

Organizational Inclusion as a Multi-Level Process: A Conceptual Synthesis of Access, Participation and Belonging

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Abstract: Workforce diversity has become commonplace, yet the mere presence of differences does not ensure equitable participation or equal access to opportunities and decision-making. Research on organizational inclusion has expanded, but what is studied and how it is studied vary across disciplinary fields, leaving a fragmented picture. This article proposes a preliminary conceptual model, CLAR, that treats inclusion as a complex, ongoing process. The components were derived by grouping the processes identified in theoretical and empirical contributions according to the role each plays in producing access, participation, and belonging at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Organizational culture provides the context within which the identified components operate and is, in turn, influenced by them, while inclusive leadership helps activate the functions of these components. Several organizational practices are also recommended. The main contribution is an integrative multi-level model that connects perspectives usually analyzed separately.

Keywords: Organizational inclusion, diversity management, multi-level model, belongingness, inclusion climate, inclusive leadership

JEL Classification: M14, M59, Z19

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INTRODUCTION

Workforce diversity represents a reality that organizational management must address across a wide range of issues: recruitment, coordination, evaluation, communication and leadership. The mere presence of differences within organizations does not automatically result in equitable participation or equal access to resources and decision-making. Over the past two decades, the literature has shifted from asking what diversity is to asking how inclusion is achieved (Roberson, 2006), a trend reflected in the subsequent growth of inclusion research (Shore & Chung, 2024; Shore et al., 2011). This shift underscores that diversity policies confined to numerical representation do not guarantee that employees from diverse groups actually take part in decision-making processes or have access to information networks and professional development opportunities (Mor Barak, 2000).

Research addressing such questions remains fragmented. The concepts of diversity, inclusion, inclusion climate, and belonging are used with different meanings across disciplines and levels of analysis (Shore, Cleveland, & Sanchez, 2018; Yadav & Lenka, 2020). Some studies focus on employees' experiences, whereas others examine human resource practices, linguistic policies, or recruitment mechanisms. Other studies address the macro-level dimensions of labor markets and digital transformations.

The analysis addresses the following question: how can the processes and practices that produce organizational inclusion at different levels of analysis be brought together in a single framework? The proposed theoretical synthesis considers organizational inclusion across three levels of analysis (micro, meso and macro). The main contribution is a preliminary integrative model that connects access, participation and belonging through four functions derived from the reviewed literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Aspects of Diversity and Inclusion

Diversity and inclusion are distinct concepts. Diversity refers to the presence of differences within the workforce. Inclusion refers to employees' actual involvement and their integration into organizational systems and processes, including participation in decision-making and recognition of their contributions (Roberson, 2006). An organization can be diverse without being inclusive. Achieving inclusion requires organizational effort.

Diversity is a complex construct. Harrison and Klein (2007) proposed a typology that distinguishes three ways of conceptualizing diversity in organizations: *separation* (differences in positions or opinions along a continuum, for example in values or attitudes), *variety* (qualitative differences in knowledge, training, or experience), and *disparity* (differences arising from the unequal distribution of resources and social status, for example in income, authority, or prestige). Each type produces different effects. Separation tends to reduce cohesion and intensify interpersonal conflict, variety may foster creativity and decision quality, and disparity may generate competition, withdrawal, and reduced involvement. This typology has implications for developing a model of inclusion, because such a model must apply regardless of the category of diversity in question (nationality, religion, gender, ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation, educational background, neurodiversity, and so on). Drawing on Harrison and Klein's typology, Ciuk, Śliwa, and Harzing (2022) proposed another way of viewing diversity in multinational companies: moving from a view of diversity as separation and disparity (differences perceived as deficiencies and as static) toward a view of diversity as variety (differences perceived positively and as dynamic). This theoretical reframing is based on two central concepts: *fluidity*, the recognition of variation within categories of difference and not only between them, and *reciprocity*, a mutual effort to leverage diversity rather than one-sided adaptation on the part of non-dominant groups.

Organizational Inclusion Frameworks

One framework frequently cited in the inclusion literature is the belongingness-uniqueness framework developed by Shore et al. (2011). Inclusion is defined as the degree to which an employee perceives that he or she is a valued member of the work group, through treatment that simultaneously satisfies the need for belongingness and the need for uniqueness. Drawing on Optimal Distinctiveness Theory (Brewer, 1991), the authors distinguished four states: inclusion (high belongingness and high uniqueness), assimilation (belongingness without recognition of uniqueness), differentiation (uniqueness without belongingness), and exclusion (low levels on both dimensions).

Extending the belongingness-uniqueness framework, Veli Korkmaz, van Engen, Knappert and Schalk (2022) identified, on the basis of a systematic review of 107 studies, a multi-level model of inclusive leadership with four dimensions situated across the employee, team, and organizational levels: fostering employee uniqueness, strengthening belongingness within a

team, showing appreciation for individual and collective contributions, and supporting organizational efforts.

Randel et al. (2018) outlined five categories of inclusive leader behavior: supporting group members, ensuring justice and equity, providing opportunities for shared decision making, encouraging diverse contributions, and helping group members fully contribute. These behaviors simultaneously facilitate belongingness and uniqueness, with positive effects on organizational outcomes.

Mor Barak (2000) developed a complementary framework that situates inclusion along an inclusion-exclusion continuum, ranging from complete exclusion to full participation in critical organizational processes (access to information, connections with colleagues, and the ability to influence decisions). Whereas the framework proposed by Shore et al. (2011) emphasizes the balance between belongingness and uniqueness, this model highlights the gradual character of inclusion and its distribution along a spectrum.

Nishii (2013) operationalized the concept of *climate for inclusion* and identified three dimensions: equitable employment practices, integration of differences, and inclusion in decision-making. The findings showed that, in an inclusive climate, gender diversity is associated with less relationship conflict, and that the climate attenuates the negative effect of conflict on satisfaction at the team level.

Drawing on their review of the inclusion literature, Shore et al. (2018) identified five streams of research (work-group inclusion, inclusive leadership, inclusion climate, organizational practices, and organizational inclusion) and proposed an integrative model of organizational inclusion, in which inclusion depends on the inclusive treatment of employees at every level. Perceived inclusion is associated with a range of positive organizational outcomes, including productivity, innovation, commitment, and job satisfaction (Shore et al., 2018).

Shore and Chung (2024) noted the expansion of research in the field of inclusion and emphasized the role of leaders in fostering inclusion, both in diverse teams and in their relationships with members of groups whose social identities are stigmatized.

In their synthesis of the literature, Edmondson and Bransby (2023) highlighted psychological safety - the shared belief among team members that taking interpersonal risks will not be penalized - as a complementary condition. They reported that psychological safety supports learning, innovation and voice behaviors in teams. The studies they review suggest that, in diverse teams, psychological safety can mediate the relationship between

differences and performance. Without it, differences may be accompanied by a lack of voice and disengagement.

Specific Aspects of Organizational Inclusion

Beyond the frameworks outlined above, numerous studies examine specific processes that extend these perspectives. The studies discussed below were selected because each addresses a process not covered by the frameworks above.

Zschirnt (2018), for example, synthesized correspondence tests of ethnic discrimination in recruitment, showing that differential treatment operates through ethnic hierarchies and produces cumulative effects. Di Donato, Garros, Lavanchy, Mahon, and Zittoun (2020) examined the naturalization process (the acquisition of Swiss citizenship), documenting that applicants undergo repeated assessments of their degree of integration, assessments in which belonging is not recognized but must be demonstrated. This finding can be extended to the organizational context: the experience of institutional evaluation, located at the macro level, may shape how migrants subsequently perceive, at the micro level, the inclusion practices of the organizations that employ them.

Inequalities in access may also accumulate through the intersection of biographical and contextual factors. In a case study of a bi-national couple, Riaño, Limacher, Aschwanden, Hirsig, and Wastl-Walter (2015) showed that migration, relocation to a setting with conservative gender values, and the birth of children function as critical moments at which the migrant woman's professional opportunities progressively narrow through the combined effect of gender, ethnicity and age.

Lüdi (2012) noted that, in linguistically diverse companies, imposing a single language does not resolve coordination problems. Employees draw on several languages, on hybrid practices, and on context-dependent adjustments of their communication. Language functions as a form of capital whose value depends on the linguistic market, and linguistic practices reflect the symbolic power relations among participants (Bourdieu, 2013; Neculaesei, 2018).

Hawlina, Gillespie and Zittoun (2019) examined, in dyadic interactions rather than in an organizational context itself, *the conditions under which difference becomes a resource for learning or a source of inhibition*. They identified perspective-taking, mutual recognition, and the avoidance of premature judgment as conditions under which differences may become opportunities for creativity.

Steiner and Krings (2015) distinguished relationship conflict (interpersonal tensions) from task conflict (cognitive disagreements), showing that only the

latter can become productive, provided that cognitive disagreement is not accompanied by interpersonal hostility.

Cuvi, Budon, and Suter (2021) synthesized the trends that are redefining contemporary work: nonstandard forms of employment, work on digital platforms, and the growing share of unstable jobs with limited social protection (*precarization*). These transformations shift the risk and responsibility for managing one's own career onto employees (Cappelli et al., 1997, as cited in Cuvi et al., 2021), while the adoption of advanced technologies calls for a human-centered approach if new forms of exclusion are not to be generated (Onea & Manolescu, 2024).

Omidi and Dal Zotto's (2022) systematic review of the literature on socially responsible HRM (SRHRM) proposes a framework encompassing the antecedents, practices, and outcomes identified in research in this field. The authors find that existing research is dominated by utilitarian approaches and call for process-oriented studies and a critical perspective on SRHRM. Fujimoto, Ferdous, and Wali (2023) emphasized the central role of resources in the inclusion process, showing that economic inclusion, achieved through equitable employment practices, supports the well-being of employees with insufficient resources and low socioeconomic status, while personal resources (a learning orientation) act as an internal condition that strengthens this effect.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article proposes a conceptual model based on an analysis of selected theoretical and empirical contributions. Sources were selected for their relevance to understanding organizational inclusion processes. To facilitate the systematization and integration of ideas, the sources analyzed were grouped into two categories: studies presenting frameworks for organizational inclusion and studies presenting specific processes of inclusion or exclusion (already discussed in the literature review).

The analysis sought to answer the following questions:

1. Which processes or practices of inclusion or exclusion are mentioned in the source under analysis?
2. What is the level of analysis (micro, meso or macro)?
3. How can the analyzed ideas be integrated into a preliminary model?

The contributions selected for the model describe aspects of inclusion but do not fully cover the processes through which access, participation and

belonging come about in organizations. The complementary contributions address specific processes of inclusion or exclusion, including discrimination in recruitment and its cumulative effects (Zschirnt, 2018), the institutional assessment of belonging (Di Donato et al., 2020), the reinforcement of inequalities at critical moments (Riaño et al., 2015), communication in multilingual settings and linguistic capital (Ciuk et al., 2022; Lüdi, 2012), the transformation of difference into learning or inhibition (Hawlina et al., 2019; Steiner & Krings, 2015), and the effects of transformations in work on the conditions for inclusion (Cuvi et al., 2021; Fujimoto et al., 2023).

The model's components were delineated using a functional logic: the findings were grouped not by theme, but by the role each process plays in producing inclusion. This logic was chosen because management is generally interested in the effects generated by these processes. Grouping the findings in this way yielded four distinct functions:

- some findings show *who gains access and under what conditions*: this concerns the classification and ranking of individuals, as well as the differential distribution of opportunities, that is, of access (Di Donato et al., 2020; Riaño et al., 2015; Zschirnt, 2018);

- another category concerns *how those who have gained access participate*: the linguistic and communicative mediation of professional interactions, that is, of participation (Ciuk et al., 2022; Lüdi, 2012);

- other findings indicate *what happens to difference once people interact*: it may become a resource for learning or a source of conflict (Hawlina et al., 2019; Steiner & Krings, 2015), depending on conditions such as psychological safety (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023) and inclusion climate (Nishii, 2013);

- other evidence concerns *how the organization institutionalizes inclusion responsibly*: through equitable human resource practices (Fujimoto et al., 2023) and in relation to macro-level transformations of work (Cuvi et al., 2021). The risk identified by Omidi and Dal Zotto (2022) in relation to responsible HRM is the dominance of utilitarian approaches which, applied to inclusion, would reduce it to formal instruments.

These four functions are designated as *Access, Communication, Learning, and Responsible institutionalization*. The first letters of these four functions, reordered, form the acronym CLAR, which in Romanian means "clear"; the name was chosen to underline the transparency that inclusion processes require.

RESULTS

The model comprises four interconnected functional components (Table 1), each bringing together conditions, processes and practices that perform a distinct function in producing inclusion.

Access has a dual role. As component A, it represents a precondition for inclusion; as an outcome, it indicates the extent to which individuals can effectively reach resources, opportunities and processes. Inclusion unfolds as an ongoing process encompassing access, participation and belonging, which do not necessarily follow from one another: access does not necessarily entail participation, and participation does not automatically lead to a sense of belonging. The three outcomes are ordered by their distance from the components that produce them - access as the proximal outcome, participation as the intermediate one, and belonging as the final one - but this ordering is logical rather than causal. Belonging is not produced by a single component but results from the combined operation of the four. Access (A) and communicative mediation (C) create the preconditions for belonging, while the transformation of difference into learning (L) and responsible institutionalization (R) sustain it over time. Some macro-level phenomena are not confined to a single function but affect several functions in different ways. Within *Responsible institutionalization*, the precarization of employment relations is a condition that the organization manages through its practices, whereas within *Learning*, it is a pressure that raises the cost of voice. Similarly, linguistic capital filters access to positions while also mediating the participation of those already integrated (Figure 1).

Individual Classification and Access Distribution (A)

This component brings together findings concerning the criteria and processes through which individuals are classified and ranked, and through which resources and opportunities are differently distributed. At the micro level, its effect is reflected in an individual's experience of being professionally accepted or devalued. At the meso level, these processes operate through HRM practices that distribute opportunities over the course of a career (Mor Barak, 2000; Nishii, 2013; Shore et al., 2018). At the macro level, access is conditioned by legal regimes and institutional categories (Di Donato et al., 2020; Zschirnt, 2018). The principal risk is discrimination that is difficult to observe and whose cumulative effects progressively narrow professional opportunities (Riaño et al., 2015; Zschirnt, 2018). Harrison and Klein's (2007) typology applies here as well: separation in values

may facilitate or hinder access to informal networks, disparity in the concentration of resources may limit access to decision-making, and variety of knowledge and experience may contribute to organizational creativity and decision quality.

Communicative Mediation of Participation (C)

This component brings together findings on the conditions under which employees are able to understand, express themselves, and be recognized. Participation also involves connectedness to colleagues and the ability to influence decisions (Mor Barak, 2000), as well as inclusion in decision-making as a dimension of the climate for inclusion (Nishii, 2013). Linguistic policies and practices influence employees' opportunities for participation (Lüdi, 2012). Ciuk et al. (2022) argue that implementing the equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) agenda requires recognizing the fluidity of differences and making reciprocal efforts to leverage diversity. Participation may be reduced by rigid linguistic norms or by gaps between stated policies and actual practices.

Transformation of Difference into Learning or Conflict (L)

Dwertmann, Nishii, and van Knippenberg (2016) distinguish two perspectives on diversity climate: one focused on preventing the negative effects of difference, the other on leveraging it. Difference may generate creativity (Hawlina et al., 2019), but may also give rise to relationship conflict (Steiner & Krings, 2015). Psychological safety (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023) supports learning and voice behaviors, while inclusion climate (Nishii, 2013) is associated with lower relationship conflict. Together, they support the transformation of difference into learning rather than into reduced voice and disengagement. The macro level indirectly conditions this function. Employment precarity (Cuvi et al., 2021) raises the cost of voicing disagreement or acknowledging an error, affecting psychological safety and reducing teams' capacity to turn difference into an opportunity for learning.

Responsible Institutionalization of Inclusion (R)

This component links inclusion to human resource practices and organizational change (Shore et al., 2018). Omid and Dal Zotto (2022) find that research on socially responsible HRM is dominated by utilitarian approaches; applied to inclusion, such approaches would reduce it to formal instruments. Fujimoto et al. (2023) show that economic inclusion supports the well-being of employees with insufficient resources. Macro-level transformations (Cuvi et al., 2021) and the adoption of advanced

technologies (Onea & Manolescu, 2024) likewise condition the effectiveness of these practices.

Culture and Inclusive Leadership

In the CLAR model, culture provides the cross-cutting framework within which the four components perform their functions. Culture can be considered at different levels, national and organizational culture being of particular interest for the present article. National culture establishes the context of values within which difference and belonging are defined. Organizational culture is influenced by this context: the values of national culture influence organizational practices (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2012). Individuals are influenced by national and organizational values (as well as by other layers of culture, which are not detailed here), which they internalize or, at times, contest (Onea, 2022).

At the organizational level (the level at which organizational culture is defined here), culture may be defined as "(a) a pattern of basic assumptions, (b) invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, (c) as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, (d) that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore (e) is to be taught to new members as the (f) correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (Schein, 1990, p. 111).

With respect to the identified functional components, culture influences which access criteria become legitimate, which linguistic norms are recognized, whether difference is treated as a resource for learning or as a threat, and whether the institutionalization of inclusion is effective or merely formal. Climate is an observable and measurable surface manifestation of culture, although Schein (1990, p. 109) cautions that, for this reason, research on climate does not reach the deeper levels of culture. In the present model, climate is incorporated into the functions, as in the inclusion climate integrated into the Learning component (Nishii, 2013), and it also appears among the antecedents of inclusion (Shore et al., 2018).

The relationship between culture and the components is bidirectional. On the one hand, culture functions as a framework for inclusion, to the extent that shared assumptions and values support inclusive practices (Pless & Maak, 2004); on the other hand, organizational culture is, in turn, reconfigured by the components, especially through responsible institutionalization, which reinforces the organization's norms and values over time.

Inclusive leadership operates within the organization and influences all four functions. This influence takes concrete form in the behaviors described by the frameworks discussed above. The

multi-level model developed by Veli Korkmaz et al. (2022) organizes these behaviors across the employee, team, and organizational levels, while Randel et al. (2018) group them into five categories of inclusive leader behavior. Through these behaviors, inclusive leaders help activate the functions. Ensuring justice and equity supports access, while shared decision making and the encouragement of diverse contributions sustain participation. Supporting group members promotes the transformation of difference into learning, and supporting organizational efforts orients institutionalization toward effective rather than merely formal inclusion, through durable practices and structures.

From Complementary Frameworks to Organizational Practices

The CLAR model (Figure 1) brings together complementary contributions, each addressing aspects that receive less attention in the other frameworks. For example, the belongingness-uniqueness framework (Shore et al., 2011) captures the individual experience of belongingness and uniqueness (micro level), but gives less attention to how access is distributed through structural mechanisms (legal regimes, labor markets, institutional categories and practices), which component A covers in the proposed model.

The inclusion-exclusion continuum (Mor Barak, 2000) is built on processes that the model separates: access to information and resources belongs to component A, while connectedness to colleagues and influence over decisions belong to component C. Nishii's (2013) three dimensions of climate for inclusion cut across the same boundary, with equitable employment practices falling under A, inclusion in decision-making under C, and the integration of differences under L. Of the five research streams identified by Shore et al. (2018), the one on organizational practices bears on both the meso level of A and the institutionalization addressed by R.

Research adopting a linguistic perspective (Lüdi, 2012) explains participation through language (component C in the model), a dimension that can be connected to the distribution of access (A). Research on psychological safety (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023) clarifies the conditions for learning in diverse teams (component L) without considering the macro level. Together, these contributions extend the analysis of inclusion across levels and processes. Zschirnt's (2018) research on discrimination, for instance, highlights the structural filtering of access (A), a dimension not covered by frameworks centered on lived experience or participation, but required for a complete picture of inclusion.

The four functional components and the three levels also provide a basis for a set of recommended organizational practices, derived from the literature. These practices are intended to support an understanding of inclusion as an ongoing process and to guide organizational action accordingly:

- monitoring access throughout individuals' career trajectories, since differential treatment accumulates (Riaño et al., 2015; Zschrnt, 2018);
 - assessing linguistic policies by their capacity to support understanding and voice, rather than standardization alone (Ciuk et al., 2022; Lüdi, 2012);
 - managing conflict in ways that account for the distinction between task conflict and relationship conflict (Steiner & Krings, 2015);
 - integrating responsible HRM practices with an analysis of their implementation and of employees' experiences (Fujimoto et al., 2023; Omid & Dal Zotto, 2022);
 - including macro transformations - digitalization, platform work, precarization (Cuvu et al., 2021) - in the assessment of inclusion conditions.
- The main elements of the model are summarized in Table 1 and Figure 1.

CONCLUSIONS

The CLAR model provides a functional framework for understanding how organizational inclusion is produced across different levels of analysis.

The model connects frameworks that are usually analyzed separately, highlights the functional components and their cross-level interactions, and provides a basis for recommended organizational practices.

The name CLAR emphasizes the importance of transparency and intelligibility in the processes through which organizational inclusion is produced. The model is preliminary, and other relevant components and practices may be added. Future research could further develop the model and test it empirically across different types of diversity.

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Table 1.

The CLAR Model: A Multi-Level Synthesis of the Components of Organizational Inclusion

Functional component	Processes	Exclusion risks	Recommended organizational practices	Analyzed sources
Individual classification and access distribution (A)	Micro - acceptance/devaluation Meso - recruitment, evaluation, promotion, compensation, access to information and resources Macro - legal regimes, institutional categories, ethnic hierarchies, labor-market access; linguistic requirements as access filters	hard-to-observe discrimination; cumulative effects	monitoring access throughout the professional trajectory, since differential treatment accumulates	Di Donato et al., 2020; Harrison & Klein, 2007; Mor Barak, 2000; Nishii, 2013; Riaño et al., 2015; Shore et al., 2018; Zschirnt, 2018
Communicative mediation of participation (C)	Micro - the ability to understand, to express oneself (voice), and to be recognized; connectedness to colleagues Meso - linguistic policies, multilingual practices, voice and feedback channels; participation in and influence over decision-making; fluidity, reciprocity Macro - linguistic capital, linguistic hierarchies	reduced participation through rigid linguistic norms; symbolic devaluation; exclusion from information networks and decision-making	assessing linguistic policies by their capacity to support understanding and expression (voice), not merely standardization	Ciuk et al., 2022; Lüdi, 2012; Mor Barak, 2000; Nishii, 2013
Transformation of difference into learning or conflict (L)	Micro - perspective-taking; learning or inhibition Meso - psychological safety, inclusion climate, team tasks; opportunities for collaborative learning Macro - employment precarity as pressure on voice and learning	reduced voice; disengagement; relationship conflict	managing conflict in ways that account for the distinction between task conflict and relationship conflict	Cuvi et al., 2021; Dwertmann et al., 2016; Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Hawlina et al., 2019; Nishii, 2013; Steiner & Krings, 2015
Responsible institutionalization (R)	Micro - well-being, personal resources Meso - responsible HRM, EDI agenda Macro - digitalization, platformization, precarization	utilitarian approaches; reduction of inclusion to formal instruments; externalization of risks	integrating responsible HRM practices with the analysis of implementation and of employees' experiences; including macro transformations (digitalization, platformization, precarization) in the assessment of inclusion conditions	Cuvi et al., 2021; Fujimoto et al., 2023; Omidi & Dal Zotto, 2022; Shore et al., 2018

Note. 1. The acronym CLAR reorders the initials of the four components; in Romanian, *clar* means "clear". 2. National culture forms the general framework, while organizational culture and inclusive leadership operate at the meso level. Inclusive leadership, as described by Randel et al. (2018) and Veli Korkmaz et al. (2022), activates all four functions. The components are situated in relation to the belongingness–uniqueness framework (Shore et al., 2011) and the integrative model of organizational inclusion (Shore et al., 2018; Shore & Chung, 2024).

Source: Author's own analytical synthesis based on the literature reviewed.

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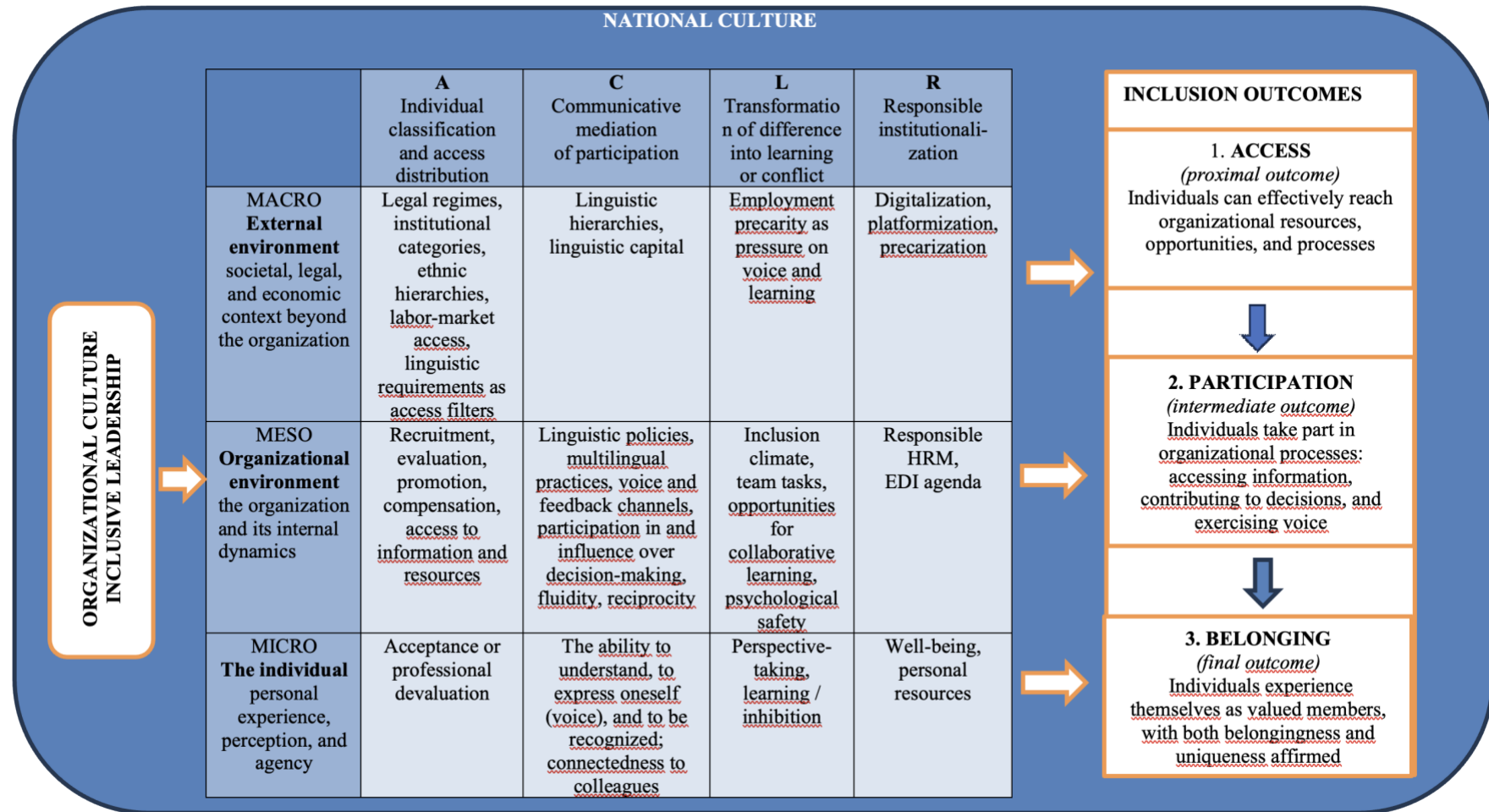


Figure 1.

The CLAR Model: Organizational Inclusion as a Multi-Level Process
 Source: Author's own analytical synthesis based on the literature reviewed.