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I'm only joking!(?) the role of disparaging humor in the communicative constitution of inclusion/exclusion in organizations

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to investigate the communicative constitution of organizational inclusion and/or exclusion through humorous acts at the expense of members of minorities and/or historically disadvantaged groups.

Design/methodology/approach – Semistructured interviews with 84 employees in Austria and Germany dealing with their experiences regarding diversity and inclusion (D&I) at work were conducted and analyzed in two steps. First, a thematic text analysis was performed to structure the content and identify relevant themes and anecdotes for further analysis. Second, a ventriloquial analysis sought to identify the physically absent yet present voices in these anecdotes.

Findings – The interviews revealed that jokes and quips mostly target colleagues of observable foreign origin. The analysis further identified three themes that show that disparaging humor can simultaneously reinforce inclusion/exclusion across hierarchies and create boundaries within teams – but in different ways. The findings also indicate that above all prejudices "participate" in such events and that in most cases the collective is invoked to increase the joke's "authority".

Originality/value – This research is the first one that investigates humor in the context of D&I through a communicative constitution of organization (CCO) lens, which facilitates studying the constitutive character of humorous communication in terms of inclusion and exclusion. Moreover, this is one of the first empirical humor studies to draw on established theory-driven concepts of inclusion-exclusion in its analysis.

Keywords Diversity and inclusion (D&I), Inclusion-exclusion, Humor, Communicative constitution of organization (CCO), Ventriloquism

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Various social facts such as rampant globalization, mass migration, medical advancements and progressive legislation particularly in western countries regarding gay rights or gender

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equality, have put diversity and inclusion (hereafter, D&I) initiatives on the political agenda. Governments and organizations have been trying to successfully deal with and also harness the increasing societal heterogeneity in terms of people's gender (identity), age, ethnic background, sexual orientation, physical and mental state, or educational biography (Mor Barak, 1999; Roberson, 2006). Yet, xenophobia, racism, sexism, ageism and homophobia are still common phenomena in large parts of our society, whether in a subtle or rather overt (systemic) way.

Although numerous institutions and organizations have already established D&I initiatives with the ostensible aim to counter those maldevelopments, a myriad of companies have set their hopes on a diverse workforce first and foremost to gain access to different markets, which Ely and Thomas (2001) label the "access-and-legitimacy perspective" on diversity management. However, the authors identified two other avenues that highlight either the joint learning potential of a diverse workforce (i.e. integration-and-learning perspective) or the moral obligation of organizations to support members of "historically disadvantaged" (Carter *et al.*, 2017, p. 214) groups and facilitate equal opportunities (i.e. discrimination-and-fairness perspective). What the latter two perspectives have in common, even though to a variable extent, is their focus on inclusion in that employees should have equal access to relevant resources and are encouraged to speak up and participate in decision-making processes. However, according to Minow (2021), equality is a somewhat ambiguous concept since the definition of what is considered equal or fair oftentimes depends on arbitrary points of reference. Accordingly, she argues that organizations as well as (public) institutions should place importance on the concept of *equity* as a means to "leveling the playing field" (p. 178) through promoting justice, fairness, inclusion and individual dignity since equity "offers ways to achieve equality by either meeting individual needs or producing alterations of entrenched patterns impairing equality" (p. 189). As discussed below, meeting an individual's wants and needs is a basic prerequisite of engendering inclusion.

Essentially, the fostering of an inclusive and fair work environment is a highly communicative task, for example, (written) policies, in order to exert agency, have to be further materialized in and through communication and interaction (Cooren, 2018). Moreover, the development and upkeep of a rather inclusive organizational culture depend on an open communication climate in which every individual can speak and is listened to (Pless and Maak, 2004). Accordingly, a study conducted by Wolfgruber *et al.* (2022) shows that the perceived degree of inclusion also depends on the way how and the context in which D&I issues are addressed at work. Since humor is one of the various features of an organization's culture (Martin, 2002), which serves as "a central means through which organizational members make sense of and perform their organizational role" (Lynch, 2009, p. 461), it makes sense to address this particular form of communication in the realm of D&I in the workplace. Against this backdrop and because humor can either unite or divide people or groups of people (Lynch, 2002; Meyer, 1997, 2000) and thus creates in- and out-groups (Charman, 2013; Lennox Terrion and Ashforth, 2002), the paper at hand focuses on the communicative constitution of inclusion and exclusion in a diverse workplace through the use of humor.

Previous humor research in the context of D&I in organizations has mostly investigated (1) the psychological effects of telling and listening to disparaging jokes about women, gay people, Muslims (e.g. Ford *et al.*, 2013, 2019) and Jews, respectively (Siegman, 2020); (2) gender-specific workplace humor (e.g. Evans *et al.*, 2019; Holmes and Schnurr, 2005); and (3) humor as a conflict resolution mechanism in a diverse workforce (e.g. Smith *et al.*, 2000). Yet there is a lack of research on the role of humor in the co-construction of inclusion-exclusion in organizations that draws on established concepts developed by D&I scholars. One exception is Tremblay's (2017) research which indicates that employees feel less included if their superiors use offensive humor. However, since that finding is based on a survey study

that exclusively deals with humor by supervisors, this article aims at investigating the communicative constitution of inclusion/exclusion not only by taking recourse to established concepts of inclusion-exclusion but also by drawing on basic ideas of communicative constitution of organization (CCO) scholarship since "organizations, as well as organizational phenomena, come into existence, persist, and are transformed in and through interconnected communication practices" (Schoeneborn *et al.*, 2019, p. 476) – a notion which also applies to inclusion and/or exclusion in organizations. Adopting a CCO lens to investigate the communicative constitution of organizational inclusion-exclusion through and in humorous acts, as well as the partaking voices, is a novel approach and this study's main contribution. Ultimately, this article addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. In what way and under what conditions does humor targeted at members of historically disadvantaged groups communicatively constitute organizational inclusion and/or exclusion?

RQ2. Which voices participate in the humorous acts that communicatively constitute organizational inclusion and/or exclusion?

To answer these questions, excerpts from interviews with 84 employed people in Austria and Germany that convey anecdotes about the use of humor targeted at coworkers who belong to historically disadvantaged groups, are first analyzed by conducting a thematic text analysis (Kuckartz, 2013) followed by a ventriloquial analysis inspired by Nathues and Van Vuuren (2022). Overall, 17 relevant anecdotes were identified and analyzed. The remainder of this article is structured as follows: After a brief review of the most relevant literature on organizational inclusion-exclusion, the construct's communication aspects are discussed with recourse to CCO thinking and the associated concept of ventriloquism. Subsequently, the most prevalent humor theories and corresponding humor styles are presented, followed by a discussion of previous findings that are of relevance to this study. After describing the data collection, the main findings of the two-step analysis are presented. The subsequent discussion includes the study's scholarly and practical implications, limitations as well as suggestions for future research.

Literature review

Inclusion and exclusion as perceptions and processes

Over the years, the inclusion-exclusion concept has gained considerable attention not only in D&I scholarship because of the notion that the inclusion of all employees – regardless of how different they may be – should be the ultimate goal of organizations (Mor Barak, 2017). Consequently, (corporate) diversity management that aims at fostering an individual's *sense* or *perception* of inclusion requires corresponding practices and *processes* that ensure the "removal of obstacles to the full participation and contribution of employees in organizations" (Roberson, 2006, p. 217). According to Mor Barak (2015), who emphasizes the psychological aspect of the concept, inclusion refers to "employee perceptions that their unique contribution to the organization is appreciated and their full participation is encouraged" (p. 85). This notion of inclusion is in accord with Shore *et al.*'s (2011) take as they define inclusion as "the degree to which an employee perceives that he or she is an esteemed member of the work group through experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for *belongingness* and *uniqueness*" (p. 1265, italics added). Extending that concept, Jansen and colleagues (2014) claim that inclusion is ultimately about an individual's perception of belongingness while being allowed to act authentically, meaning that all employees can be their true selves regardless of whether they are members of the so-called majority or an underrepresented group. Exclusion, in turn, means that someone is not being treated as an esteemed group member whose inimitability is genuinely valued by others but is rather rejected and

marginalized by coworkers and/or superiors precisely because of the person's uniqueness and/or minority affiliation (Shore *et al.*, 2011).

A theoretical model of the inclusive organization that was developed by Shore and colleagues (2018) suggests six core themes (i.e. practices and processes) that add up to organizational inclusion, namely (1) psychological safety, (2) involvement in the workgroup, (3) feeling respected and valued, (4) influence on decision-making, (5) authenticity, and (6) recognizing, honoring and advancing of diversity. A critical review of that model by Van Eck *et al.* (2021) addresses its disregard for low-wage workers who have additional and sometimes different wants and needs because low-wage workers are oftentimes manual laborers who are located at the bottom of an organization's hierarchy. Hence, the authors added the themes of material and physical safety; opportunities for nontask-oriented involvement; recognizing, honoring and accommodating low-wage workers' voices and needs; and outward focus on power asymmetries and social inequalities. Another psychological feature of perceived inclusion that pertains to all organizational members, regardless of their profession and position, is emotional well-being, indicating that inclusion/exclusion is also about positive/negative emotions aroused by organizational processes and communication, respectively (April and Blass, 2010).

What one has to keep in mind, however, is that initiatives aiming at fostering an inclusive workplace are often accompanied by excluding effects since inclusion and exclusion are closely intertwined phenomena and fundamental to human co-existence (Dobusch, 2014). Yet, the concepts of inclusion and exclusion should not be considered a factual dichotomy as the "perception of inclusion-exclusion is conceptualized as a continuum of the degree to which individuals feel a part of critical organizational processes" (Mor Barak, 1999, p. 52). Thus, sensing inclusion and/or exclusion is always a matter of degree, meaning that the degree of perceived inclusion (and exclusion) highly depends on the extent to which a person's wants and needs (e.g. psychological and physical safety, possibilities for participation) are met (Shore *et al.*, 2018). In this context, communication and interaction play a key role.

Inclusion and exclusion as communicatively constituted phenomena

Even though the communication aspects of inclusion (and exclusion) are mostly not at the forefront of D&I research, Mor Barak (1999) claims that inclusion points to an "individual's sense of being a part of the organization system in both the formal processes, such as access to information and decision making channels and the informal processes, such as 'water cooler' and lunch meetings where informal information and decisions take place" (p. 52). Hence, someone's perception of inclusion is closely intertwined with *inclusive* processes and practices that are communicative by nature. Explicitly addressing the significance of communication, Pless and Maak (2004) consider an inclusive workplace an environment in which "different voices are respected and heard, diverse viewpoints, perspectives and approaches are valued and everyone is encouraged to make a unique and meaningful contribution" (p. 131).

In a similar way, but drawing on CCO scholarship, Trittin and Schoeneborn (2017) assert that "diversity management practices that rely on a constitutive-polyphonic viewpoint require organizations to implement explicitly communicative mechanisms that emphasize an *inclusive environment* in which their members feel comfortable and accepted when speaking out" (p. 316, italics added). An inclusive workplace thus permits and promotes a diversity of voices (i.e. polyphony) and an open communication climate in which all internal and external stakeholders are encouraged to speak up without fearing retaliation (Pless and Maak, 2004). In order to create such a "safe" workspace, the fostering of an open-minded and diversity-embracing organizational culture that is based on (moral) values and authentically emphasizes the implementation of D&I-related policies, practices and rewards, is pivotal

(Mor Barak, 1999; Pless and Maak, 2004). Such an organizational culture may facilitate the diminution of microaggressions or microinequities such as disparaging jokes targeted at members of historically disadvantaged groups, even if these can never be completely prevented due to environmental influences, for example, a person's socialization or the media (Carter *et al.*, 2017; Rowe, 1990).

In an attempt to reconcile CCO and D&I scholarship, Trittin-Ulbrich and Villesèche (2022) contend that organizations and organizational phenomena such as D&I are multivocal, which means that the communicative constitution of a diverse and inclusive organization is not limited to humans' voices, but rather implies that "other-than-human actors" (Cooren, 2020, p. 7) such as attitudes, principles, ideologies, social norms or prejudices also have a say, so to speak. In this regard, Trittin-Ulbrich and Villesèche bring Cooren's (2012) concept of ventriloquism into play, which stresses "our capacity to make other beings *say or do things* while we speak, write, or, more generally, conduct ourselves" (Cooren, p. 4–5, italics in original), which corresponds to the aforementioned idea of polyphony. Ultimately, the concept of ventriloquism highlights the fact that humans are both ventriloquists and figures/dummies as our utterances are always animated by something (e.g. beliefs, norms, values) or someone while we simultaneously animate these beings to speak through us (Cooren, 2010; Nathues *et al.*, 2021; Nathues and Van Vuuren, 2022). This is what Cooren (2012) terms the constant *vacillation* or *oscillation* between the vent and figure/dummy, which is inherent in every act of communication. Accordingly, it is vital to also consider the agency of (physically) absent actors – human or not – as they materialize in and through communication (Cooren, 2020) and therefore contribute to the co-construction of organizational inclusion/exclusion; either through the interactants' conversations or mediated by written words, symbols, spatial arrangements, etc.

Focusing on the interactions between members of diverse work teams, research conducted by Walker *et al.* (2019) suggests that the sharing of information and conflict management are key to creating an inclusive workplace. Their findings also show that diverse teams become more inclusive over time, presumably because of the increased mutual trust, which would most likely be impossible to achieve without frequent communication and interaction. Also focusing on interpersonal communication, a study by Wolfgruber *et al.* (2022) shows that particularly interpersonal communication in rather formal settings about D&I affairs (e.g. racism, sexism, ageism at work) is more prolific for engendering a sense of inclusion, compared to informal communication or mediated "top-down" communication. Consequently, it appears plausible to contend that inclusion and exclusion are communicatively constituted phenomena and therefore "ongoing and precarious accomplishments realized, experienced, and identified primarily . . . *in* communication processes" (Cooren *et al.*, 2011, pp. 1150, italics in original).

Drawing on CCO thinking to investigate the constitutive character of the use of humor in the context of organizational inclusion/exclusion seems particularly fruitful since (allegedly) humorous acts of communication such as jokes, banter, teasing or sarcasm are essential for fostering relationships and eventually forging our identities (Norrick, 2009). The use of humor is thus considered a powerful and oftentimes necessary means of coconstructing a sense of community and shared interpretations of organizational life (Lennox Terrion and Ashforth, 2002). However, jokes, put-ons and teasing have the inherent ability to communicatively constitute inclusion and exclusion since humor can both unite and divide (Meyer, 2000).

Workplace humor: a tightrope act

Investigating the communicative constitution of organizational inclusion-exclusion through humor is an auspicious avenue for researching D&I matters in organizations since "humour

analysis broadens our capacity to study the everyday world of organizations and enhances our appreciation of members' experiences in terms of emotional and aesthetic, as well as cognitive, dimensions" (Hatch and Ehrlich, 1993, p. 520). Hence, the use of humor in work settings, although oftentimes viewed as some kind of entertainment and amusement (Meyer, 1997), can pursue serious purposes such as forging solidarity and identity, learning and challenging organizational norms and boundaries, subverting but also reproducing power relations or exercising social control (Holmes and Marra, 2002b; Lennox Terrion and Ashforth, 2002). As humor is a quite complex form of communication with a plethora of purposes and functions (Norrick, 2009), a brief look at the major humor theories is indispensable if someone wants to earnestly study humor as constitutive of organizational inclusion and exclusion.

Humor research has traditionally been conducted based on three different theories: (1) incongruity theory, (2) superiority theory and (3) relief theory (Meyer, 2000). The *incongruity theory* of humor claims that jokes and laughter stem from the nonthreatening violation of social or cultural norms, which means that something "can be found funny if it is irrational, paradoxical, illogical, incoherent, fallacious, or inappropriate" (Lynch, 2002, p. 428). According to scholars who follow an incongruity approach, humor is a cognitive activity that aims at coping with and making sense of ambiguous or somewhat paradoxical information and situations that might cause psychological discomfort (Beeman, 2000; Hatch and Ehrlich, 1993; Lynch, 2009). A different but closely related theoretical approach is the *relief theory*, which claims that the use of humor is a means of reducing feelings of tension, which can emerge from the perception of incongruities (Lynch, 2009). As humans usually are uncomfortable when they perceive dissonance or distress, they usually tend to reduce such sensations by making jokes or using gallows humor. In contrast to that notion, Westwood and Johnston (2013) contend that "incongruity is experienced as a state of tension, and the resolution of the incongruity results in relief, a pleasurable experience that, in the right conditions, is experienced as humor" (p. 237). Hence, by looking at humor from a relief theory perspective, it can either serve as a mechanism to ease tension and dissonance or emerges as a consequence of stress relief; i.e. the incongruity has been resolved. The basic assumption of the *superiority theory* is that humor is applied by someone who considers him-/herself superior to the "targets" [1] by laughing at them or turning them into ridicule. According to Meyer (2000), the use of superiority humor eventually serves two main purposes, namely that "society is kept in order as those who disobey are censured by laughter, and people are made to feel part of a group by laughing at some ridiculed others" (p. 315).

A more recent theoretical approach to humor is the *benign violation theory* by Warren and McGraw (2016), which can be considered a particularly fruitful avenue to studying humor in the realm of D&I as it claims that felicitous humorous acts are grounded on violations of social norms which are assessed as benign by the people involved due to the existence of other norms that suggest that such "identity threats" (p. 410) are acceptable. Those norms are oftentimes part of an organization's culture, which is mostly based on cherished values that eventually guide members' conduct and thus prescribe what kinds of behavior are deemed either acceptable or not (Charman, 2013; Meyer, 1997; Martin, 2002; Romero and Cruthirds, 2006). The significance of an organization's culture in the context of D&I is demonstrated by Kartolo and Kwantes (2019) who show that employees tend to perceive less discriminatory behavior at work if an organization's culture promotes meaningful relationships among coworkers. This finding suggests that the values and norms that fuel an organization's culture also determine what kinds of humor are permitted or undue. This assumption is pivotal due to humor's immanent potential to discriminate against people, which also depends on the humor style that is put to use (Ford *et al.*, 2013).

According to Romero and Cruthirds (2006), five humor styles can be distinguished, namely *affiliative humor*, which serves as a social glue that creates a pleasant work

environment; *self-enhancing humor*, which amounts to a coping mechanism to deal with distress at work; *aggressive humor*, which is mostly used to make oneself feel better at the expense of others; *mild aggressive humor*, which "allows one to express disagreement and conflict without negative affect since the message is delivered in a playful manner" (p. 60), and *self-defeating humor*, which aims at entertaining others and gaining acceptance by others in a witty way. Ultimately, the hitherto understudied constitutive character of humor is not to be underestimated concerning the emergence of inclusion-exclusion as humor "is pervasive in all human communication; in meetings, in politics, at home, and at work, humor may be welcomed as a unifying and relaxing force or dreaded for its ability to insult, divide and build tension" (Meyer, 1997, p. 189).

Methodology

Procedure and data collection

In the course of a comprehensive research project dealing with D&I affairs and the corresponding communication at work, 84 in-depth interviews were conducted with employees in Austria and Germany, investigating their experiences with diversity (management) in their organizations. This method is particularly useful when it comes to studying rather sensitive topics in the work context because qualitative interviews are expedient to provide "information and background on issues that cannot be observed or efficiently accessed" (Tracy, 2013, p. 132). The interviews followed a problem-centered approach according to Witzel (2000), which is particularly suitable for studying socially relevant issues such as D&I. The semistructured interview guide included, among others, open-ended questions about the interviewees' organization, profession and position in the organization, as well as their experiences regarding diversity in the organization, its management (e.g. D&I-related policies, processes, practices), and concomitant formal and informal communication activities. The interview guide was developed by the author of this article together with a colleague, based on an extensive review of relevant literature in the fields of communication, sociology, psychology and management and organization studies, and subsequently pilot tested. The final version of the interview guide was then approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the faculty of social sciences of the University of Vienna.

The interviews were carried out by a group of trained graduate students in communication studies between April and June 2020. Due to the nascent COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of the interviews were conducted online via Zoom or Skype and by telephone, respectively. At the beginning of each interview, the participants were informed about the research objective and the interview procedure and were asked to give their consent verbally. The audio-recorded interviews lasted between 32 and 68 min, depending on the participants' talkativeness and own concernment, which varied considerably. The interviews were all conducted and subsequently transcribed in German. For this article, however, the anecdotes illustrating relevant humorous events in connection with D&I were translated into English as accurately as possible with the assistance of a native English speaker [2]. In terms of the richness of detail of the transcriptions, the research team opted for transcribing at a mid-level of detail according to Tracy (2013) since the transcription of filler words such as "um" would not have added value to the study because of the initial research interest and research questions, respectively.

Participants

To reflect the diversity in society, each interviewee had to fit into at least one of eight sociodemographic categories, which had been developed based on the six core diversity dimensions defined by the German Diversity Charter [3]. This was to ensure a relative

balance in terms of the diversity characteristics of the participants such as gender (identity), age, migration background, nationality, physical and/or mental impairment, and educational level). To ascertain possible differences between participants with and without observable and/or (rather) nonobservable diversity characteristics, a few rather young (up to 40 years of age), healthy, well-educated (i.e. university degree), heterosexual white males in management positions were also interviewed and hence served as a sociodemographic frame of reference that represented the "privileged elite", so to speak.

Table 1 gives an overview of the sample based on gender [4] and other observable and (rather) nonobservable diversity characteristics as well as the hierarchical position within the organization (i.e. workforce vs. management position). A total of 39 participants who referred to themselves as males (15 of them held a management position) and 45 women (13 of them were managers) were interviewed. In terms of the type of organization the interviewees worked for, 27 participants reported working for public institutions such as hospitals, educational institutions and the police force, or for private nonprofit organizations. Interestingly, the majority of the interviewees with (rather) observable diversity characteristics held management positions in nonprofit organizations. The age of interviewees ranged from 19 to 62 years and their length of service with the current employer from two months to 42 years. Nine participants were white males without any relevant diversity characteristics, while twelve participants were white females who displayed no further diversity characteristics. Moreover, respondents who featured at least one *nonobservable* diversity characteristic such as a low educational level (i.e. no high school degree), nonobservable migration background, or sexual orientation other than "straight" (a total of 26 participants) were distinguished from people with one or more *observable* diversity characteristics such as an age of 55+ or a visible migration background (a total of 19 participants). A migration background was considered observable if the interviewee displayed a different ethnicity than "Caucasian" or had an unmistakably foreign accent. Lastly, 18 interviewees featured observable *and* nonobservable diversity characteristics – apart from gender (identity).

Method of analysis

In the initial step of the two-step data analysis, the transcripts were content wise structured by applying Kuckartz's (2013) thematic text analysis. In the course of the close reading and coding, it became apparent that humor (i.e. jokes, put-ons, teasing, etc.) targeted at coworkers who belong to minority and/or historically underprivileged groups is a quite common phenomenon that presumably contributes to creating organizational inclusion/exclusion – at

	Male		Female	
Diversity characteristics	Workforce	Management	Workforce	Management
None	2	7	8	4
1 Nonobservable D.C.	8	4	8	3
2 Nonobservable D.C.	1	1	1	0
Subtotal	9	5	9	3
1 Observable D.C.	7	1	5	4
2 Observable D.C.	1	0	0	1
Subtotal	8	1	5	5
Nonobservable + observable D.C.	5	2	10	1
Total	24	15	32	13

Note(s): $N = 84$; D.C. = diversity characteristic
Source(s): Table by author

Table 1.
Sample composition

least temporarily. To classify interview passages as humorous, I followed Meyer's (1997) definition of humorous narratives, which are considered stories that point to a nonthreatening incongruity or violation of a norm or expectation, which usually make the narrator laugh or grin. An additional indicator of a humorous story is the interviewer's explicit statement that the anecdote illustrates the common use of humor targeted at coworkers who feature at least one diversity characteristic.

The inductively derived (humor-related) relevant categories comprise the narrator's sociodemographic status, position in the organization and perceived degree of inclusion; the target's diversity characteristics; the content (what is made fun of); the humor style used; and the supposed inclusiveness/exclusiveness of the humorous act based on established definitions of inclusion-exclusion. Altogether, 41 interviewees reported the occurrence of humor in the workplace at the expense of members of historically disadvantaged groups. In seventeen cases, participants shared at least one insightful anecdote where diversity-related "humorous" acts had occurred. These anecdotes were first analyzed thematically, resulting in the identification of three themes (see below).

Subsequently, a ventriloquial analysis inspired by Nathues *et al.* (2021) was performed. The aim was to ascertain which human and other-than-human actors (e.g. attitudes, stereotypes, prejudices) participate in the supposedly humorous acts through their implicit and/or explicit invocation by the interlocutors and thus coconstruct inclusion and/or exclusion. Note that this study refrains from distinguishing between the interactant's role as a "ventriloquist" (i.e. a person lets someone or something else "speak" in the respective act of communication, e.g. "The news media say that . . .") or as a "dummy" (i.e. a person's act of communication is "invisibly" animated by someone or something else, e.g. "I think that . . .") because of the aforementioned vacillation/oscillation between them, meaning that the ventriloquist and dummy constantly swap roles (Cooren, 2012, 2016, 2020). Furthermore, the distinction between the ventriloquist and the dummy does not create added value to the study at hand as it aims at ascertaining who or what is participating in the allegedly humorous acts in the first place and not so much whether someone or something is participating implicitly or explicitly.

According to Nathues and Van Vuuren (2022), a ventriloquial analysis aims at identifying four ventriloquial connections, namely (1) appeal (i.e. a figure speaks for the interlocutor), (2) authorship (i.e. ventriloquizing a figure to strengthen one's authority), (3) appropriation (i.e. ventriloquizing a figure that expresses the interlocutor's possession of something) and (4) attribution (i.e. ventriloquizing a figure that reveals the interactant's attachment to someone or something else). After the identification, the authors recommend grouping them into clusters, followed by relating the voices and clusters to one another. Finally, instructive vignettes are presented and the partaking voices/figures are expounded in detail. Accordingly, three episodes, each embodying one theme, are presented and examined regarding the content and context of the joke, the humor style used, and, of course, the partaking actors/voices and their interrelations.

Analysis

Before delving into the analysis of narratives that illustrate the role of humor in the communicative constitution of organizational inclusion/exclusion, the examination of the interviewees' perceived degree of inclusion indicates no noticeable differences between white males and white females – especially if these participants held a management position. Even though this finding is somewhat surprising at a first glance due to still existing gender inequalities, it may be explained by the female interviewees' management position, which indicates that the person is well included in the organization. Moreover, in countries with a mainly "Caucasian" population, whiteness is (still) considered a privilege. With the concept of

intersectionality in mind – which refers to the various social identities of an individual which wield influence on the person's beliefs about gender (Shields, 2008) – it means that especially women who exhibit further observable diversity characteristics such as an observable migration background, have greater difficulty climbing up the career ladder compared to white women (Crenshaw, 1989).

In terms of the context in which humor targeted at members of historically disadvantaged groups occurred, it is vital to point to the finding that diversity-related workplace humor was almost entirely geared towards the target's *observable* diversity characteristics, with most jokes being made about the person's ethnic origin and/or nationality. Overall, *racially insensitive* (i.e. the joke focuses on the target's ethnicity but doesn't mean to harm the target) and *racist* (i.e. the joke harms the target based on his/her membership in an ethnic minority) have been identified in the anecdotes, but no *merely racial* (Anderson, 2015, p. 6) quips that aim at subverting common ethnic stereotypes. Only in a few cases did interviewees report that colleagues of advanced age had been the target of jokes or put-ons. Further, a few participants reminisced about sexist jokes toward women made almost exclusively by men in leadership positions. However, those interviewees were hardly able to recount specific events in which such ageist and sexist jokes had occurred. Consequently, the two-step analysis has been performed solely for anecdotes that illustrate putatively humorous acts at the expense of the target's observable foreign origin, nationality and/or cultural background.

Thematic text analysis: the three themes

Based on the content structuring thematic text analysis of the seventeen anecdotes, three themes have been identified regarding organizational inclusion/exclusion through and in humorous acts of communication. The three themes are labeled as follows:

(1) Fostering inclusion by reinforcing existing boundaries through mockery (5 anecdotes)

(2) Concurrently engendering inclusion and exclusion by ridiculing alleged "insiders"(8 anecdotes)

(3) (Re)Establishing inclusion by making fun of one's own "otherness"(4 anecdotes)

For determining whether the anecdotes illustrate inclusion and/or exclusion, the aforementioned concepts developed by Jansen *et al.* (2014) and Shore *et al.* (2011) were adopted since the reported episodes allow for tracing whether the target's "otherness" is sincerely cherished (i.e. uniqueness) and whether he/she can live up to his/her true self (i.e. authenticity) while still being treated as an esteemed group member (i.e. belongingness). The three themes are described in greater detail in the course of the ventriloquial analysis of the selected vignettes as it investigates and illustrates the situational conditions as well as the interrelations of the actors/voices involved.

Ventriloquial analysis: speaking in the name of . . .

The analysis identified various recurring figures that participated in the humorous events but also in the narrations, indicating that the interviewee identifies him-/herself with the respective event to some degree. For example, the targets' apparent foreign origin and concomitant stereotypes/prejudices always formed the substrate for the jokes and additionally acted as co-authors that permit or justify such cracks (i.e. authority, attribution). Moreover, the narrators always referred to "us", indicating that they speak in the name of the group, which also points to the strengthening of authority. Correspondingly, hierarchy and power asymmetries seem to play a decisive role when it comes to the first two themes in that asymmetries are major motives for the jokers, which, in turn, are

consubstantialized in and through these "comical" events. Regarding the ventriloquial function "appeal", the second vignette illustrates how a drawing can exclude and speak in the name of a person or group that makes fun of someone. In contrast, anecdotes reflecting the third theme indicate that the target can (re)establish inclusion by taking up the stereotypes on which the initial put-on is grounded and using (i.e. appropriating) them as the basis for making fun of oneself. The recurring ventriloquations of stereotypes/prejudices, power relations and affiliations indicate a common pattern in the emergence of inclusion and/or exclusion through offensive and disparaging humor (Ford *et al.*, 2019; Tremblay, 2017).

(1) Fostering inclusion by reinforcing existing boundaries through mockery

This theme addresses the use of ridicule and dividing humor in the workplace, which is "invoked to make both alliances and distinctions" (Meyer, 2000, p. 321), highlighting humor's innate capability to unite and divide and consequently increase in-group cohesion at the expense of others (Lynch, 2002). The subsequent vignette illustrates how ridicule and disparaging humor are used to unite and reinforce a group's unity at the expense of a nonmember who exhibits apparent "otherness". The interviewee, who is a well-educated white male with a nonobservable second-generation migration background, who, by his own admission, feels highly included in his large-scale company, tells a story that demonstrates how making fun of an unpopular superior's observable Mid-eastern background can increase the cohesiveness of the in-group while reinforcing the boundary between the group and the superior who is perceived as an "outsider":

> The one who is often taken for a ride, and he doesn't really know it, is the regional manager of my company. A Persian.*chuckles* We call him the carpet dealer or his car is the flying carpet. So we always say that he came to work with the flying carpet. Or we also call him the caraway dealer. *chuckles* I think we only do that because he's our boss and because he doesn't seek much private contact with us.

This anecdote depicts the use of racially insensitive (Anderson, 2015) and mild-aggressive humor (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006) by subordinates who are emphasizing and reinforcing the differences between them (i.e. in-group) and the superior (i.e. member of an out-group) in terms of hierarchical position and ethnic origin. Such jokes seem to be an expression of dissatisfaction with the superior (i.e. the relatively unapproachable superior) as humor "offers a license to challenge power structures and power figures" (Westwood and Johnston, 2013, p. 238). In this case, the team members attribute their jokes to socially accepted stereotypes that are (partly) based on the tales from the "Arabian Nights", which the superior seemingly embodies. This might be considered a benign violation since the norms of the group apparently permit such violations and quips, respectively (Warren and McGraw, 2016). The chuckles that accompany his statements that the superior is from "Persia" and is called a "caraway dealer", and the fact that the team members make these jokes repeatedly ("always") support this assumption.

Interestingly, the interviewee invokes the manager's aloofness as the main reason for their racially insensitive jokes, which, however, seems rather questionable as the team members attribute typical oriental stereotypes to him of which they make fun repeatedly. Regardless, the fact that the team members do not tell these jokes in the presence of the superior indicates that such insider jokes intend to strengthen the bonds between the team members and their associated (work-related) social identities through shared meaning-making (Lynch, 2009). Ultimately, those quips targeted at the superior facilitate the fostering of a sense of community and belongingness in the team through the putatively facetious exclusion of the superior by caricaturing his ethnic origin.

Moreover, the frequent mention of "we" underpins that assumption as it indicates that the interviewee represents and speaks in the name of the in-group, which points to the team

members' co-authorship, which consubstantiates the legitimacy of such jokes in this context. In a nutshell, the superior's role as an outsider, due to his managerial position and somewhat dismissive attitude towards his subordinates, is *reinforced* by jokes at his expense in that his (ethnic) *uniqueness* is *not valued* by the subordinates but is rather the subject of put-ons, which simultaneously strengthen the sense of unity among the team members and communicatively solidify the already existing boundary between them and the superior. This finding supports Holmes and Marra's (2002b) claim that humor can reinforce (and challenge) the status quo. Interestingly, the figures invoked in the narrated stories are mostly folkloric stereotypes that have little to do with the individual's personhood and eventually represent or embody cultural bias.

(2) Concurrently engendering inclusion and exclusion by ridiculing alleged "insiders"

The second theme delineates the simultaneous co-construction of inclusion and exclusion through ridiculing alleged insiders (i.e. team members) who feature observable diversity characteristics. This theme differs from the first one in that the reinforcement of already existing boundaries due to organizational imbalances (e.g. hierarchies) plays a minor role. Instead, inclusion and exclusion are considered entirely *communicatively constituted* phenomena that concurrently emerge in and through jokes at the expense of members of minorities and/or underprivileged groups. Accordingly, the following vignette illustrates the twofold consequence of ridiculing a team member's foreign origin as it simultaneously fosters the inclusion of members of the "majority" while excluding the target by making fun of his culture. The interviewee is a well-educated young woman with an observable second-generation migration background (Filipina) who feels highly included in her medium-sized internationally operating company. She narrates a story about a former political refugee from Syria – a faithful Muslim – who got riled up by a colleague's drawing that was supposed to be a joke:

> I have a colleague who has been with us for three years now and he is originally from Syria. Not so long ago, another colleague painted a penis on a piece of paper lying on the Syrian's desk. *chuckles* For us, this wouldn't be a problem at all but he felt so offended. We tried to convince him that it was just a joke, but he immediately went to our boss and showed him the drawing. The boss then asked us who it was but none of us admitted it. After that, he sent an email circular that we shouldn't do such things anymore. *laughs*

This anecdote, too, distinctly illustrates the dividing and unifying force of humor (Meyer, 2000), by using a rather racist (Anderson, 2015) and aggressive humor style (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006) in the form of a drawing. As in the previous anecdote, the concurrent division and unity also materialize through the interviewee's invocation of the collective ("we" and "us"), which also corroborates the joke's authority. According to incongruency theory, dividing or differentiating humor focuses on the violation of the "normal" (Meyer, 1997). In this case, it seems that the colleague's religiosity signifies such a norm violation. This becomes apparent as the interviewee implicitly attributes Islam and the corresponding values and traditions to the Syrian colleague, indicating that (a conservative interpretation of) Islam, which supposedly cuts across a drawing of a penis, also participates in the event. Notably, the drawing itself exerts agency – and is thus considered an additional co-author of the mockery – in that it is a *physically present* other-than-human actor (Cooren, 2020) that embodies and thus consubstantializes the stereotypes that are attributed to the Syrian target. Furthermore, the drawing that incarnates the racist prejudices, materializes not only in the interviewee's anecdote but also in the boss's email that refers to the picture and says that such jokes are not permitted, in the same breath ventriloquizing the organization's norms in this respect.

The analysis also suggests a feeling of superiority on the part of the jokers due to the apparent minority status of the target, which may have been another reason for the drawing.

The victim's reaction, "he immediately went to our boss and told him about the incident", stresses the offending character of this rather aggressive and racist nonverbal joke. Presumably, the target felt offended due to the psychological closeness between him and the joke (Kant and Norman, 2019) as his religiosity appears to be an important part of his identity. Apparently, the target did not perceive this identity threat as benign (Warren and McGraw, 2016) which suggests that for him, unlike his colleagues, there are no norms in place that would permit such a drawing. Conversely, the fact that his team members do appropriate norms that allow such jokes is illustrated in the statement that "for us, this wouldn't be a problem at all", which highlights the differentiation function of humor, referring to the joker's attempt to make "clear divisions and oppositions among opinions, people, and groups" (Meyer, 2000, p. 323). This episode shows that, from the perspective of the victim, such disparaging humor can be an experience that engenders "exclusion by making one feel 'relationally devalued' and disconnected from others" (Ford *et al.*, 2019, p. 701). Eventually, the Syrian Muslim is hardly able to live his faith *authentically* without being ridiculed for it by his colleagues, which eventually diminishes real *belongingness*.

(3) (Re)Establishing inclusion by making fun of one's own "otherness"

In contrast to the other two themes, which address humor's potential to simultaneously engender inclusion and exclusion, this one stresses the (re)establishment of inclusion after a mockery through the target's uptake and further "use" of the joke, since such a move indicates a person's sense of humor, which is mostly considered a well-liked virtue due to the person's ability to laugh problems away (Norrick, 2009). What is pivotal in this context is the fact that both the joker and the target must be somewhat equally aware of the topic in question (Beeman, 2000), which in this case is racial stereotypes (Anderson, 2015). Further, the target must perceive the violation as benign and somewhat funny to retort humorously, which is predominantly the case if the power differences between the joker and the target are nominal (Kant and Norman, 2019) and the interlocutors share a relatively similar set of values (Charman, 2013). The subsequent vignette demonstrates how a racially insensitive put-on is taken up by the target to (re)establish a sense of belongingness by using self-deprecating humor, which is akin to self-defeating humor and referred to as "a tool to break down barriers to intergroup interaction by taking ownership of the stereotypes and reducing the tension involved with them" (Ellithorpe *et al.*, 2014, p. 403). The interviewee is a white female nurse who reports feeling rather included in her team. She recounts a story in which she and some colleagues make fun of another colleague of Asian descent, a few months after the outbreak of the coronavirus in China:

> I have a funny story that fits the current situation. We have an Asian colleague and now during the corona pandemic, we were jokingly talking about how we'd better not sit too close to her during the break. *chuckles* But no offense meant. She took it with a great deal of humor and also made jokes about it. She said that she now has her peace in the subway because no one sits next to her. *chuckles* We frequently make jokes about such things, but if the person also doesn't take it too seriously, I don't think it's a problem at all.

This anecdote depicts the use of racially insensitive (Anderson, 2015) and mild aggressive humor (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006) in that the colleagues jokingly decide not to sit next to the Asian colleague who might be infected with the coronavirus since the virus was first detected in China. Here, the interviewee and her colleagues invoked and appropriate not only the pandemic and the corresponding social distancing measures imposed by the government but also the widespread accusation that China is responsible for the COVID-19 outbreak, which is implicitly attributed to the Asian colleague. Thus, the pandemic, governmental regulations, fear of infection as well as prejudices against the Chinese, are co-authoring the joke. Moreover, the interviewee speaks in the name of the collective by frequently referring to

"we", which also contributes to the joke's legitimacy. Attention should also be paid to the statement, "no offense meant", as it indicates her awareness of the joke's potential to insult the target, pointing to the fact that humor is a frequently used vehicle for expressing bias and prejudice under the cloak of fun (Ellithorpe *et al.*, 2014; Ford *et al.*, 2019).

Even though this kind of humor can reinforce prejudice, particularly against groups"for whom society holds ambivalent attitudes" (Ford *et al.*, 2015, p. 179), the anecdote indicates that esteemed personality traits such as a sense of humor (Norrick, 2009), which is attributed to the target ("she took it with a great deal of humor"), can counter exclusion through racially insensitive jokes. This explicit attribution is further substantiated through the interviewee's statement that the initial target immediately took up the put-on and jokingly said that she now "has her peace in the subway", ventriloquizing the prejudice against Asians which materializes not only in the initial quip but also in the passengers' behavior and the joke about their behavior. The target's comical uptake of the initial joke features some kind of self-deprecating humor (i.e. making fun of her Asian origin in the context of the pandemic) which is frequently used by members of minority groups to reduce tension and regain equal status within a group (Ellithorpe *et al.*, 2014), which was briefly undermined by the colleagues' racially insensitive joke.

The anecdote also emphasizes the importance of a sense of humor for (re)establishing inclusion as it seems to be a valued norm of the group as illustrated in the utterance that the group members frequently make jokes of that sort and that they are considered legit since the group members do not take them too seriously. The "we" in that statement is pivotal as she speaks in the name of the whole group and points to the inclusion of people who can laugh about themselves, indicating that a sense of humor can counter prejudice against an individual's ethnic origin as long as humor is a crucial feature of a group's culture (Holmes and Marra, 2002a). Eventually, the Asian colleague's sense of humor revealed itself in and through her counter-quip that significantly contributed to (re)establishing inclusion. The target's uniqueness in terms of her ethnic origin, on which the initial joke was based, turned out to be an asset *in combination* with her humorous personality as this *combination* reflects and consubstantiates the group's norms and thus facilitates a sense of *belongingness*.

Discussion and conclusion

This study is dedicated to the investigation of the constitutive character of disparaging humor in terms of the coconstruction of inclusion and exclusion in a diverse workplace. The analysis of the 84 interviews revealed that organizational members of foreign origin were almost exclusively the targets of disparaging jokes whereas quips at the expense of women or members of the LGBTQIA# community were rarely observed by the interviewees. Even though it is significantly more likely for women who feature multiple (observable) diversity characteristics to face prejudices and discrimination than white women (Crenshaw, 1989), the analysis revealed that gender plays a rather minor role in terms of the selection of the target since ten targets were men and seven were women. This finding indicates that ethnic differences are in the foreground when it comes to rather disparaging jokes and thus microaggressions in the workplace.

Interestingly, the participants who recounted stories about humorous events in the context of D&I reported feeling rather or highly included in their teams, which means that they felt valued as an individual and were able to be their true selves at work. Moreover, all narrators emphasized that the humorous acts were not supposed to discriminate against the targets but rather served as a fun way to relieve the team's boredom and foster a fun and enjoyable working climate. This finding is quite concerning as it partly supports Enoksen's (2016) research that suggests that employees who perceive a fair and just workplace for themselves are less likely to notice discriminatory behavior against others. In the context of

this study, this purports that people who feel (highly) included do not deem racist or racially insensitive jokes as discrimination against the targets of the joke but rather as entertaining. This is in opposition to Ford *et al.*'s (2013, 2015, 2019) findings which indicate that disparaging humor against members of minorities serves as means to release prejudice under the guise of fun. This insight is particularly relevant since humor is also a form of self-disclosure (Cooper, 2008) through which unconscious biases and prejudices, which are considered learned stereotypes against minorities or historically disadvantaged groups (Oberai and Anand, 2018), can come to the surface as a microaggression or microinequity in the guise of a joke (Rowe, 1990).

Now let us turn to the answer to the two research questions, beginning with the first one that poses the question of *in what way and under what conditions does humor targeted at members of historically disadvantaged groups communicatively constitute organizational inclusion and/or exclusion*? The analysis identified three themes that address the communicative constitution of inclusion/exclusion through disparaging humor. The first theme signifies the role of racist or racially insensitive humor in reinforcing already existing boundaries between the target and the jokesters and affiliated team members. The relevant anecdotes strikingly show that especially power asymmetries trigger this kind of safety valve humor which aims to resist and cope with management control and eventually release the concomitant tension (Lynch, 2009). In such cases, the apparent foreign origin of the unpopular superior is selected as the subject of the jokes and ultimately serves as the basis for the reinforcement of the boundary between a team and management. The second theme addresses the exclusion of an actual team member by ridiculing his/her ethnic origin. What the first and second themes have in common, though, is the fact that the use of disparaging humor communicatively constitutes the target's exclusion while simultaneously unifying the joker and his/her allies, highlighting the dualism of humor (Meyer, 2000). The last theme outlines the primeness of the target's sense of humor, especially if humor is a vital feature of a group's culture (Charman, 2013; Holmes and Marra, 2002a). The findings indicate that the target's quick-wittedness is prime if he/she wants to reestablish inclusion after a disparaging quip, as a sense of humor is considered an esteemed personality trait (Norrick, 2009). Due to the target's willingness to take up and further develop the joke, it is possible to foster inclusiveness through and in disparaging put-ons because such a response solidifies a group's identity (Lennox Terrion and Ashforth, 2002). The three themes, although in different ways, support the notion that inclusion and exclusion are relational and two sides of the same coin (Dobusch, 2014).

The second research question asks *which voices participate in the humorous acts that communicatively constitute organizational inclusion and/or exclusion*. The ventriloquial analysis strikingly shows that common stereotypes and prejudices make their voices heard through the utterances of the interactans *and* the narrator of the anecdotes. The observed frequent invocation of stereotypes/prejudices against specific social groups in racist and racially insensitive jokes not only reflects but also solidifies them. Moreover, the narrators always speak in the name of the collective ("we", "us") which embodies either the distinction between the joker(s) and the affiliated people and the target(s) or, as with the third theme, a sense of unity after the initial target has regained inclusion through the uptake of the joke. The coauthorship of a group's norms and values, which sometimes contradict the norms of the organization, also becomes evident in almost every anecdote. A group's norms and values *make themselves present* (Cooren, 2010), particularly when the narrators refer to their incarnation in recurrent actions, as indicated by the use of adverbs such as "always" and "frequently" in the respective context.

Altogether, the ventriloquial analysis revealed that widespread stereotypes/prejudices against specific social groups not only animate the jokers but also the narrators who consider the recounted racist and racially insensitive quips humorous events. The legitimacy of the jokes is further strengthened through the interviewees' invocation of the collective that backs

this kind of disparaging humor, eventually leading to its manifestation in a group's norms and concomitant culture. Hence, the degree to which a person's uniqueness is truly valued highly depends on the type of that unique feature. The findings of this study indicate that an *observable* foreign origin is not a trait that is embraced by the "majority" but rather the subject of mockery and put-ons. The good news, however, is the fact that a bold sense of humor and self-irony can help the target to counter the disguised prejudice and comically transform exclusion into inclusion since humor if appropriated benignly, can serve as a social lubricant (Lennox Terrion and Ashforth, 2002).

Research implications

This article contributes to the body of knowledge as it is one of the first studies that investigate workplace humor drawing on established theoretically derived concepts of inclusion-exclusion (e.g. Mor Barak, 2017; Shore *et al.*, 2018). Further, using a CCO lens for studying inclusion and exclusion through disparaging humor in a diverse workforce is a novel approach, and the findings of the ventriloquial analysis corroborate the constitutive character of humor, which serves as a somewhat ambiguous and oftentimes paradoxical vehicle for various figures such as biases and prejudices to "comically" speak up and communicatively participate in organizational processes, leading to the inclusion of some while excluding and marginalizing others. The consideration of polyphony in the context of D&I (Trittin and Schoeneborn, 2017; Trittin-Ulbrich and Villesèche, 2022) is pivotal in the theorization and research of humor targeted at members of minorities or historically disadvantaged groups since all the voices "that we (re)produce in our conversations and discourses also participate in what defines or identifies us" (Cooren, 2012, p. 6). Consequently, this study furthers the research on workplace humor in the D&I context in that it signposts the organizing agency of the physically absent yet present figures (Nathues and Van Vuuren, 2022) that eventually make a difference through their invocation in allegedly humorous acts, eventually contributing to the communicative constitution of inclusion and/or exclusion in the workplace. Furthermore, this study indicates that ethnicity and nationality, with the concomitant cultural "peculiarities", are the main drivers of disparaging humor in the workplace and that somewhat socially accepted (unconscious) biases and prejudices against people of foreign origin play an important role when it comes to organizational inclusion and/or exclusion. Lastly, the findings suggest that self-deprecating humor that is based on the initial disparaging joke (i.e. uptake), can assist in becoming included again as a sense of humor is considered an admirable personality trait (Norrick, 2009).

Practical implications

Studying the communicative constitution of inclusion-exclusion using ventriloquial analysis may also assist practitioners in the identification of partaking figures whose recurrent invocations either hamper or facilitate the fostering of a genuinely inclusive work environment. Even if some organizational members may be known as overt "racists", the findings show that various jokes are based on learned unconscious biases and prejudices that come to the fore as microaggressions or micro-inequities in the form of jokes (Oberai and Anand, 2018; Rowe, 1990), indicated by statements of some interviewees such as "it was just a joke". Although unconscious bias training is a common and helpful measure in the context of D&I in organizations, being aware of one's own biases does not necessarily lead to behavioral change, especially because the long-lasting mitigation of racism and racist (or racially insensitive) jokes, not only in the workplace, depends on going beyond the individual level since the individual is part of society and the concomitant institutions (Moon, 2018). This does not mean that initiatives such as unconscious bias training are pointless since it shows that an organization's management is willing to "fight" racism and discrimination, but a

sustainable change requires at least an organizational culture that demands and promotes diversity and the inclusion of all members and their voices (Pless and Maak, 2004; Trittin and Schoenborn, 2017).

However, this is also the crux that managers have to deal with because if inclusion means that everyone can say anything without fear of sanctions; it also means that disparaging jokes are allowed. For this reason, organizations are well-advised to set certain limits to the freedom of speech – which should be granted to all employees – in the form of rules that are based on ethical principles and values. A possibly effective way to mitigate racism and discrimination in the form of humor may be the explicit mention of the adequate use of humor in the corporate code of conduct since such a document is usually considered a behavioral guideline based on ethical and legal deliberations (Kaptein and Schwartz, 2008). However, this does not imply that organizational members should not be allowed to say what they have on their minds; rather, it is about laying down (communicative) rules in order to ensure that the dignity of every individual (and social group) is preserved.

Limitations

As with any study, this study also has some limitations that should be mentioned. First, the interviews did not deal with humor in the D&I context in the first place. Consequently, the interviews did not go further into this topic, resulting in a rather small number of instructive anecdotes. Second, although the interviewees' degree of inclusion was investigated by asking questions that were in line with Jansen *et al.*'s (2014), Mor Barak's (2015, 2017), and Shore *et al.*'s (2011) conceptualizations, the applied method did not allow for ascertaining the target's subjectively perceived sense of inclusion. Accordingly, the target's inclusion and/or exclusion was determined based on the interviewee's (i.e. team member) level of inclusion in conjunction with the story, its context, and the figures/voices invoked. Third, the adopted concepts of inclusion-exclusion do not consider factors such as the target's influence in decision-making or material and physical safety (Shore *et al.*, 2018; Van Eck *et al.*, 2021), which also limits the study's explanatory power.

Future research

In order to further investigate the various implicit and explicit figures that express themselves in disparaging and similar types of humor, ethnographic fieldwork may be a fruitful avenue as it opens up the possibility of observing and documenting the allegedly humorous events, including nonverbal communication, and the respective context from up close. Such an approach also prevents researching and analyzing vague or even false memories. Moreover, follow-up interviews could help to gain a deeper understanding of the event itself and the interplay of the partaking human and other-than-human actors. Finally, as this study is based on events recounted by employees in Austria and Germany, future studies could examine organizations in other countries and cultures, as often not only the social problems and challenges regarding D&I differ but also the forms of communication, which include the use of humor. No matter what kinds of methods scholars will choose in the future, the ultimate goal should be to explore how the use of humor can contribute to a more inclusive workplace and, by extension, a more just and fair society.

Notes

1. In this study, the term "target" refers to the person about whom a joke is being made and not to the "audience".
2. The native English speaker, who is also proficient in German, was consulted particular in those cases where a literal translation from German to English was not possible or even perverted the meaning of the utterance.

3. Since the beginning of 2021 the German Diversity Charter refers to seven core dimensions, namely age, ethnic background and nationality, gender (identity), physical and mental abilities, religion and worldview, sexual orientation, and social background.
4. As the sample comprises a balanced number of females (45) and males (39), gender (identity) was separated from the other predefined diversity characteristics.

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