

The dark side of inclusive leadership

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Introduction

In recent years, the notion of inclusive leadership has gained prominence within management discourses on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Framed as a progressive response to increasing calls for workplace equity, it is frequently theorised as a leadership style capable of enhancing organisational performance, team cohesion, and individual well-being (Leroy et al., 2022; Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006; Shore et al., 2011). Its advocates position inclusive leadership as uniquely well suited to navigating the complexities of diverse workplaces, often portraying it as an essential remedy to the shortcomings of traditional diversity management (Ferdman, 2014; Roberson, 2006). Scholars tend to argue that inclusive leaders drive belongingness, foster psychological safety, and unlock creativity, all while enhancing competitiveness and reputational capital (Carmeli et al., 2010; Randel et al., 2018; Korkmaz et al., 2022).

Yet, this mainstream optimism warrants closer examination. While inclusion is broadly valued and few DEI practitioners and researchers would question its significance, critical engagement with the assumptions underpinning inclusive leadership remains sparse (Adamson et al., 2020; Tyler, 2019). The prevailing framings privilege leader agency, managerial virtue, and business-case rationalities. By depoliticising inclusion, these approaches risk narrowing its aims to organisational performance outcomes rather than addressing structural inequalities or advancing social justice (Dobusch, 2021; Zanoni, 2024).

This chapter focuses on the dark side of inclusive leadership, exemplified in the commodification of inclusion, an emphasis on tokenistic interventions, and the tendency to reinforce rather than their dismantle existing hierarchies (Ajibade Adisa et al., 2025; Kanter, 1977; Leong, 2013; Romani et al., 2021). We argue that these limitations can be traced to the ontological foundation of humanist individualist agency in which inclusive leadership is inherently rooted. In critiquing the very conceptualisation of inclusive leadership, the chapter exposes its theoretical and practical shortcomings and interrogates the legitimacy of claims regarding its numerous benefits. The central argument presented here is that – unless its foundations are critically rethought – inclusive leadership, underpinned by a leader-centric ontology and business-case orientation, far from being a solution, risks inadvertently reproducing the very inequalities it claims to challenge.

We unfold this argument in three stages. First, we examine the background and relevance of inclusive leadership, situating the discussion within broader debates on diversity and inclusion, and presenting evidence of the persistent discrepancy between the rhetoric and reality on inclusive leadership, in particular in the case of UK workplaces. Second, we develop a critique of the legitimacy of inclusive leadership's claims, highlighting its reliance on leader-centric framings and the problematic conflation of inclusivity with managerial effectiveness. Third, we pursue a deeper ontological critique, questioning the essentialised and intentional subjectivity underpinning inclusive leadership. We propose replacing it with a relational ontology of interdependence as an alternative, more radical grounding for rethinking inclusion beyond leader-centrism. By unpacking these issues, the chapter contributes to critical approaches to diversity and inclusion, aligning with scholars who caution against co-option of the equity agenda and call for a more transformative politics of inclusion.

Background and relevance: The discrepancy between the rhetoric and reality of inclusion in the UK workplace

Despite the growing organisational commitment to inclusion, and the overwhelmingly positive tone of inclusive leadership scholarship, broader empirical evidence suggests that progress not only remains uneven but is, in some areas, regressive. The claim that inclusive leadership offers a route towards more equitable and diverse workplaces must therefore be considered alongside empirical data indicating that, contrary to the dominant rhetoric surrounding inclusive leadership, in the UK workplace context, progress with diversity is slowing down, and inclusion remains elusive.

Workplace realities, even in sectors that publicly champion equality, reveal a striking gap between rhetoric and practice. A 2024 study of UK environmental charities found that ethnic minority representation remained as low as 5%, declining slightly from previous years, and with employees reporting tokenistic approaches to diversity and a lack of meaningful change (The RACE Report, 2024). Data from across the UK further reveal significant gender imbalances at the highest organisational levels, with board diversity progress slowing and the proportion of new appointments going to women and ethnically diverse candidates declining since 2022 (Consultancy.uk, 2024). Women accounted for just 50% of new board appointments in 2024, a decrease of 6% from 2023 and 8% from 2022. Ethnic minority appointments also fell to 20% from 23% the previous year, showing regression rather than progress. At present, only 7% of FTSE 350 CEOs are women (FTSE Women Leaders Review, 2025). In smaller AIM-listed firms, inequalities are even starker: one-third of boards remain entirely male, and fewer than one in six seats are held by women (Consultancy.uk, 2024). These figures underscore the persistent exclusion of female and ethnic minority leaders at senior levels. Gender pay gaps also remain unaddressed, with ONS data showing that Black African women

earn 26% less than the average male worker, while Bangladeshi and Pakistani women experience even greater disparities (ONS, 2024).

The growing scepticism surrounding organisational diversity initiatives reflects wider concerns that across UK workplaces; inclusivity-focused interventions are not effective, sometimes counterproductive, or legally questionable, and frequently fail to achieve intended outcomes (UK Government's Inclusion at Work Panel Report, 2024).

Beyond gender and ethnicity, socioeconomic inequalities remain crucial in shaping career prospects. A 2025 Sutton Trust analysis found that privately educated candidates continue to dominate elite UK roles, with minimal change since 2019 and regression in some sectors (The Sutton Trust, 2025). This demonstrates that access to positions of power is structured less by inclusive leadership initiatives than by intersections of gender, ethnicity, and class privilege. While this data shows a broader trend of stalling inclusion across business sectors, two institutional case studies – the NHS and UK higher education – illustrate that, despite being formally championed, inclusion remains far from accomplished.

The NHS, the UK's largest employer and the biggest employer of ethnic minority staff in Europe, continues to exhibit structural inequalities. Ethnic minority staff constitute 30% of the workforce but only 8% of top senior management positions (NHS Workforce Race Equality Standard, 2025). They are also more likely to face disciplinary action and harassment while reporting fewer opportunities for progression (NHS Workforce Race Equality Standard, 2025). For example, the 2024 WRES report revealed that 17.9% of Black women reported experiencing discrimination from managers or colleagues in the previous 12 months, compared with 9.1% of men. Government-commissioned reviews and media reports have highlighted how institutional cultures and episodic or poorly designed interventions can exacerbate rather than ameliorate inequality (Messenger and Pollard Review, 2022). High-profile professional bodies (e.g. the BMA Report, 2022) also document that overseas-trained and minority ethnic

clinicians face disproportionate obstacles across their careers, from training assessment to disciplinary processes, a pattern inconsistent with the notion that inclusion has been normalised in the NHS workforce. Amplified by unsafe experiences of raising voices about inequalities at work, minority ethnic staff within the NHS report feeling fearful and frequently choose to remain silent, in order to avoid being labelled “a difficult coworker” and denied opportunities for career progression (Chastney et al., 2024: 6). The lived experiences of minority ethnic staff working in the NHS, marked by higher rates of harassment, lower perceptions of career opportunity and chronic under-representation in senior roles, are in contradiction with the NHS ‘Our Leadership Way’ framework and the ‘NHS People Promise’.

What becomes evident is that despite introducing numerous initiatives focused on tackling inequalities such as the 2023 NHS Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Improvement Plan centred around six ‘high impact’ actions for leaders – resonating very strongly with theoretical postulates of inclusive leadership – the experiences of staff from minority ethnic backgrounds show a striking discrepancy between the rhetoric of inclusivity and the reality of those who continue to face systemic inequalities. Some argue that tasking those who currently dominate in senior roles (Ross 2019) with tackling the range of discriminative disadvantages faced by ethnically diverse NHS staff will only produce superficial changes, rather than meaningful progress (Hussain et al., 2024; Ramamurthy et al., 2022). Without first addressing the very underrepresentation of members of ethnic minority groups and women in senior positions, leadership-focused solutions are risking being continually hindered by a lack of understanding of cultural sensitivities and experiences of Black and minority ethnic staff. Regardless, then, of the inclusive leadership narratives, the underlying inequalities and injustices within the context of the NHS are unlikely to be dismantled without a shift of institutional hierarchies that, as Irons (2024) argues, persistently echo colonial relations of power).

A similar discrepancy between rhetoric and practice can still be observed in UK higher education (see also Bebbington and Özbilgin, 2013). While universities pledge to create inclusive environments where “diverse voices are included in decision-making processes” and academics, professional staff and student feel valued, heard and empowered, structural inequalities remain persistent (Advance HE, 2025, no p.no.). Against the rhetoric of embracing “a more inclusive, distributed, and ethically grounded approach to leadership development” (Advance HE, 2025, no p.no.), HESA data for 2022–23 revealed that while staff from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds comprised 20% of all academic staff, almost 90% professors were White, and fewer than 1% were Black (HESA, 2024). Advance HE’s 2024 ‘Equality in Higher Education – Staff’ report further found that BAME academics were disproportionately employed on fixed-term contracts, and just 8.9% of staff in senior management were from minority ethnic backgrounds (Universities UK, 2021).

The persistence of racialised inequalities has been well documented in academic research (Arday and Jones, 2022; Bhopal, 2016; Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020), showing how BAME academics are concentrated in precarious positions and less prestigious institutions. They frequently report experiences of marginalisation and excessive scrutiny, along with expectations to engage in often unrecognised or under-recognised diversity work (Gabriel, 2017; Osho and Alorme, 2025).

Inequalities in academia continue to be produced and perpetuated through micro-practices of gendered and racialised disadvantages as experienced by women and members of ethnic minorities, cumulatively shaping institutional climates of inequality and exclusion (Johnson and Joseph-Salisbury, 2018; Śliwa et al., 2024). These micro-level struggles point to broader macro-level failures of inclusion and reveal how leadership discourses of equity remain disconnected from the lived realities of those whose experiences are marked by ongoing

exposure to everyday microaggressions, and culture of fear and distrust, adversely affecting their wellbeing (Dattani-Demirci and Toogood, 2025).

Critics argue that even when universities, signalling commitment to gender and racial equity, adopt various programmes and monitoring tools focussed on inclusion such as the Athena Swan Charter and the Race Equality Charter (REC), these schemes risk enhancing managerial reputation while leaving systemic barriers untouched (Campion and Clark, 2022). As Bhopal and Pitkin (2020: 534) note, REC can ‘create the illusion of inclusion’ without addressing the structural disadvantages faced by BME groups in higher education. Policy badges and inclusive leadership frameworks are flourished with intentions but fail substantively, coexisting with neoliberal pressures and marketisation that entrench inequity and privilege within academia (Strauß and Boncori, 2020). These troubling trends show that while higher education leaders promote inclusivity and publicly express commitment to equity, they fail to translate narratives into transformative practice (Ahmed, 2007; Carducci et al., 2024).

Evidence from both the NHS and higher education demonstrates persistent under-representation and differential treatment. Examining these contexts shows that broader policy commitments and the promotion of inclusive leadership do not automatically translate into inclusive realities. On the contrary, they fail to dismantle systemic inequalities. Empirical research highlights a fundamental discrepancy: while inclusive leadership is portrayed in scholarship as transformative and universally beneficial, workplace realities show persistent inequality, tokenism (Ajibade Adisa, et al., 2025) and stagnating progress. The gap between the rhetoric and practice calls into question the legitimacy of inclusive leadership’s claims and underscores the need for a more critical examination of its foundations.

This critique is even more urgent given the growing importance attached by employees, particularly younger generations, to workplace inclusivity. A 2024 survey shows that 59% of UK workers would consider leaving their jobs if their employer rolled back DEI commitments

(IRIS Software Group, 2024). This reinforces the need to rethink the very foundations of inclusive leadership, ensuring that its promises are no longer rooted in the myth of the excessively powerful, capable, and morally heroic organisational leader (Schweiger et al., 2020). Left unchallenged, such myths risk reinforcing authority and domination-based understandings of leadership, undermining the very inclusion it claims to advance.

The promise of inclusive leadership

The notion of inclusion is typically framed in overwhelmingly positive terms, with a wide range of benefits identified as the outcomes of an inclusive organisational environment. Transforming organisations into inclusive workplaces is assumed to reduce discrimination, enhance fairness, and overcome the limitations of earlier diversity management approaches (Dobusch, 2021; Özbilgin et al., 2013). Despite the common pairing of the terms diversity and inclusion, their meanings and emphases are distinct. Diversity is primarily concerned with the composition of the workforce. It refers to the presence of individuals from different demographic, cultural, and social groups, and includes both observable characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and age, as well as non-observable backgrounds within the workplace (Roberson, 2006).

In practice, however, diversity has often been reduced to organisational initiatives that focus on numerical representation, particularly through recruitment practices aimed at increasing heterogeneity (Roberson, 2006). Such approaches, while important in addressing access, do not necessarily attend to the lived experiences of individuals once they are within organisations. A narrow, static and quantitative understanding of diversity has been subject to extensive criticism, not least because it risks reducing people to tokens of difference rather than recognising them as full participants in organisational life (Ajibade Adisa et al., 2025; Lukkien et al., 2025)

Inclusion, by contrast to diversity, is framed as a more expansive and active concept, moving beyond demographic representation and focusing on processes, practices, and

relationships that ensure “full rights, access, and privileges of employment and advancement to all organisational members” (Combs et al., 2019: 279). In other words, inclusion promises to transform the static representation of diversity into dynamic practices that are embedded in everyday organisational life and represent “a more material change” (Roberson and Perry, 2022: 756). As Ferdman and Deane (2014: xxi) argue, diversity is often treated as a noun, whereas inclusion operates as a verb, a practical way of “working with and managing diversity” encompassing practices, interactions, and structures that integrate diversity into collective life. Whereas diversity initiatives may lead to increased representation, addressing inequality requires practices that allow everyone to feel valued, accepted, and supported regardless of their background, identity, or circumstances (CIPD, 2020).

The rise of inclusion as an organisational aspiration has grown in response to the critiques of diversity management’s failures. Critical diversity studies (CDS), rooted in non-essentialist and constructivist approaches, have shown that diversity initiatives – particularly when driven by commercial imperatives – can produce unintended negative consequences. These include the commodification of minority identities for economic gain and the reduction of difference into a resource to be harnessed rather than a political demand for equality (Leong, 2013; Rodgers and Liera, 2023). Indeed, when difference is instrumentalised through the business case for diversity, the original struggles for anti-discrimination and equality risk being undermined (Dobusch, 2021; Zanoni, 2024; Zanoni et al., 2009). The business case, in subordinating diversity to profitability, reframes equity as a means to improve performance metrics rather than as an ethical or political imperative. Zanoni (2024: 31) warns that business-case diversity ‘undermines the long-standing struggles for anti-discrimination and equal opportunities in the workplace’. In this sense, diversity management has shifted from a politically contested terrain into a managerial tool for leveraging difference, often reinforcing the very inequalities it purports to dismantle (Romani et al., 2021).

In response, inclusion has emerged as a corrective and seemingly superior alternative. It is presented as a morally compelling solution, responding to the critiques of instrumentalised diversity by focusing not only on who is present in the organisation but also on how they experience belonging and participation (Adamson et al., 2020). Yet, compared with the extensive critical literature on diversity management, inclusion has been subject to significantly less critical scrutiny. Instead, it remains framed predominantly in celebratory terms, making it difficult to interrogate the assumptions embedded in inclusion discourse or to consider how it might replicate, rather than transcend, the limitations of diversity management.

Positive framings of inclusion and inclusive leadership

The scholarly literature has linked inclusion to a range of positive outcomes at the individual, team and organisational levels. A growing body of studies suggests that inclusive organisational climates increase employee creativity, innovativeness, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, well-being, and overall performance (Leroy et al., 2022). These findings provide the empirical foundation for managerial and scholarly calls to prioritise inclusive practices as a way of achieving organisational success. At the centre of these discussions is the figure of the inclusive leader. Building on Shore et al.'s (2011: 1265) argument that inclusion “satisfies employees’ simultaneous needs for belongingness and uniqueness”, inclusive leadership has been positioned as the mechanism through which inclusion is enacted. Leaders are framed as pivotal figures who can cultivate inclusive climates by embodying specific behaviours: openness to new ideas, recognition of diverse contributions, accessibility, fairness, and the creation of psychologically safe spaces (Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006; Randel et al., 2018). By acknowledging and valuing differences while also fostering belonging, inclusive leaders are assumed to enable both majority and minority group members to feel respected and included.

As a result, inclusive leadership has been framed as a set of personal virtues, desirable behaviours, and effective styles of leadership. It is often distinguished from other values-based approaches such as servant leadership, ethical leadership and spiritual leadership (Fry, 2003; Kraemer, 2011; Liden et al., 2015). What sets inclusive leadership apart is its explicit emphasis on harnessing and integrating diversity for mutual benefit. This emphasis aligns with broader managerial discourses on core competencies, where diverse perspectives are assumed to generate superior problem-solving, creativity, and adaptability. Inclusive leadership, in this sense, is presented as both morally desirable and instrumentally valuable for supporting organisational performance (Korkmaz et al., 2022). Inclusive leadership thus appears as a solution for many of the challenges of diverse workplaces, yet – similarly to the failure of diversity initiatives to deliver on their promises (Oswick and Noon, 2014) – the celebratory framing of inclusive leadership may obscure rather than address underlying organisational tensions.

Despite the overwhelmingly positive portrayals of inclusion in organisational and leadership studies, there exists a striking gap between the aspirational rhetoric and the lived reality of inclusion in workplaces. While inclusion is often celebrated as the corrective solution to the failures of diversity management, a closer examination reveals that it inherits many of the same conceptual and practical limitations. Diversity management was once championed as a progressive organisational agenda, promising to redress exclusion and advance equality. Yet, it soon became co-opted into instrumental business case logics that subordinated justice and fairness to profitability and competitiveness (Romani et al., 2021; Oswick and Noon, 2014; Zanoni et al., 2010). There are strong reasons to suspect that inclusion, particularly when operationalised through leadership models that privilege individual behaviours and competencies over collective practices and systemic transformation, is likely to follow the same

trajectory. Instead of disrupting exclusionary structures, it may reproduce hierarchical relations under the guise of moral progress.

Inclusive leadership thus occupies a paradoxical position. On one hand, it is promoted as a remedy to the superficiality and instrumentalism of diversity management, offering more than numerical representation and promising genuine belonging. On the other hand, it risks being reduced to yet another managerial competency, an additional skill to be mastered by individual leaders in pursuit of organisational success (Ferdman and Deane, 2014; Mor Barak, 2015; Mor Barak et al., 2025). Framing inclusion in this way not only elevates the individual leader as the primary agent of organisational change, it also narrows the scope of inclusion to what can be enacted within the limits of managerial discretion and organisational performance imperatives.

By positioning leaders as the central drivers of inclusion, the literature on inclusive leadership implicitly places the responsibility for achieving equity on individual managers. Inclusion becomes a matter of personal virtue and professional competence, conflated with managerial effectiveness. This overly optimistic tone obscures the fundamental tension at the heart of the inclusion discourse: it is simultaneously framed as a moral imperative and as a business necessity. In practice, however, these two imperatives are rarely balanced. Instead, the moral demand to ‘do the right thing’ by embracing inclusion is justified predominantly through its contribution to creativity, innovation, employee engagement, and overall organisational performance (Leroy et al., 2022; Nishii and Leroy, 2022). The effect is the moralisation of managerialism: inclusion becomes both a virtue and a competency, a standard to which leaders are held accountable not because of its intrinsic ethical value but because of its instrumental benefits for organisational competitiveness.

The outcome of this dynamic leads to the depoliticisation of inclusion. While it promises systemic transformation, inclusion often remains reduced to individual leaders’ behaviours and organisational metrics of success, rather than to the dismantling of persistent hierarchies and

power imbalances (Benschop, 2021). At the same time, models of inclusive leadership often encourage leaders to act as organisational change agents. The challenge, then, is to take inclusion's promise seriously by acknowledging the importance of inclusion but also by interrogating its assumptions to examine whether, and under what conditions, inclusive leadership might meaningfully transform structures of inequity.

Critique of inclusive leadership

Leader-centrism and the business case

One of the most persistent critiques directed at mainstream diversity management is its reliance on the so-called 'business case' rationale. Inclusive leadership scholarship frequently follows this logic by emphasising how inclusive climates and leadership behaviours enhance innovation, creativity, collaboration, and financial performance (Carmeli et al., 2010; Nishii and Leroy, 2022). Inclusion is thus framed as a form of organisational capital, a resource to be leveraged for competitive advantage. The problem is that this framing risks subordinating equity and justice to profitability, treating inclusion as an economic asset rather than a political or ethical project (Romani et al., 2021).

Critical diversity studies have long argued against the instrumentalisation of diversity, noting that when difference is leveraged for business advantage it becomes commodified, obscuring rather than challenging systemic inequities (Dobusch, 2021; Zanoni et al., 2010). Inclusive leadership risks extending these logics by commodifying inclusion itself, reframing it as a desirable leadership skill within the managerial repertoire. Leaders are expected to create climates of belonging and respect uniqueness, but these expectations are often operationalised through their impact on measurable organisational outcomes, such as productivity and performance. Thus, the moral virtue of inclusion is indirectly tied to managerial effectiveness, undermining its radical, justice-oriented potential and confining it within the very organisational hierarchies it claims to contest (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012).

This reliance on leader-centric logics further legitimates managerial dominance. Inclusive leadership presumes that senior leaders are best equipped to facilitate equitable organisational environments (Tourish, 2019). Yet this assumption is rooted in the unitarist view dominating leadership studies, where followers are imagined as compliant subjects subscribing unproblematically to goals, ethics and identities predefined by leaders (Drath et al., 2008; Tourish, 2019). Such an expectation overlooks the structural and systemic barriers that reproduce exclusion regardless of leaders' intentions. By positioning leaders, who themselves are products of organisational hierarchy, as the arbiters of inclusion, organisational power is reinforced rather than redistributed, and hierarchies are continually reinforced. Inclusive leadership, therefore, may be fundamentally limited: inclusion can only extend as far as leaders allow, and redistribution of power is constrained within boundaries set by those who already hold authority (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Benschop, 2021).

Overemphasis on leader agency

When inclusion initiatives fail to deliver meaningful change and inclusive leadership results in little more than superficial efforts that enhance a leader's or organisation's reputation, ontological accountability provides a crucial lens (Moon and Pérez-Hämmerle, 2022), prompting examination of the implicit assumptions that sustain or hinder substantive engagement with inclusivity. The problematic inclusive leadership ontology, inherited from the mainstream approaches, disproportionately emphasises the autonomous, cognitive, and disembodied agency of the leader. This individualistic and essentialising ontology results in imagining inclusive leaders as purposeful, autonomous actors who stand apart from organisational systems, directing the efforts of compliant followers to produce positive outcomes (Tourish, 2019). This "fantasy of the sovereign subject" (Dobusch, 2021: 381) as "a singular, self-contained consciousness operating within universal rationality" (Dolezal, 2017: 60), while appealing in its simplicity and flattering view of leader capacities, reductively frames

leadership as a set of competencies possessed by rational individuals. It perpetuates the Enlightenment belief that the world is a separate domain, amenable to control and ordering by human reason, a worldview that places “humans at the center of this ordering endeavor, and by placing the mind at the center of the human” (Holt, 2020: 589). This leadership paradigm, rooted in an individualist ontology, is not ideologically neutral. It reflects the broader ideological influence of neoliberalism (Dobusch, 2021), which assigns personal responsibility for social problems including systemic inequality, to individuals. Ontologically, this perspective is profoundly distorting. By constructing leaders as detached agents operating upon a separate organisational reality, it obscures the intricate, systemic and structural conditions that constitute organisational life. It reinforces a hierarchical view of inclusion as something that leaders do *to* others, rather than understanding it as an emergent, ongoing and collective practice of relating. The very framework that positions leaders as the primary solution to exclusion thus risks reinforcing the individualistic logic that underpins the problem in the first place.

This ontological scrutiny points towards the persistent preference for entitative, essentialising rather than relational ontology (Hosking, 2011) in conceptualising inclusive leadership. Even when inclusive leadership scholarship introduces relationship-based approaches (Roberson and Perry, 2022), that underscore the importance of “collaborative and respectful relational practice” (Booyesen (2014: 306), and advocate building high quality relationships between the individual employee and their direct managers (Shore et al., 2018), the dominant ontology underpinning this logic remains individualist. Relations are often seen as occurring between discrete and bounded individuals, each bringing their own characteristics into interpersonal exchanges (Booyesen, 2014; Shore et al., 2018) and mobilised to influence others. Failing to take into account that leaders, are inextricably entwined with the world and are constituted in and through relationship with others, perpetuates the view which prioritises

separation over relationality (Dobusch, 2021). This, along with the underlying beliefs in autonomous existence, human exceptionalism and the supremacy of disembodied reason over other ways of knowing (Chandler et al., 2022), has damaging consequences for practice. Reinforcing the myth that “individual actions and changes on a local level will be enough to make a difference” (Mohammed, 2021: 88), inclusive leadership may appear progressive on the surface, while at best offering only superficial interventions and worst reinforcing inequity rather than dismantling it.

Future orientation: Towards relational ontologies of inclusion

Recognising these limitations, critical scholars have argued for rethinking inclusive leadership at the ontological level. Feminist theory, postcolonial critiques, and Indigenous ways of knowing have long rejected essentialist, individualist understandings of agency, instead conceptualising the self as relational, embodied and constituted through interdependence (Banerjee and Linstead, 2001; Janssens and Steyaert, 2019; Pérezts et al., 2023; Tyler, 2019). A relational conception of the self points towards the “inherently social nature of human beings” (Llewellyn and Downie, 2012: 4), emphasising how we are constituted in and through our relationships with others through our relational, embodied, and vulnerable existence. This perspective starts from the premise that “individuals are always-already enmeshed in relations of interdependency with others and cannot be understood, even theoretically, apart from their relational contexts” (Powell and Dépelteau, 2013: 2). This foundational shift dramatically rethinks inclusion. It no longer becomes possible to consider inclusion as a top-down moral project led by heroic figures. Rather, it is reconfigured as a collective ethical practice rooted in mutual vulnerability, openness and a recognition of interdependence. By underscoring the ethical significance of caring relationships and interconnectedness, this framing points towards the cultivation of “equal intersubjective relationships grounded in caring and feeling with rather than for others” (Johansson and Wickström, 2023: 320).

Departing from the ideal of a self-sufficient and autonomous subject (Cavarero et al., 2021) directly unsettles the core claims of mainstream inclusive leadership by rejecting the illusion of human mastery that underpins it. Only when the autonomous, sovereign leader is decentred as the primary agent of change, can inclusion be disentangled from managerial solutionism. By embracing relational ontologies and reimagining inclusion as an ongoing, ethically fragile and collective practice sustained through daily encounters, solidarity and shared struggles for justice, can we reclaim inclusion's radical promise and reconnect it to its justice-oriented roots.

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