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## OSW-030: Birds of a Feather Flock Together: Challenges of Organizing for Inclusion in New Work Spaces

### Abstract

In a recent turn to “inclusion” (Adamson et al., 2021; Riordan, 2014; Sherbin & Rashid, 2017; Shore et al., 2018; Van Eck, Dobusch & Van den Brink, 2021), interest in organizational inclusion initiatives has rapidly increased. Seen as a “force for good that changes the exclusionary practices that have dominated organizations” (Adamson et al., 2021, p. 212), inclusion tends to be positively valued (Dobusch, 2014). Yet, critical research provides a more nuanced and complex understanding. For example, Ortlieb and Sieben (2014) show the intertwined nature of inclusion and exclusion and the ambivalent effects of practices that aim at organizational equality and inclusion. Similarly, Dobusch (2014) raises awareness about the excluding side-effects of inclusion measures, making explicit the inherent power dynamics that underpin organizational inclusion. And Ahmed (2012, p.163) concludes that inclusion, “as a technology of governance”, necessarily implies practices of exclusion.

For others, inclusion is a “game” that organizations and individuals might play strategically, with specific expected effects (Harwood, 2010).

Organizational inclusion, far from being one-sided, is thus a complex process inherently linked to power issues and political dynamics (Adamson et al., 2021, p.213). At the same time, the way(s) in which inclusion and exclusion unfold in attempts to conceptualize and organize for inclusivity in contemporary organizations leaves room for further exploration (Stephenson et al., 2021).

To address this question, we focus our attention on the inclusion-exclusion dynamic faced by an epitome of modern, inclusive organizations: the coworking space. Coworking spaces are explicitly built around the idea of inclusion, authenticity, and community (Stephenson et al., 2021),

breaking with traditional (hierarchical/competition-based) understandings of work (e.g. Salovaara, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2012). Researchers even go so far as to identify in coworking spaces the “potential to change society” and see in them a “profound cultural revolution” (Vidaillet & Bousalham, 2020, p.61).

Our longitudinal, empirical case study traces the evolution of a coworking space to highlight how an a-priori inclusive, open, welcoming, and community-based space that heavily depends on shared values among its members turns out to foreclose, rather than embrace, diversity, ultimately producing effects of exclusion. Furthermore, the case illustrates how, in the long term, the challenges of securing constant income to run coworking spaces, the pressure to professionalize as a way to establish oneself as a reliable partner, as well as the pressure to engage in business practices that partly contradict the initial purpose and value proposition, largely complexify the inclusion-exclusion relationship. In the discussion, we problematize the “idealness” of a community-based approach to inclusion vs. the “reality” of the market-based approach observed in coworking spaces and its consequences for diversity and inclusion.

The contribution of our study is threefold. First, we contribute to literature on inclusion by shedding light on the political dynamics and power structure behind inclusive organizations that clarify the inclusion-exclusion tension (Adamson et al., 2021). Second, we pave the way for future research to problematize the notion of community in the context of capitalism and the sharing economy, characterized by the need to professionalize and grow, leading us to call for more research on the process(es) through which coworking spaces evolve over time and the contradictory practices of inclusion and exclusion encountered in the business of coworking. Third, we contribute to literature on coworking space by responding to the recent call to pay greater attention to its inherent contradictions (Gandini, 2015) and ideological underpinning (e.g., Aroles et al., 2018; de Peuter et al., 2017).

## References

Available upon request (and in full paper version)