

# Contributive Justice: An Invisible Barrier to Workplace Inclusion

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*Characterized as an employee's ability to fully and meaningfully contribute to work units or organizations (Mor Barak & Cherin, 1998), inclusion incorporates opportunities to significantly influence positive change in core work processes and to have that influence valued by others. Despite an increasing emphasis on inclusion as a strategy for valuing and integrating diversity into the formal and informal structures of organizations, research highlights variability in employee experiences of inclusion across social groups. Because socio-structural features of organizations influence the nature and extent of employees' opportunities to contribute to organizations, we speculate that current understandings of inclusion may confound what people do contribute with what they are able to contribute.*

*To better understand differences in people's capacities for contribution as a hidden inequality, we introduce the concept of contributive justice within organizational contexts and advance a model for exploring its meaning, operation, and import. We propose meaningful work and instrumental voice as antecedents and offer a framework for exploring their interactive effects on perceptions of contributive justice. Further, we consider the impact of this type of justice on individual outcomes, particularly employees' sense of inclusion. We also situate contributive justice within the established nomological network of organizational justice, yet distinguish it as a separate construct with unique explanatory power. We conclude by putting forth research and practice agendas to advance our understanding of role of contributive justice in dismantling structures of inequality and creating more inclusive work environments.*

**Keywords:** justice; contribution; inclusion; fairness; equality; opportunity

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As organizational workforces comprise a multitude of identities and backgrounds, both scholars and practitioners have focused on approaches to valuing and leveraging differences to enhance organizational functioning. One such approach that has been increasingly explored and emphasized is the creation of inclusive work environments in which structures, policies, and practices are configured for employees to fully utilize their perspectives and talents in the achievement of organizational objectives (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Holvino, Ferdman, & Merrill-Sands, 2004; Roberson, 2006). As a strategy for valuing and integrating diversity into the formal and informal structures of organizations (see Shore, Randel, Chung, Dean, Ehrhart & Singh, 2011), inclusion is intended to mitigate the problematic impact of organizational systems rooted in discrimination and inequality (see Ferdman, 2014; Shore, Cleveland, & Sanchez, 2018). Yet, research suggests variability in employee experiences of inclusion across social groups (e.g., Findler, Wind, & Mor Barak, 2007; Pelled, Ledford, & Mohrman, 1999; Walker, Ruggs, Morgan, & DeGrassi, 2019) and thus the effectiveness of inclusion efforts in organizations.

As demonstrated by ubiquitous references within the field to diversity, equity, and inclusion as an amalgamation, or DEI (Kraus, Torrez, & Hollie, 2022), fairness is seen as the mechanism through which the diversity–inclusion relationship works. While not well-articulated within the diversity literature, equity is intended to represent policies and practices to eliminate bias that diminishes equal opportunities across all social groups and to improve the statuses of historically disadvantaged groups (Iyer, 2022; Mor Barak & Cherin, 1998; Nishii, 2013). This is somewhat consistent with classical conceptualizations of equity, which infer the treatment of people across groups as equals with commensurate opportunities to compete without prejudice or discrimination and corresponding to their abilities, motivations, efforts, and accomplishments (Leventhal & Michaels, 1969, 1971). Yet, such conceptualizations have long been criticized for a lack of consideration given to factors outside a person's control that affect the allocation of such opportunities and, subsequently, performance differences (Austin & Hatfield, 1980; Mikula, 1980; Miller, 1976). As a result, individuals' opportunities for contribution within organizations are assumed to be equal. Still, as research suggests that people's opportunities for contribution may be influenced by their roles in organizations, group memberships, and other characteristics considered to be indicative of status (see Ibarra, 1992, 1993, 1995), we posit that such opportunities may be an invisible inequality in the workplace.

We argue that fairly designed and implemented organizational systems should account for individuals' capacities for contribution and introduce the construct of *contributive justice*, or the fairness of opportunities to contribute to core work processes in workgroups and organizations. We first discuss inclusion theory and research, and how inequalities in opportunity to contribute may shape employees' sense of feeling included. Drawing from philosophical dialogues on contributive justice, we then explore the concept within organizational contexts and propose a model for exploring its meaning, operation, and import. Specifically, we propose meaningful work and instrumental voice as antecedents and offer a framework for examining how different levels of each combine to generate perceptions of contributive justice. We also consider the consequences of this type of justice on employees' sense of inclusion and other individual outcomes. Because we position contributive justice as a form of organizational justice, we also situate it within the nomological network, yet distinguish it as a distinct construct with unique explanatory power. We conclude our discussion with a consideration of

how future research may advance the study and implementation of contributive justice in organizations.

Our contributive justice framework advances the management literature in several ways. First, with attention to differences in individuals' capacities for contribution in organizations, we offer insights into the experience of workplace inclusion. While current research emphasizes individuals' treatment as insiders with distinctive value as paramount to feelings of being included in work contexts, our analysis considers socio-structural factors that may drive such treatment. By exploring how meaningful work and instrumental voice enable opportunities for employees to be significantly involved in critical organizational processes, we delve into the complexity of inclusion and challenge future thinking and research on the topic to explore precursors to the satisfaction of employees' needs for distinctiveness and connectedness. Second, with attention to how organizational hierarchies influence an individual's capacity for contribution, we illuminate access to contributive opportunities as an overlooked yet important basis of disadvantage in the workplace. In doing so, we encourage a consideration of both the nature and extent of employees' opportunities for contribution for understanding and addressing systems of disadvantage in organizations. Third, while the organizational justice literature has remained relatively reticent about how social group memberships and other status characteristics can influence employee access to fair treatment in organizations, we advance scholarly and practical understandings of a form of justice that captures this relationship. By accounting for access to contribution opportunities, we inform current models of organizational justice in ways that are more consistent with the composition and dynamics of modern workforces.

### **Contribution Inequalities and Employee Experiences of Inclusion**

Early conceptualizations of inclusion focus on the extent to which individuals are organizational insiders (see Stamper & Masterson, 2002). Drawing upon a career movement model proposed by Schein (1971), which argues that a person's position relative to the center of an organization provides insight into how much that person is integrated into interpersonal networks, research suggests that inclusion is indicated by one's organizational centrality (e.g., Brass, 1985; Hom, 1979; Ibarra, 1993). More specifically, greater centrality is posited to engender more acceptance by and trust from others, and hence more influence throughout the organization (Stamper & Masterson). Following this logic, O'Hara, Beehr, and Colarelli (1994) highlight power, access to sensitive information, and participation in decision-making as key components of inclusion or centrality, which are used synonymously. They note that because such factors are reflective of the critical aspects of an organization's workflow, employees can use them to gauge the extent to which their contributions are valued and, therefore, to which they are included. Importantly, however, the results of their study also reveal ratings of inclusion to vary by salary, education and ethnicity, thus highlighting a need for future models to capture such differences.

More recent conceptualizations of inclusion have built on this work by focusing on treatment as an organizational insider, yet incorporating the effects of demography. Acknowledging the changing demographic composition of workforces, Mor Barak and Cherin (1998) propose inclusion as a bridge between diversity and the engagement of such differences towards the achievement of organizational goals. Drawing upon various

psychosocial theories of interpersonal behavior in groups, they establish inclusion as derived from a fundamental need for individuals to evaluate themselves relative to others in their referent groups to understand their standing within those groups. As such evaluations provide individuals with insight into their fit with or status among others in the group, which is important to their psychological attachment and well-being (see Baumeister & Leary, 1995), it is argued that the extent to which they feel part of organizational goals and have an ability to effectively contribute to those goals will ultimately affect their work performance. Accordingly, inclusion is indicated by perceptions of belonging to a work group, access to resources, influence over workflow decisions, and having an ability to impact the group's work (Mor Barak & Cherin, 1998). Pelled et al. (1999) build on this argument through an examination of how individuals' demographic dissimilarity from others in their workgroup influences inclusion. As the findings reveal, those who are more dissimilar along dimensions of gender and race experience lower workplace inclusion, especially in terms of access to information, the authors conclude that being demographically different from others creates an inclusion disadvantage. Further, they call for organizational approaches to combat a potential propensity for those belonging to certain demographic groups to have their contributions devalued and be treated inequitably relative to others. More recently, Shore et al. (2011) echoed this need for individuals to be valued for their differences and treated like insiders within their workgroups and, thus, for environments that enable a sense of inclusion.

Some research on the development of inclusive work climates emphasizes fair treatment without regard to demography or social identity as foundational to inclusion (see Kossek & Zonia, 1993; McKay, Avery, & Morris, 2009; Mor Barak, Cherin, & Berkman, 1998). In particular, researchers suggest that equitable employment practices that are fairly implemented across all social groups help to eliminate bias and create a more level playing field (Nishii, 2013; Roberson, 2006). While interpersonal integration and involvement in decision-making are highlighted as other key dimensions (Nishii, 2013), we reason that existing frameworks do not fully account for opportunity structures within organizations. With an assumption that contribution to core work activities is sufficient for the creation and maintenance of inclusive work environments (see Davidson & Ferdman, 2002; Wasserman, Gallegos, & Ferdman, 2008), little consideration has been given to individuals' capacity to do so.

Research findings suggest that inequality is often manifested as unequal access to opportunities based on social positions or statuses, which establish boundaries for inclusion (Mair, Wolf, & Seelos, 2016). For example, social group memberships, such as gender and race, have been shown to influence access to and participation in organizational networks (Ibarra, 1992, 1995). Further, differences in network structures and interaction patterns have been shown to influence the concentration of power within particular social groups (Mair et al., 2016), thereby materializing distinctions in terms of who is considered an insider and/or valued for their input into decision-making processes (see Shore et al., 2011). In effect, network differences serve to create an "opportunity context" (Ibarra, 1993: 66), or a structural environment in which those on the periphery of organizational networks—or considered to be so given status hierarchies—are unable to fully utilize their talents to achieve organizational objectives (see Davidson & Ferdman, 2002; Wasserman et al., 2008). As a result, the degree to which a work context enables contributions to work processes and outputs may constrain the potential for inclusion in organizations.

Accordingly, current conceptualization of inclusion may confound what people *do* contribute with what they are *able* to contribute to organizations.

## Contributive Justice

Gomberg (2007) conceptualizes contributive justice as the fairness of what people are expected and able to contribute in terms of labor. Drawing from theoretical perspectives on social stratification (see Davis & Moore, 1945) and examples of such stratification within housing, education, and work settings, he articulates contributive justice as a philosophical alternative to the ideal of equal opportunity. Gomberg (2007) argues that, because social and economic goods are unequally distributed across social groups, equal opportunity can be more accurately described as equality of competitive opportunity to obtain positions of power or advantage within a specific context. He highlights the competitive nature of opportunity given that the most desired positions in society are fewer than the number of individuals who desire them and that some people are disadvantaged from attaining such positions based on factors other than their qualifications or fit, such as social group membership. As rights, responsibilities, and access to resources are embedded within social and structural hierarchies, the quantity of opportunity to contribute differs across social groups (Gomberg, 2007). Thus, the focus of contributive justice is on the extent to which social structures allow people to make a positive contribution without discrimination on the basis of identity or valued social characteristics (Timmermann, 2018).

In his conceptualization of contributive justice, Gomberg (2007) identifies four normative dimensions: duty and equal opportunity to contribute labor and duty and equal opportunity to participate in social decisions. Specifically, he notes that the equal distribution of both routine and complex labor as well as involvement in decisions about production and the organization of society allows individuals across social groups to have more uniform opportunities to generate social esteem and prestige, which ultimately harmonizes relationships between people (Gomberg, 2007; 2016). Thus, Gomberg (1995) argues that the growth and success of a system is driven by the opportunity for those typically excluded from positions of status within social and structural hierarchies to contribute, rather than by their abilities or personal capacities for doing so. At a fundamental level, it is reasoned that “justice is about contribution” (Gomberg, 2007: 149), which is consistent with Rawls’s (1971) second principle of justice that social and economic inequalities can only truly be considered fair if individuals have an equal opportunity to contribute to society. More specifically, Rawls’s difference principle recognizes the subjective influences of status and other social contingencies on distributions and seeks to mitigate these influences by establishing processes that improve long-term expectations for all individuals, including the least advantaged in society. Thus, while distributions need not be equal, the opportunity to receive such distributions should be accessible for all.

Although Gomberg’s (2007) conceptualizations of contributive justice and Rawls’s (1971) second principle of justice primarily consider the role of opportunity within societal contexts, its applicability within organizations is implicit. Rawls’s (1971) principle argues that individuals appreciate the exercise of their realized capacities, and that this appreciation is enhanced in more complex situations. At the same time, work on contributive justice posits that individuals’ well-being is largely driven by a natural desire to utilize their abilities at work and

that such rewards are augmented under opportunities for the utilization of complex abilities (Gomberg, 2007; Sayer, 2009, 2012; Timmermann, 2018). Thus, theorizing in both areas highlights contexts in which employees have opportunities to fully utilize their potential to address job demands as central to their social standing, self-esteem, self-development, and other identity-related benefits (Rawls, 1999; Sayer, 2009). These arguments are consistent with inclusion theory, which highlights the fairness of processes used to allocate opportunities and the actual distribution of those opportunities as key components of inclusive climates in organizations (Hayes, Bartle, & Major, 2002; Nishii, 2013). Specifically, as climates for inclusion are characterized by unbiased organizational practices that facilitate fair treatment, resource allocation, and access to power across social groups (Mor Barak et al., 1998), the consequence of opportunity and in particular, equality of opportunity, within organizational contexts is highlighted.

In the section below, we further elucidate the construct of contributive justice. Building upon extant theory and research, we consider structural and social factors that may influence the extent to which people are expected and able to contribute at work. Specifically, we explore meaningful work and instrumental voice as antecedents to contributive justice and reason how their interrelationship shapes opportunity contexts within the workplace. We also situate the contributive justice construct within the established organizational justice nomological network, distinguishing it from other types of justice and describing its relative predictive value. We then elaborate on this value by considering the effects of contributive justice on employee experiences of inclusion and other employee outcomes.

### *Antecedents to Contributive Justice*

*Meaningful work.* Rawls (1971) suggests that the division of labor in organizations should incorporate both routine and complex activities for all individuals, given that the latter offers an opportunity for “exercises of their realized capacities” (p. 426). Drawing on a principle of inclusiveness (see Perry, 1926), which argues that the satisfaction of a broader range of values and interests leads to greater harmony within individuals and societies, Rawls (1971) postulates that people should not be made to choose between mundane and intricate activities. As activities greater in complexity satisfy individuals’ desires for novelty of experience, exploration, and growth, he reasons that each individual should be provided with multifaceted and meaningful work to find opportunities for expression and achievement. Similarly, Gomberg (2016) conjectures that both simple and complex labor should be shared among those capable of doing so given that work characterized as interesting, complex, and/or important allows people to utilize and develop their capabilities and to generate a sense of fulfillment, value, and self-worth. In effect, contributive justice researchers argue that contribution is a good that should be available to all, non-competitively (Gomberg, 2016; Sayer, 2009), although evidence suggests that meaningful work is often more readily available to members of certain social groups while other groups have more narrow access to lower quality work (Gomberg, 2007). Accordingly, contributive justice necessitates the fair distribution of meaningful work (as well as work that is less so) to allow equal opportunity for contribution.

In the management literature, meaningfulness is conceptualized as a perceived return on the investment of oneself in fulfilling a work role and that the work carried out is valuable (Kahn, 1990). Theorized to be an end in itself as well as a means to a sense of identity

and connection, meaningfulness is conceptualized to encompass both self- and other-directed action (Yeoman, 2014). For example, Steger, Dik, and Duffy (2012) highlight that one's subjective experience of being involved in work that has positive and personal significance as key dimensions of meaningful work. They also propose meaning to be derived from one's work having broader significance and making a positive difference on the greater good, although this dimension is focused on others (rather than on self). Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) contend that there are four dimensions of meaningful work, including developing the inner self, unity with others, expressing full potential, and service to others. While the first two focus on meaning derived from self-awareness and reflection, the latter dimensions represent actions that help to generate meaningfulness. In particular, these dimensions refer to opportunities to fully utilize one's talents (i.e., expressing full potential) and to contribute to others' well-being (i.e., service to others). These fulfillment and other-directed dimensions are consistent with the contribution pathway to meaningful work, which establishes that a motivation to differentiate oneself by engaging in purposeful action directed towards others can facilitate the creation and maintenance of meaningful work (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Thus, consistent with the exposition of contributive justice, research underscores a relationship between meaningfulness and the opportunity to contribute.

What is less clear from research on meaningful work is whether opportunities to engage in such work are commensurate across social groups. While some measurement studies have shown slight differences in dimensions of meaningful work based on group membership, such as gender or age (see Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012), we have limited understanding of why such differences might occur. Much of the meaningfulness literature assumes that the meanings people draw from the work and the amount of meaningfulness experienced are determined by the organizational context (see Rosso et al., 2010), such that those engaged in work considered to be significant and/or impactful will be more likely to construe and experience positive meaning. However, recent research suggests that workers in positions not considered to be instrumental to an organization's goals may experience less meaningfulness or have less opportunity to concern themselves with such issues. For example, findings from a comparative study of meaningful work among white-, blue-, and pink-collar workers showed those in white-collar positions experience meaningfulness more frequently than the other employee groups (Lips-Wiersma, Wright, & Dik, 2016). Similarly, in a study of socioeconomic privilege and meaningful work, the results revealed greater experiences of meaningful work among those who identified with higher social status, although the desire for meaningful work was endorsed similarly regardless of social status (Autin & Allan, 2020). Based on these collective findings, it is reasonable to argue that members of certain groups may not have the same opportunities to experience meaningful work as do others. Accordingly, we expect meaningful work to be an antecedent to contributive justice in organizations.

*Instrumental voice.* While Rawls's (1971) difference principle primarily conceptualizes opportunity in terms of power and benefits assigned to positions, Gomberg (2007) highlights participation in decisions about production and the organization of society as a norm of contribution. Specifically, opportunities to participate in collective decision-making processes are considered to enhance the probability of reaching the best decision possible, thereby leading to greater contribution within social groups. Yet, as equal opportunities for all individuals to

employ and master their complex skills in the planning of production are emphasized (Gomberg, 2007), contribution is conceived as something beyond simple involvement in decision-making. In effect, opportunity contexts are seen as circumstances in which individuals' participation is influential to the work being done and/or decisions being made. Accordingly, the opportunity to participate in positive and effective ways that advance the quality of work done in organizations is considered to be essential to contributive justice (see Timmermann, 2018).

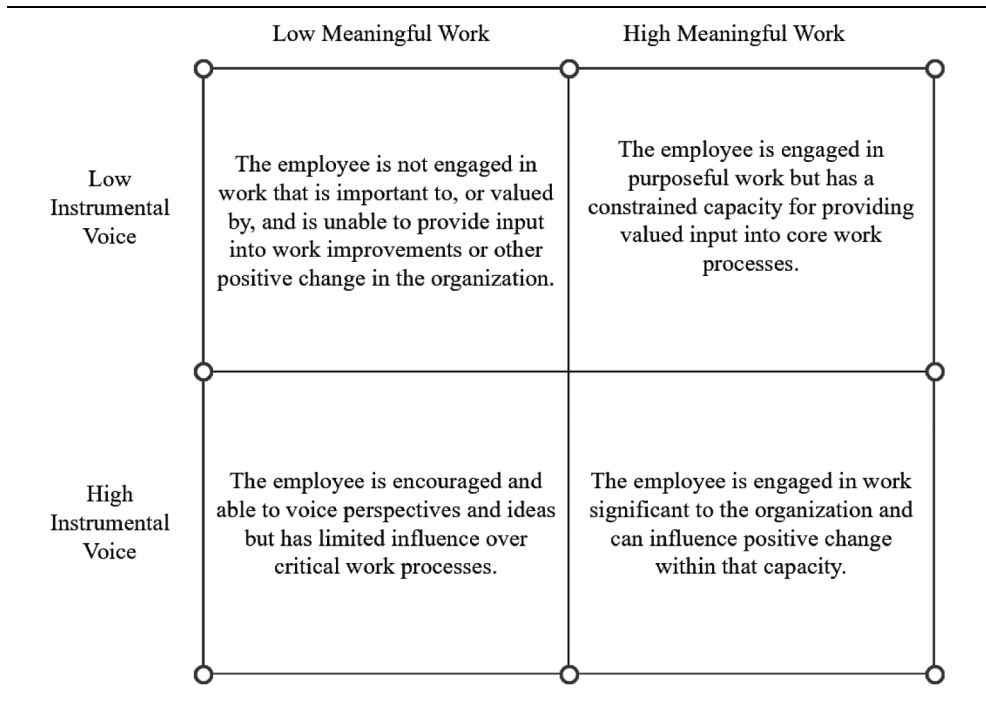
The management literature conceptualizes voice as a discretionary act of verbal expression intended to bring about improvement or positive change in organizations (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). While studies show its enactment to vary according to scope, level, and the forum through which it is expressed (Wilkinson, Dundon, & Marchington, 2013), fundamental to the concept of voice are its derivation and underlying motivation. Specifically, voice is considered to be a self-initiated behavior, such that individuals elect whether to engage in such behavior (Morrison, 2011), and constructive in nature, as the intent is to improve upon current organizational or work situations (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Morrison, 2011). With proactivity in origin and purpose as essential to its conceptualization, voice is largely seen as an extra-role behavior that falls outside of what is required or expected from employees within the purview of regular job performance (Van Dyne, Cummings, & Parks, 1995). Yet, inherent in the construct is also the assumption that responsibility for voice behavior resides with the employee. In particular, employees will be motivated to voice their perspectives and share information that brings about improvements in organizations if encouraged or presented with opportunities to do so (see Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003).

The findings of voice research reveals group differences in such promotive behavior. For example, studies highlight higher rates of voicing for men and ethnic majority groups as compared to women and ethnic minorities (Detert & Burris, 2007; LePine & Van Dyne, 1998), and differences in employees' choices to engage in voice based on sexual orientation (Bell, Özbilgin, Beauregard, & Sürgevil, 2011). In speculating reasons why employees might opt for silence in the workplace, scholars have suggested that individuals at lower levels of established social hierarchies may do so in an effort to protect themselves from the risks or potential negative outcomes associated with engaging in voice behavior (Morrison, 2011). Specifically, it is reasoned that because members of such groups may not feel a sense of belonging, they may perceive less psychological safety for speaking up and be more concerned with further status loss (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003), thus demotivating them from speaking up regarding positive change in organizations. A study of voice behavior among Chinese migrant workers, which showed the enactment of few voice behaviors under conditions of high job insecurity and low social networks, provides some evidence of these self-protective motives underlying work silence (An & Bramble, 2018). Other voice research, which highlights group differences in the effects of employees' confidence in their abilities to safely speak up and the perceived risks of doing so on withholding input (see Morrison, 2011), further demonstrates a relationship between status and voice in organizations.

The organizational justice literature also incorporates a focus on voice in terms of the opportunity to express one's views and provide input into decision-making procedures (Folger, 1977; Folger, Rosenfield, Grove, & Corkran, 1979; Thibaut & Walker, 1975).



**Figure 1**  
**Contributive Justice Framework**



Focused on formal mechanisms for employee input, justice research presumes that such opportunities drive beliefs that individuals have indirect influence over decisions when direct control is not possible (Shapiro, 1993). Referred to as an instrumental voice effect (Lind & Tyler, 1988), voice is valued because it increases the perceived probability that one will receive more favorable or equitable outcomes (Bies & Shapiro, 1988; Shapiro, 1993), which is considered to be indicative of status in a group or organization (Lind & Tyler, 1988). As status theory suggests that low-status individuals may have fewer occasions for participation and influence simply based on their group memberships (see Correll & Ridgeway, 2003), we extrapolate that access to voice mechanisms may differ across social groups in organizations. Accordingly, we expect that instrumental voice is an antecedent to contributive justice in organizations.

### *Contributive Justice Framework*

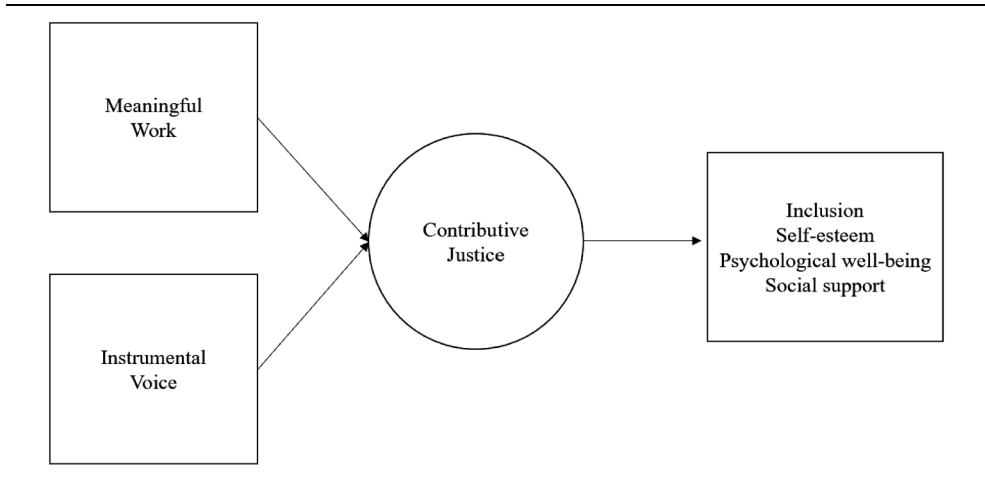
We propose that meaningful work and instrumental voice work together to create contributive justice, as shown in Figure 1. Specifically, we argue that greater opportunity for contribution exists when an individual is engaged in meaningful work and instrumental voice (see lower right quadrant of Figure 1). For example, a Chief Human Resource Officer (CHRO), responsible for developing and executing human resource strategy in support of an

organization's overall business strategy, is involved in work that is significant to an organization and can bring about positive change via human resource policies and practices. With opportunities to fully express and utilize one's talents and to promote the well-being of others (see Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Rosso et al., 2010), the CHRO has opportunities to influence critical work processes. However, as such contributive opportunities are obvious for those in positions located at higher levels of organizational hierarchies, it is important to consider the enactment of contributive justice for those who are not in formal positions of power. Take, for example, a trainer who reports to the CHRO and is responsible for coordinating and conducting training sessions within the organization. While this role may be less central in the organization and its influence on business goals more indirect, the prospect of contributing to others' growth and development combined with mechanisms for providing input into the development and implementation of training plans and programs enhances the opportunity for contribution. Consequently, the trainer is likely to have a sense of contributive justice.

On the opposite end of the spectrum with low meaningful work and low instrumental voice (see upper left quadrant of Figure 1), employees have the lowest opportunity for contribution. Under these circumstances, an individual is neither engaged in work that is important to, or valued by, an organization, nor able to provide input into the improvement of current work situations (see LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Morrison, 2011). For example, a hotel housekeeper with responsibilities for keeping guestrooms and other areas clean on a daily basis is likely to have few opportunities to contribute, and thus low contributive justice, given the nature of the job. Yet, highlighting links between the role and business objectives—such as the importance of housekeeping to guest safety and satisfaction—may enhance the personal and organizational significance of the work, while encouraging input into standard operating procedures or other process improvements may foster opportunities for instrumental voice. Thus, by expanding the opportunity context (see Ibarra, 1993) for employees at lower levels of organizational hierarchies, contributive justice may be increased. It may also be the case that some individuals in more central positions are asked to engage in work and/or forms of participation that are less valued in the organizations. For example, a business unit head might be asked to serve on a diversity committee, lead an employee resource group or take on other service work outside of their formal responsibilities and not considered to be integral to the achievement of business goals. Although such work may be personally meaningful, its lesser significance within the broader organization and/or capacity for driving change may limit the unit head's opportunities for contribution and, subsequently, contributive justice. Therefore, individuals' capacities for contribution within organizations should be considered relative to their potential for meaningful work and instrumental voice regardless of formal position or power.

Other instances of lower contributive justice represented in our framework are the combinations of high meaningful work and low instrumental voice (see upper right quadrant of Figure 1) or low meaningful work and high instrumental voice (see lower left quadrant of Figure 1). In the former situation, individuals are engaged in purposeful work that has the potential for full utilization of their talents and skills, yet such potential is not realized given constraints on their abilities to provide input into work processes. While such constraints may be due to a lack of mechanisms for meaningfully participating in collective decision-making processes and/or to a reduced psychological safety for speaking up to bring about work improvements or other positive change, contributive justice is diminished

**Figure 2**  
**Antecedents and Outcomes of Contributive Justice**



due to lower instrumental voice. In the latter situation, individuals are encouraged to voice their perspectives and share information but are limited in the influence they have over work processes. Analogous to the impact dimension of psychological empowerment, which represents the extent to which a person can influence work contexts (Spreitzer, 1995), individuals with instrumental voice—yet in work roles with low meaningfulness—have fewer opportunities to impact strategic and operating outcomes. While meaningfulness may be shaped by various factors, including the distribution of simple versus complex tasks or the personal versus organizational significance of the work, the resultant effect is to lessen the instrumentality of an individual’s voice and subsequent opportunity for contribution, thus decreasing contributive justice.

### *Consequences of Contributive Justice*

We anticipate that contributive justice will shape individuals’ experiences of inclusion in the workplace as well as their identity-related and motivational outcomes (see Figure 2). First, as inclusion is described as an individual’s treatment as an insider within a workgroup yet valued for the distinctiveness brought to the group to improve performance (Shore et al., 2011), we expect that this sense of belongingness and uniqueness will be influenced by contributive justice. Consistent with group value models of justice which suggest that people are concerned with the fairness of procedures because they are considered to be indicative of a workgroup’s values (see Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler & Lind, 1992), we presume that meaningful work and instrumental voice will convey related information. On one hand, such mechanisms allow people to make positive, unique contributions to the workgroup regardless of their structural positions within organizational hierarchies (see Gomberg, 2007; Timmermann, 2018). On the other hand, they enable feelings of self-worth and fulfillment as employees lend their capabilities to the execution of interesting, complex, and/or important

work (see Gomberg, 2007). Overall, as opportunities to employ one's skills and abilities towards the enhancement of core work processes and have those inputs appreciated by others signal value within the workgroup, individuals are likely to perceive fairness in the distribution of opportunities for contribution. Further, their needs for distinctiveness and connection are more likely to be satisfied. As such, contributive justice should be positively related to employees' psychological experiences of inclusion.

Also, following the predictions of justice models which predict that individuals' fairness concerns are motivated by their predisposition to belong to social groups, and that procedures provide information about how they are regarded by the group (see Lind & Tyler, 1988; Tyler, 1989; Tyler & Lind, 1992), we reason that contributive justice will be related to other identity and motivational outcomes. Specifically, as such models posit that the fairness of procedures are indicative of the quality of individuals' social relationships (see Tyler & Lind, 1992), we expect contributive justice to offer similar insights into identity. Because contributive justice is reflective of one's status as a valued member of a workgroup or organization, it is likely to impact people's self-concepts. For example, contributive justice may be influential to individuals' self-esteem, psychological well-being, or perceptions of social support (see Findler et al., 2007). As such status is also indicative of one's contributions to critical work processes, contributive justice may also affect motivational outcomes, such as psychological empowerment, work stress, or engagement.

### *Contributive Justice as a Form of Organizational Justice*

We contend that contributive justice has important implications for organizational functioning. However, as organizational justice theory articulates four types of justice: distributive, procedural, informational, and interpersonal (see Colquitt, 2001), it is important to distinguish the construct of contributive justice from existing types. Gomberg (2016) attempts to distinguish between contributive and distributive paradigms, the latter of which he argues focuses on the distribution of income and wealth yet ignores individuals' starting points on these dimensions (cf. Rawls, 1999, 2001). Because differences in income and wealth are influenced by social factors, Gomberg (2016) introduces the idea of contribution as an allocation norm. Similarly, in differentiating contributive justice from distributive justice—or the fairness of decision outcomes (Adams, 1965; Deutsch, 1975; Leventhal, 1976)—Timmermann (2018) notes that contributive justice is meant to justify more equal allocation decisions by accounting for the social organization of work and how it affects opportunities to engage in meaningful work activities. Thus, researchers highlight a need for broader conceptualizations of distributive justice that incorporate differentiation among social groups and status hierarchies.

Interestingly, early research on equity theory, which presumes a merit principle such that the fairness of individuals' and others' outcomes are evaluated based on the proportion of inputs-to-outputs (Adams, 1965; Homans, 1961), has called for more multidimensional conceptualizations of justice (see Leventhal, 1980). Equity is considered to exist when all individuals are receiving commensurate gains relative to their contributions to an exchange (Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973). However, because equity theory treats personal characteristics, such as social position or demographic group, as inputs that warrant certain outcomes (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972), an assumption of deservingness eclipses the

consideration of what individuals are expected or able to do (Leventhal, 1976; Walster et al., 1973). While both contributive justice and distributive justice focus on fairness in allocation decisions, the former centers on the allocation of opportunities to contribute rather than on the contributions themselves. Accordingly, the contributive justice construct offers a more mid-range approach to distributive fairness by integrating the effects of social structures and/or identity into allocation processes.

Contributive justice may also be distinguished from procedural justice, or the fairness of processes that lead to decision outcomes (Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Leventhal, 1980). While some parallels between the constructs may be drawn given that procedural justice is cultivated through voice in decision-making processes, there are a few key distinctions. First, while procedural justice research highlights its importance when outcome allocations are in dispute (Thibaut & Walker, 1975), contributive justice is relevant across all work contexts. In contrast to voice, which creates the perceived potential to influence a given decision (Shapiro, 1993), contributive justice encapsulates the opportunity to largely and meaningfully participate in core work processes. Second, although procedural justice is fostered by adherence to norms of fair allocative processes, such as consistency or the uniform application of procedures across individuals and time (Leventhal, 1980), contributive justice focuses on equality in opportunities for contribution. Yet, in accordance with research that highlights the importance of justice judgment models that account for dissimilarities in recipient behavior across groups (see Leventhal, Karuza, & Fry, 1980), contributive justice also considers equality in the quality of opportunities offered. Further, while other fair process criteria may relate to issues of participatory decision-making and power-sharing (see Leventhal, 1980), such rules are relevant to the allocative process rather than to the work itself. Thus, the construct of contributive justice can be differentiated by the importance of meaningful work and focus on broader opportunity contexts in organizations.

Given that contributive justice may be indicative of one's status within a workgroup or organization, some may argue for conceptual overlap between the construct and dimensions of interactional justice, or the treatment individuals receive during the enactment of procedures (Colquitt, 2001). Specifically, as such dimensions represent the degree to which people are treated with dignity and respect in decision-making processes and offered justifications or explanations for decisions (Colquitt, 2001), it may be supposed that they are reflective of one's insider status within a workgroup or organization, similar to contributive justice. However, as interactional justice is enacted in social exchanges between an employee and their supervisor, it is considered to be more reflective of relationship quality (Masterson, Lewis, Goldman, & Taylor, 2000). Therefore, contributive justice signifies one's standing within the larger work context and relative to others in the workgroup and organization.

## Discussion

We introduce the concept of contributive justice to the management literature and articulate its operation as a potential barrier to workplace inclusion. With attention to how structural and social hierarchies influence the extent to which people are treated as organizational insiders and valued for their input into work processes, we consider access to opportunities to contribute to be a disregarded yet important driver of inclusion disparities in organizations. Building upon the philosophical concept of contributive justice, we examine the influence

of meaningful work and instrumental voice on the fairness of individuals' opportunities to contribute to organizations, and how such perceptions shape employee experiences of inclusion. Still, because more work is needed to better understand the phenomenon and its impact in and on organizations, we offer future directions for research and practice below.

### *Directions for Future Research*

Empirical research to explore contributive justice would advance our understanding of the construct, its nomological network, and its ability to predict outcomes beyond other dimensions of organizational justice. With its conceptualization as the fairness of what people are expected and able to contribute in terms of labor (Gomberg, 2007), a foundational area of investigation may be to examine what constitutes a contribution. While employees may engage their talents in a number of ways, it is likely that all activities are not viewed equally. As suggested by early work on inclusion, the degree to which an individual has influence within an organization is driven by that person's centrality within the network (see Stamper & Masterson, 2002). Following this logic, contributions made by those higher in organizational hierarchies or more directly associated with the strategy and goals of the organization will be valued more than input from others. However, because this logic assumes that the contributions of those in positions of power are more valuable to the organization, individuals who are more peripheral within the network are less likely to be given opportunities for contribution. Further, expectations for involvement and input that significantly impact the work of the organization may be lower for such individuals and/or their contributions evaluated differently. Thus, research is needed to explore how contribution is seen across employees and groups in organizations.

Beyond encouraging research to explore the concept of contribution, which is fundamental to people's inclusion experiences at work (see Shore et al., 2011), we provide a model for guiding future work on contributive justice. As we identify meaningful work and instrumental voice as antecedents to this type of justice, research might examine the unique and combinative effects of these mechanisms on the perceived fairness of opportunities to contribute. For example, as meaningfulness is comprised of both self- and other-directed dimensions (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Rosso et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2012; Yeoman, 2014), individuals may be particularly attuned to the other-directed aspects of one's role, given that they are reflective of their relational status within workgroups or organizations. Similarly, because meaningful work also characterizes having a greater purpose and/or broader impact regardless of the type of work one does (see Steger et al., 2012), this dimension may be more influential to individuals' beliefs about what they are able to contribute to organizations and, thus, to contributive justice perceptions. It might also be the case that the allocation of routine versus complex tasks impacts the perceived meaningfulness of work and, subsequently, the strength of opportunity contexts that allow employees to contribute in positive and significant ways.

As a distinction between voice mechanisms and voice behavior is drawn within the management literature, scholars might also explore their differential impact on perceived opportunities for contribution and on contributive justice. For example, while psychologically safe work environments may embolden employees to provide input into process improvements or other positive changes at work, more formal mechanisms for voice may shape their

perceptions of the fairness of contribution opportunities. Because such mechanisms are established by the organization, they may be considered to be demonstrative of its values and, therefore, fairer than informal voice mechanisms. Employees may also see them as offering more direct lines of communication to organizational leaders and, correspondingly, as more instrumental, thus enhancing contributive justice perceptions. Alternatively, contributive justice may be motivated by the perceived instrumentality of input provided than by the types of opportunities for input. Specifically, the importance of the work being done or decisions being made may be relatively more impactful to employees' perceptions than the extent to which voice is encouraged. It might also be that other indicators of value, such as affirming or showing appreciation for one's input or empowering employees to take actions on their own, may enhance perceptions of influence and contribution. Thus, research is needed to explore how the nature of contribution opportunities influences the perceived fairness of such opportunities.

Given that we introduce contributive justice as a type of organizational justice, research is needed to distinguish it from other types of justice. With a focus on the fair distribution of opportunities for contribution, contributive justice is similar to distributive justice, which exists to the degree to which such distributions are consistent with situational goals (Colquitt, 2001). Similarly, with a focus on people's involvement and input into organizational decision-making, it shares features of procedural justice (see Thibaut & Walker, 1975). However, as contributive justice incorporates differences in people's opportunities for contribution, collapsing it with other types of justice would likely mask these differences. Thus, our theorizing has implications for the development of a contributive justice measure and research to test its construct validity. Specifically, scholars may rely on our and other work on contributive justice to generate items that tap into the degree to which individuals are afforded meaningful opportunities to influence critical work processes, and distinguish this type of fairness from others. Further, studies to explore outcomes associated with contributive justice and relative to other justice constructs may help to place it in the larger organizational justice nomological network and establish its predictive validity. Such research may also provide theoretical insights into the motivations underlying perceptions of contributive justice and, thus, how this type of justice operates.

Our theorizing has implications for the study of organizational justice outcomes. As suggested in the articulation of our model, empirical examination of the relationship between contributive justice and workplace inclusion may be a good starting point given the conceptual links between the fairness of opportunities to contribute and feelings of being treated as an insider who is valued for unique contributions to a workgroup. More specifically, research to dissect the effects of contributive justice on employees' sense of uniqueness and belonging may provide insights into the extent to which this type of fairness may be useful for satisfying workgroup member needs (see Shore et al., 2011). As leader behaviors are instrumental to individuals' experiences of inclusion (see Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006), explorations of the enactment of contributive justice may also advance our understanding of how fair treatment can facilitate the full and meaningful participation of employees in organizations. Because climates for inclusion are conceptualized as environments in which policies, practices, and approaches are fairly implemented across social groups (Nishii, 2013), studies to examine the role of contributive justice in the development of such climates may offer insight into how opportunities to contribute influence employees' shared interpretations

and understandings of their experiences at work. Yet, because our model assumes the direction of causality to go from contributive justice to inclusion, exploration of alternate forms of this relationship may also be beneficial.

To further understand the predictive value of contributive justice, researchers should also consider its effects on a broader range of outcomes. As suggested above, future work to explore the how contributive justice shapes employee identity and motivation may help to explain the impact of fairness on individual performance. For example, opportunities to contribute may counteract feelings of marginalization and positively impact employees' psychological and physical health, thus strengthening their ability to navigate work environments. Such opportunities may also have spillover effects, enabling individuals to compensate for devaluing experiences outside of the workplace and to maintain more positive attitudes and behavior in other life domains. Contributive justice may also influence outcomes at higher levels of analysis. For example, the creation of opportunity contexts in which all workgroup members have the capacity to contribute to core work processes may enhance member relationships, facilitating greater trust and cohesion rather than conflict, which can often materialize in diverse work contexts. Further, it may help to generate process gains, such as improved communication, learning, and decision-making, which ultimately affect workgroup performance.

Future research on contributive justice should also examine moderating factors that impact its operation in organizational contexts. Although our theorizing is at the individual level of analysis, we expect that a variety of individual, workgroup, and organizational factors may influence its salience and effects. For example, while contributive justice is reflective of one's capacity to contribute to critical work processes, it may be shaped by individuals' preferences and personal goals. It may be that employees with a more internal locus of control or motivation to contribute are more likely to engage in voice behavior or to seek opportunities for contribution, which may subsequently amplify their perceptions of contributive justice. Similarly, those with a higher need for belongingness or greater psychological empowerment may have different expectations for opportunities for contribution, which can influence the way such opportunities are evaluated. The distribution of individual differences within workgroups may also have contextual effects on the operation of contributive justice. For example, equality of opportunity to contribute may be more salient in workgroups with less variability in employee expectations for contribution. Also, in such contexts employees may assess the fairness of contributive opportunities relative to those of others in the workgroup, rather than gauge the absolute meaningfulness of work or instrumentality of their voice. Structural factors, such as the allocation of routine versus complex tasks, availability of voice mechanisms, degree of independence, and other features of work design may also impact the creation of opportunity contexts and, hence, the formation of contributive justice perceptions. Thus, future research to expand our proposed model can help to clarify and advance what we know about the operation and effects of contributive justice in organizations.

### *Directions for Management Practice*

Our articulation of contributive justice has several practical implications. In general, we offer guidance on how to dismantle systems of disadvantage based on opportunity and create fairer opportunity structures within organizations. First, to identify systemic inequalities in access to opportunity, human resource managers might pinpoint status hierarchies within organizations



and explore how the distribution of meaningful work and instrumental voice may be correlated. For example, while an organization may be diverse in terms of the representation of various groups within the workforce, such heterogeneity may be concentrated in certain places. Take, for instance, the food service industry, which may be characterized by gender and racial diversity although it tends to be within entry-level and/or lower-paying roles. With more routine work or fewer opportunities to affect change within the organization, contributive justice may be lower for members of specific demographic groups. As this may negatively impact the engagement, attitudes, and behaviors of such groups, human resource leaders should audit their organization's talent management systems to ensure fairness in terms of employees' opportunities for meaningful contribution to strategic and operational goals.

Our conceptualization of contributive justice also suggests that human resource leaders may enhance employee experiences of inclusion by integrating opportunities for contribution into work design. More specifically, by integrating aspects of meaningfulness into work roles regardless of where they fall in the structural hierarchy of the organizations, they may be able to broaden employees' capacity for contribution and, subsequently, their sense of contributive justice. For example, highlighting how each role links to the organization's strategy may enhance employees' feelings of being involved in work that has broader significance and contributes to goal achievement. Similarly, encouraging employees to consider how their work furthers career development or helps to situate them for other positions in the organization may enhance their experiences of being involved in work with personal significance and that drives personal growth. Overall, such opportunities for the betterment of self and the larger organization may help both to strengthen employee perceptions of the meaningfulness of their work as well as their capacity to influence meaningful change.

Organizations may also facilitate the development of contributive justice climates by creating environments in which employees have opportunities to engage in voice behavior. Formal mechanisms that allow for employee input, such as task forces, suggestion systems, quality circles, and town hall meetings with organizational leaders, may help to facilitate upward communication and employee engagement in strategic issues. More informal mechanisms, such as open-door policies, may also be effective for employees to feel like they have opportunities for their voices to be heard and to influence the functioning and success of organizations. To drive self-initiated voice behavior among employees, is also important for leaders to create environments in which people feel psychologically safe to offer their ideas, especially when such ideas may be critical or unpopular. Accordingly, training managers to routinely ask employees for their perspectives and provide different forums in which they can do so may help both to enhance manager receptivity to employee voice and lower the perceived risks of engaging in voice behavior among employees. As a result, climates for contributive justice, in which employees consider both what they are expected to contribute *and* what they are able to contribute, may develop, thus increasing the likelihood that such contributions will continue in the future.


As organizations work to ensure that all employees have access to opportunities for meaningful contribution, it is also important that they ensure fairness in the evaluation of contribution. Given the potential for performance expectations to vary across employee groups based on status characteristics, it is important that managers standardize their expectations. For example, establishing a set of performance goals that are consistent with an organization's values and can be demonstrated regardless of job level—such as innovation or collaboration


—may help to establish uniformity in expectancies for contribution. Similarly, periodic review of performance goals within job categories or roles may help to safeguard against variability in expectations and, subsequently, contributive inequalities in employees' abilities to influence critical work processes and positive change. Beyond such leadership actions, codifying what contribution entails across the enterprise (e.g., measurable improvements to an organization and its processes) and establishing contribution metrics (e.g., recommends innovative solutions for change, suggests process improvements, identifies opportunities for growth) may help to enable greater standardization in understandings of contribution throughout the organization and, subsequently, in the evaluation of such behavior. Further, focusing evaluation and reward systems on demonstrated contribution may be effective for destabilizing social hierarchies within talent management systems and ensuring equal opportunity for contribution throughout workforces.

## Conclusion

While scholars and practitioners have highlighted inclusion as a strategy for addressing inequalities across visible dimensions of diversity in organizations, it may also reveal critical insights into a hidden source of disadvantage. Beyond whether an individual *feels* like a full and meaningful contributor to an organization's critical work processes is the issue of whether that person has opportunities to actually be able do so. As such, a focus on equality of opportunity to contribute in terms of significant opportunities to fully use one's talents and skills to positively impact critical work processes, or contributive justice, may advance our thinking about what inclusion truly means and how to create and maintain more inclusive work environments. Through greater exploration of those work experiences that allow individuals to fully and meaningfully impact organizational change, we can gain insight into what it means to really be included. Further, through greater consideration of how social structures generate inequalities in employees' capacities for participating in and advancing the mission, strategy, and goals of organizations, we can gain insight into how diversity can be better leveraged to enhance organizational functioning and performance. Overall, by greater discovery and scrutiny of systemic factors that generate inequalities in what people can do, we as a field may have an opportunity to move closer to understanding how to dismantle those structures to ensure greater equality in what people can actually achieve.

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