short. As a result, minoritized people remain under-represented in many of the United States' most successful firms and even less represented amongst their leadership (Peterson et al., 2007). Beyond their career attainment, marginalized individuals also report lower job satisfaction and higher turnover compared with the white majority (Grodsky & Pager, 2001). Inclusion remains an understudied and elusive challenge of DEI. Inclusion, defined as the involvement, participation, and acceptance of diverse individuals and perspectives in an organization (Mor Barak, 2015), offers a series of organizational and individual benefits, including a more committed and healthier workforce, increased innovation, and greater exchange of information (Galinsky et al., 2015). In the present paper, we argue that organizations can instill a social sense of belonging by promoting value, reciprocity, and fit for individuals within the workforce. Value is the sense that an individual and their contributions are valued and recognized by their colleagues. Reciprocity is met when individuals feel that their social initiative is returned to them by others in roughly equal measure. And fit occurs when they see others occupying roles similar to their own.

We argue that these three dimensions of belonging come in part through social interactions, and thus, a social network perspective enables companies and

researchers alike to measure contributors to belonging. We propose three measures of social network structure—network centrality, tie reciprocity, and equivalence—as measures of one’s value, reciprocity, and fit within the organization. We call on future research to test empirically whether these network features drive belonging amongst organization members. Lastly, we discuss how marginalization of Black people in the United States impacts their social experience. We posit a series of theoretical propositions to better understand how the marginalization of Black workers may affect their experience of workplace inclusion, both indirectly, through its effect on network structure, as well as directly, in interaction with the effect of network structure. Critically, the lens we apply within this framework highlights the interplay between individual and structural factors, and highlights the generative potential of integrating psychological theory with a network perspective, to better understand inclusion in organizations.

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### Positionality statement

In acknowledgement that our identities can influence our approach to science (Roberts et al., 2020) the authors wish to provide the reader with information about our backgrounds. With respect to gender, when the manuscript was drafted, 1 authors self-identified as a woman and 2 authors as men. With respect to race and ethnicity, 1 author self-identified as Black, 2 authors as White.

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