Abstract

Purpose – This article examines a climate for inclusion through the lens of organizational justice. We argue that open interpersonal contacts, the fair treatment of gender-diverse employees, and inclusive decision-making processes in the promotion of equitable employment practices are foundational for shaping the climate for inclusion.

Design/methodology/approach – Qualitative data were collected from multi sources: focus groups with female employees (N = 20) and interviews with male and female managers (N = 8).

Findings – In examining the similarities and differences between employees’ and managers’ perspectives, the findings revealed that, in all dimensions of a climate for inclusion, employees had more negative justice concerns than did managers, while managers and employees had similar views on some aspects of employment practices.

Research limitations/implications – This study was conducted within one university setting; therefore, the findings may not be applicable to other industries.

Practical implications – This study offers managerial implications that can be developed to promote the climate for inclusion in organizations.

Social implications – In order to create a fair and equitable workplace, all employees should be able to actively participate in decision-making processes and share suggestions for contextualized and fair employment practices.

Originality/value – Drawing the group-value model, this study advocates the importance of justice-based organizational practices in building an inclusive organization.

Keywords Inclusion, Diversity, Organizational justice, Women, Gender, Voice

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Organizations are increasingly aware of the need to incorporate inclusive practices to promote organizational inclusion and equitable employment practices for socially marginalized groups. Yet, previous research consistently found that women were often discriminated against and tended to receive fewer privileges at work, as compared to historically majority members such as white men (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011; DiTomaso et al., 2007; Triana et al., 2015). Ways of developing inclusive organizations should be of great interest to organizations worldwide, given that millions of people suffer from discrimination in the workplace (International Labour Organization, 2019), for example, in the US (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2018) and Australia (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018). Therefore, ensuring that women are provided with an inclusive work environment is essential for organizational development.

A climate for inclusion is defined as an approach to eliminate “relational sources of bias by ensuring that identity group status is unrelated to access to resources, creating expectations and opportunities for heterogeneous individuals to establish personalized cross-cutting ties, and integrating ideas across boundaries in joint problem solving” (Nishii, 2013, p. 1754). Our
study aims to unpack how to enhance a climate for inclusion by promoting women’ voices through respect and fairness in human resource (HR) practices, interpersonal encounters, and inclusive decision-making processes. In an inclusive work environment, diverse employees are valued for who they are, treated fairly, and included in decision-making processes, and therefore, negative impacts of demographic diversity, such as stereotypes, conflict, turnover and interpersonal bias, could be eliminated (Nishii, 2013). Inclusive organizations can lead to positive employee attitudes such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction and job retention (Mor Barak, 2000).

In the higher education sector, the literature has shown evidence for the lack of advancement, representation and involvement of women in senior positions (c.f., Burke and Mattis, 2007). Inequities for women’s representation and inclusion in the higher education sector have been identified in multiple domains such as recruitment, promotion, leadership and retention, indicating a need for integrating their voice in the transformation of organizational mind-sets and practices (Bilimoria et al., 2008). More specifically, women’s voice is particularly important to systematically transform organizational structures, processes, work practices, and mental models of gender inequity in the higher education sector (Bilimoria et al., 2008). However, to date little research has been done to examine climate for inclusion through the lens of organizational justice, and how these perceptions might influence the voice of women. Understanding justice and climate for inclusion from both employees’ and managers’ perspectives is critical to improving strategies for greater equitable employment practices.

This paper examines climate for inclusion through women employees and managers’ varied justice perceptions. In doing so, we explore the influence of a person’s demographic background on their justice perspective on climate for inclusion, and suggest strategies to promote inclusion in organizations. We integrate dimensions of climate for inclusion to argue that equitable employment practices are evident when women employees have opportunities to voice through respectful interpersonal encounters and inclusive decision-making processes. Voice behavior is defined as the expression of constructive change-oriented ideas and suggestions, which are intended to improve the situation or avoid harmful consequence for organizations (LePine and Van Dyne, 2001; Ng and Feldman, 2012). Further, we argue that employees’ justice perceptions lay a strong foundation for organizations to build an inclusive work environment. Thus, when women are not granted voice opportunities in interpersonal encounters with managers and in the decision-making processes, diversity management and inclusion remain mere rhetoric. We answer two research questions:

(1) What are female employees’ and managers’ perceptions of climate for inclusion through the lens of organizational justice?

(2) How might female employees’ and managers’ perceptions of climate for inclusion influence employee voice?

This paper contributes to the literature in three ways. First, we extend the literature by examining climate for inclusion from the lens of justice perceptions from multi sources: female employees, and female and male managers from diverse demographic backgrounds. Prior research often examined the topic from a single source (Le et al., 2018; Le et al., 2016), which might limit our understanding of the variations of justice perceptions from managers and employees, and warrant fresh perspectives on how climate for inclusion can be enhanced. It is likely that if managers have similar views to employees on most of dimensions of climate for inclusion, the organization is more just and employees feel more comfortable to voice. Second, this paper highlights the critical role of shared justice perceptions between female employees and managers and in decision-making processes in building a climate for inclusion.
in organizations. To date, extant research has not explored in detail why justice perceptions are critical in developing the climate for inclusion. Finally, this study provides practical implications on how to foster climate for inclusion in ways that minimize the potential negative impacts of the workforce diversity.

**Theoretical backgrounds**

*Diversity and inclusion*

Diversity and inclusion have attracted attention globally among researchers and HR practitioners (Healy and Oikelome, 2007; Scott et al., 2011). Nishii (2013) highlighted that diversity rhetoric has shifted its focus to inclusion as a new approach to managing workforce diversity, aiming at reducing negative impacts of demographic diversity (e.g. conflict and turnover). Much of the literature emphasizes diversity management as a means of gaining competitive business advantage, with little attention given to inclusion, justice and improvement (Roberson and Stevens, 2006). Managing diversity means that organizations should create inclusive workplaces, where every employee can participate and have their voice in organizational decision-making processes (Fujimoto and Härtel, 2017). What is missing in the current literature is how to bridge the gap between management responsibility and diversity management to develop the relational context of workplace diversity free from conflict and discrimination.

The term *inclusion* refers to the extent to which an employee perceives that s/he is accepted by other colleagues as an insider in a workplace (Pelled et al., 1999, p. 1014). Inclusion also means individuals have inputs in decision-making processes, can access resources and information, and feel valued in work groups (Le et al., 2018; Mor Barak and Cherin, 1998; Roberson, 2006). Research provides evidence that employees’ perceptions of being included in organizational procedures influence various employee attitudes and behaviors, such as employees’ sense of identity and positive social interaction at work (Shore et al., 2011), positive justice perceptions and well-being (Le et al., 2018). At the organizational level, inclusion can be shown in the form of profit and organizational performance (Sabharwal, 2014). The emphasis on inclusion recognizes that organizations could reduce problems associated with demographic diversity and enhance its potential benefits by proactively creating and maintaining inclusive work environments (Holvino et al., 2004; Nishii, 2013; Shore et al., 2011).

Positive perceptions of inclusion at work are important for diverse employees and organizations. Historically marginalized employees often reported negative experiences at work, including discrimination and less supportive work environments (Avery et al., 2007; Deitch et al., 2003). Overall, their voice has been “unheard” in organizations (Bell et al., 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2015). For example, in the higher education sector, there are intergroup tensions between genders and negative emotions (Gappa et al., 2007), leading to frustration and lower levels of satisfaction. Women’s low satisfaction was found to be associated with their relationships with senior faculty members (Ponjuan et al., 2011).

Past studies have reported little voice of women in relation to executing flexible work arrangement and managing competing workloads in the higher education sector (Donnelly et al., 2012). Lack of voice has also been shown in low wage immigrant women workers with poor English language skills (Chun et al., 2013). Furthermore, women often required more professional development than men to voice their recommendations and opinions about work issues (Wang et al., 2014). Broadbridge and Simpson (2011) highlighted the importance of incorporating women’s gendered experiences, interests, and values in determining career development opportunities with an aim of achieving gender justice, and acknowledging women’s different ways of speaking, managing and negotiating from men to solve work problems.
Justice perceptions align well with the concept of inclusion. The theoretical perspective of a group-value or relational model of authority (Tyler, 1989) can explain the link between justice perceptions and inclusion in workplaces. The group-value model demonstrates that, as people have strong needs to belong and socialize, group membership is critical to signify that they are valued and treated well in groups. Tyler (1989) argues for the link between procedural justice and inclusion, such that fair procedures are usually perceived as symbolic messages of group inclusion where members are valued for who they are, whereas unfair procedures tend to be perceived as symbolic messages of being excluded from, or rejected by, a group. Based upon the relational model of authority, when employees are given opportunities to improve fairness of HR policies and practices, they perceive that they are respected, included, and valued in workgroups.

Despite the benefits of workplace inclusion, little attention has been given to how employees from diverse social identity groups can have greater participation in the organizational decision-making processes that affect their work outcomes (Fujimoto and Härtel, 2017). Inclusive organizations would reduce negative attitudes and behaviors such as isolation, stress, low trust, high levels of conflict, and low social integration (Nishii, 2013). We argue that to optimize the potential benefits of diversity and reduce its adverse impacts, perceptions of organizational justice should be an integral part of work processes to systematically develop HR practices that are free from bias and discrimination.

Climate for inclusion and justice
Climate for inclusion has three dimensions. The first dimension is the foundation of equitable employment practices, which focuses on perceptions of fairness in organizational processes and HR practices towards all members, regardless of their identity group membership, and ensuring that employees are provided with a safe environment to voice (Nishii, 2013). It is also determined by the extent to which employees perceive the distribution of resources correlates with demographically based statuses in organizations. The second dimension is integration of differences, which refers to the extent to which employees can be their “true” selves. This dimension emphasizes personalized contacts that employees can enact as individuals and/or in group identities without the need to assimilate their expression into the values and expectation of majority groups. The third dimension is inclusion in decision making, which refers to the extent to which diverse employees’ inputs were actively sought in the decision-making processes, even if they might disrupt the status quo (Mor Barak et al., 1998). Such democratic decision-making processes are important for the reduction of stereotype and bias (Fujimoto and Härtel, 2017).

We explore the nuances of interrelationships between the climate for inclusion and the organizational justice climate in the creation of an inclusive organization. In justice literature, perceptions of justice are categorized as: (1) procedural justice (Thibaut and Walker, 1975); (2) distributive justice (Adams, 1965); and (3) interactional justice (Bies and Moag, 1986). Briefly, procedural justice refers to perceived fairness about the design of formal HR decision-making processes, policies and practices, which are used to determine employees’ work outcomes, such as promotions and pay (Thibaut and Walker, 1975). Distributive justice refers to perceived justice about employees’ work outcomes in relation to their work contributions (Adams, 1965). Interactional justice refers to perceived justice about the quality of interactions that employees have with authorities (Bies and Moag, 1986).

Procedural and distributive justice have a clear link with the foundation of equitable employment practices, as they focus on HR process and outcomes, while procedural justice has a link with inclusion in decision making through the concept of voice. Although integration of differences is much broader than interactional justice, both concepts share the aspect of “interpersonal integration” among people and the fair treatment of employees (Nishii, 2013, p.
The fairness of employment practices is argued to be important to improve other two dimensions of a climate for inclusion (Nishii, 2013).

LePine and Van Dyne (2001) see voice as a form of proactive behavior that encompasses behavior that promotes the organization and has a beneficial impact on overall organizational operations and effectiveness. By expressing voice, employees have opportunities to raise their concerns with the managers in an open dialogue to influence managerial decision-making process (Holland et al., 2013, p. 3149). Therefore, open communications between managers and employees play a key role in encouraging employee involvement and participation in the workplace processes, as well as fostering levels of trust between managers and employees (Fujimoto and Härtel, 2017; Tzafrir et al., 2004). Voice behavior is seen as vital and critical to organizational performance and survival (Qin et al., 2014). Therefore, proactive measures for hearing employees’ voices in relation to work practices are an important component of the climate for inclusion.

Justice scholars argue that there is no absolute justice – only justice in comparison with others (Shepelak and Alwin, 1986). Those “others” can be another person, group, or even one’s achievements (Major, 1994), male and female employees, or white and non-white employees. The system justification theory argues that lower-status groups (i.e. minority members) in organizations and society tend to justify the system of inequality, accepting the status quo as what they deserve (DiTomaso et al., 2007). Such justification is partly due to lower-status groups’ hesitation to risk challenging the system (Jost et al., 2004). The perceptions of those with lower statuses further legitimize the perceptions of those with higher statuses, allowing them to feel more entitled to their resources and good treatment (DiTomaso et al., 2007). Research demonstrates that organizational diversity initiatives are most effective if managers can address the sources of inequality (DiTomaso et al., 2007; Kalev et al., 2006). We posit that the failure to consider different social groups’ justice perceptions is a major cause of inequality and a low climate for inclusion in every dimension.

**Research methods**

*Participants and procedures*

We selected participants from a large higher education institution in Australia to examine female employees’ perceptions of climate for inclusion through the lens of organizational justice. As we aimed to study climate for inclusion, this selected institution had employees from an array of gender-diverse groups. In 2018, this organization had about 3,800 employees, with 55% women, 23% born outside Australia, and about 20% of staff who spoke a language other than English at home. In following the required ethical procedures, all information on the organization and participants have been removed from the data.

The data for this study were collected from multi sources: managers and employees (both faculty and professional staff members), on a voluntary basis. We conducted six focus group (FG) sessions with female employees from diverse cultural backgrounds, including white (N = 15), and non-white (N = 5) female employees (Total = 20 people). Participants had an option to not indicate their cultural backgrounds, thus, we are unable to identify how many women came from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. The FG sessions examined the perceptions of organizational justice and climate for inclusion using the framework of Nishii (2013). FG was an appropriate research method, as it provided us with “direct and immediate evidence about similarities and differences in participants’ opinions and experiences” (Cavana et al., 2001, p. 154). Employees were invited via email to participate in the FGs. Participants had to work at the University for at least one year so that they could share their experiences in relation to the topic. The focus groups were approximately 1.5–2.5 h.

We conducted eight face-to-face semi-structured interviews with senior managers (four white men and four white women); the interviews were about one hour. To participate,
senior managers had to be a key decision maker for more than one year, so that they had the authority to influence HR policies and practices in their respective work units. As a result of their restricted schedule, semi-structured interviews were appropriate to allow for more in-depth, private and open dialogues. All FGs and interviews were audio recorded, and transcribed with assurance that no personal informational would be revealed in any form.

In the FG and interview sessions, we examined participants’ perceptions on climate for inclusion with particular focus on (1) perceptions on the organization’s procedures and equal employment practices; (2) how HR practices (e.g. pay, promotion, performance review and leave) were distributed; (3) inclusion in decision making process; and (4) how employees’ demographic differences were valued in this organization. The questions were pilotsed with normal staff to make sure that the meaning was clear. The above discussion areas allowed us to identify the congruency and incongruency in managers’ and employees’ perceptions, as demonstrated in Table 1.

Data analysis
Line-by-line coding, using open-coding technique (Charmaz, 2006), was employed to identify emerging themes – initial coding encompassed themes covering both negative and positive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of inclusion climate</th>
<th>Defined concept</th>
<th>Congruency or incongruency in managers’ and employees’ perceptions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Equitable employment practices</td>
<td>(1) Fairness in performance review, promotion, professional development</td>
<td>(1) Congruency in annual performance review</td>
<td>(1) Poor annual review process</td>
<td>(1) Poor annual review process</td>
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<td>(2) Provision of safe environments for employees to voice</td>
<td>(2) Incongruency in advancement, rewards, promotion and professional development opportunities</td>
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<td>Integration of differences</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(2) Work-life balance</td>
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<td>(2) Embraced and mindful of team differences</td>
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<td>(3) Authentic selves</td>
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<td>Inclusion in Decision Making</td>
<td>(1) Employees input actively sought</td>
<td>(1) Incongruency in incorporating women’s voice and actively participating in decision-making process</td>
<td>(1) Lack of awareness that employees were not engaged in decision-making process</td>
<td>(1) Limited to no opportunities for women to voice opinions in decision-making process</td>
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<td>(2) Incorporating employee voice</td>
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Table 1. Congruency or incongruency in managers’ and employees’ perceptions
justice perceptions, such as performance review, merit-based rewards, career advancement opportunities, fair distribution of workload, and interpersonal relations. After further reiteration and analysis of the data, the final coding was divided into three dimensions of climate for inclusion to identify differences and similarities. The analysis meets key requirements for qualitative studies as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The consensus in themes and subthemes was reached among researchers. We will present our findings in relation to three dimensions of climate for inclusion among managers and female employees. Figure 1 presents an organizational justice and climate for inclusion framework.

Findings

Foundation of equitable employment practices

The findings showed that gender issues in the workplace were a recurring conversation. Particularly, HR practices concerning performance review, rewards, and promotability were at the forefront.

Performance review

There was an overall consensus from both managers and employees that the performance appraisal process was unfair and lacked context. The annual performance review, which was completed by both the manager and employee, shed light on the employees' ability to achieve certain work outcomes. However, employees argued that this process did not provide an outlet to express concerns such as access to resources or lack thereof in order to perform tasks:

I never ever get asked if there's anything they could do to assist me or any issues I'm having in my professional role. At my performance review that question has never ever been asked, it's assumed that I have the knowledge and contacts to fix my own hassles... (FG4)

As illustrated in this comment, performance was solely evaluated based upon whether specific objectives were achieved, with no emphasis given to the resources needed to perform the job. Employees felt that the performance review process provided a limited snapshot of their overall contribution to the organization, leading to an unfair evaluation of their performance.

Furthermore, managers shared concerns that the review process was partial. Some managers did not directly speak about how they managed the unfair performance review process; rather they stated that it was a University problem; as one said:

I do not think the performance review process is the best model for University. I think it can be quite prescriptive in terms of what is and is not an outstanding performance. For me an outstanding performance could be somebody who’s really struggled to get up to a certain level, but has just been so determined and worked so hard and made it. (M. T., female manager)

The performance review process lacked contextual objectivity, which provided managers with a significant amount of discretion in evaluating their employees. With no contextual sensitivity and objective measures to follow, managers did not have a consistent process through which to evaluate their employees.

Rewards, promotion and professional development

Employees expressed that they were not given clear guidelines on rewards and bonus pays. For example, market loading was used to reward outstanding performance, but the criteria were not clearly given to employees, and the outcome derived from the subjective judgments of managers:
Inclusion in Decision Making
The extent to which women’s views were actively sought in a consultation process and have their voice considered in the decision-making processes.

Foundation for Equitable Employment Practices
The women’s perceptions of fairness in organizational processes, HR practices, and diversity-specific practices (i.e., pay, promotion, performance review) to all members regardless of their identity group membership.

Interactional Justice:
e.g., the respectable interaction that people receive from authorities

Procedural Justice:
e.g., performance review process and safe ways to voice

Distributive Justice:
e.g., rewards, advancement, promotion, quota system

Integration of Differences
The extent to which women can engage in personalized contact with managers to enact whole selves or core aspects of their self-concept and/or multiple identities.

Voice of Women
The extent to which women can share their justice perceptions

Inclusion in Decision Making
The extent to which women’s views were actively sought in a consultation process and have their voice considered in the decision-making processes.
I think the discretion is in their use of market loadings, which are available for the University, where they could make judgements themselves that a female or somebody of a different nationality, or any other equity group that we look at, is perhaps not as strong and give a different remuneration, by use of those market loadings. (FG1)

One manager also expressed concern about there being a quota in the number of employees who would be rewarded additional pay based upon receiving outstanding performance reviews.

... it seems that it’s a discretionary power of the director of the division whether or not to grant an award, regardless of what I have classified them as in their review. For example this year I gave one of my staff an outstanding review and I believe she was not rewarded at all, even though I’d recommended some financial bonus. My understanding is it comes back to the divisional budget and how much is set aside and who the director wants to give that to. (J. C., male manager)

As shown in this quote, even if the employees performed at an exceptional level, they might not be equally recognized for their contribution, as it is dependent on the budget and upper level managers. While many managers criticized the performance review system, only a couple of them spoke about the action they took to try and reconcile the issue. For example, one manager compensated his employees indirectly via gift cards. Although this did not come close to solving the problem, it helped employees to feel appreciated by their managers. Another manager indicated that employees were compensated based upon their performance and merit:

... so if you get a team together who works well together and everyone puts in a lot of work, then you do want them to feel rewarded for helping with the other initiatives apart from their normal roles. (G. P., male manager)

In relation to career advancement opportunities, some women employees felt the process was unfair and not transparent, due to their gender background:

Selection for higher duties or responsibilities; I have no visibility of that at all. It just happens and constantly irritates me. Promotion and rewards ... I think the whole thing’s a joke without any transparency and any acknowledgement. Career progression I see as a negative but probably more as a woman. (FG4)

However, some managers expressed the lack of confidence that was often seen in women employees, resulting in much fewer opportunities of advancement:

If you [women] do not naturally have that confidence or that self-esteem, and I think especially in women, you’re not going to put yourself out there and you may not get promoted as a result because you have things that are holding you back. (M. T., female manager).

Professional development opportunities were allocated unfairly as the participant was a part-time employee (common employment for women):

... in terms of professional development, I just do not know what the protocol is. Some people seem to get fabulous opportunities to go off and do intensive, which is what I want to do, because it’s very hard for me to commit on-going to one day a week or whatever, ... But I see other people having these opportunities to go off and do a week-long intensive program. And I think “I want to do that.” It’s very expensive, I know that. And I have raised it, and been told “No, sorry, there’s not enough money in the budget this year.” (FG2)

Safe environment to voice
One aspect of this dimension is whether women employees were provided a safe environment to voice their concerns. An employee expressed her discomfort to voice her work-related issues. Although the University had an active complaint department within Human
Resources, there was a concern that the department had a greater interest in protecting the reputation of the organization rather than in the issues expressed by the employees. The complaint department was perceived as ineffective in dealing with interpersonal issues such as respect and bullying.

...I’m speaking frankly here, I may as well say what I’m thinking, but Human Resource [Department] would be the last place I would go if I had a bullying problem. If I felt, personally, like, something was happening to me, I have no confidence in their ability to help... Because... I know that it’s very much representing [this organization], not the individual. (FG2)

Consequently, some women employees stated that they have experienced or witnessed bullying in the workplace; however, many of these complaints were not managed in an effective manner, so remained unresolved. Separately, some employees felt that voicing their concerns could be perceived as a sign of weakness; hence, rather than challenge perceived inequities, they remained silent: “But when you do [speak up] at times, it’s almost perceived like it’s you’re whining or that it’s a sign of weakness.” (FG5)

Other HR practices
Separately, demographic differences were central as they related to specific HR policies and practices with regard to leave entitlements. For example, despite there being written policies to advocate for leave entitlement, women employees were hesitant to utilize it, at risk of being overlooked for promotion and advancement. As within any institution, there are implicit rules that one has to learn in order to navigate the political and organizational landscape. Women employees expressed that although the University does a favorable job in instituting policies such as flextime and maternity leave, they often felt that they had to overcompensate for not being physically present.

...I overcompensate. And I know other people who are in a similar position with young children or whatever do. Because, if you do need to have that flexibility, you might take one day, but you’re probably going to give back two in the overtime that you do to make up, so that you are not overlooked. (FG2)

Women perceived that they were penalized for utilizing flexible time or paid time off by being overlooked for special projects or promotions. Consequently, women would overcompensate by working longer hours at home to provide evidence of their contributions.

Overall, there were more negative views from employees than from managers related to the foundation of equitable employment practices. The implication is that those negative experiences of HR practices attenuate an inclusive climate in this organization.

Inclusion in decision-making
Inclusion in decision making was determined by the extent to which diverse employees’ input was actively sought, considered and valued in the decision-making process (Nishii, 2013). While complementing the foundation of equitable employment practices, this dimension highlights whether employees were willing to voice concerns and their voice was heard.

Opportunities and willingness to voice
A common thread that emerged regarding employee’s concerns was a lack of consultation and information, and of voice opportunities provided for them to make important decisions. For example, one Faculty member said that due to her lower status, her voice was not sought in certain processes such as recruitment and selection, which mainly involved senior Faculties:
I’m not part of that process. . . . The lower you are down the food chain, the less you have opportunity to be involved in recruitment and interviewing, and decision making. . . . You know, you have these panels of five people, and the people who are probably most likely to contribute to a very informative way of recruitment are the people who are going to have to work with these people, yet, they’re not part of the process. (FG2)

Another female faculty mentioned favoritism between men versus women, and potential adverse consequences for her career, which discouraged her to voice:

... we do actually have a chance to voice, we can actually say, it mightn’t do us any good in the short-term doing that, but in the long-term it probably does not damage your career too much, speaking out about it, but whether anything will actually happen is a different issue. (FG3)

This quote demonstrates that there was a prevalent norm that existed within the organizational culture. That is, employee voice, particularly of women, was either unheard or employees were fearful of a negative consequence. As a result, women employees had negative justice perceptions, felt undervalued, and were unwilling to voice.

Unfair workload allocation
Workload allocation appeared to be a controversial matter among managers and employees in this study. Middle managers expressed worries about the organizational budget, while employees were concerned about being overloaded. Therefore, employees’ inputs were essential in the workload allocation process, because unfair workload directly impacted their work outcomes and well-being. One employee expressed voicing her concern for the workload issues, but it was simply disregarded by her manager:

... I was thinking, some of the conversation just gets shut down. So, if you challenge the workload assumptions, you get told well, at least we’ve got one. We did not have one before. Yeah, right. We’ve got one, but it’s still not working. Let’s have a conversation about it. And why is not it working? (FG2)

The above quote implies that employee voice was “shut down” or unheard, and the manager was not willing to take employees’ insights into account in order to redefine work practices. Different from employees’ perceptions, managers indicated that employees within his team had opportunities to have inputs in some processes. For example:

Certainly, within my team . . . the staff themselves very much have an input into their performance objectives, . . . so in that way they’re able to feed into the performance process and have some input into what they can realistically achieve . . . (J. C., male manager)

Communication about the process
In relation to communication, employees reported negative perceptions on how they were not informed about certain practices within their respective units, preventing them from having an input in the decision-making processes:

Here it’s almost like I have to beg for certain information that’s going to help me do my job. (FG5)

So you have to go around and hunt people because they would not think to necessarily let you know of certain elements that can affect your decisions and the way you go about doing certain things. (FG5)

Furthermore, participants frequently mentioned a lack of employees’ insights in decision-making processes, in the form of being “shut out” or just simply not informed. One female staff member mentioned:

The communication processes around major organizational change are very poor. . . . I would love to see a little bit more of a human element that would accompany that kind of thing. But it always has
felt very cold, closed door. You know, the words might be saying, “You can talk to us about any concerns you have” but sometimes...the behaviors are quite different. (FG2)

In contrast, a manager stated that he encouraged his staff to voice their concerns, although the outcome might not be satisfactory for the employee:

Interesting that I’ve just had someone resign because they were dissatisfied, had worked here... for about six years, at the University for 11 [years]. They were dissatisfied with the fact that they could not get an upgrade from their current position... at HEW five, to HEW six. Now that person came to me and talked about it, and I encourage any of my staff to do that. I encourage them because I think it is a collaborative process... to come to some agreement... (D. T., male manager)

Overall, the findings from employees and managers were not congruent in this theme. That is, employees believed that they were not included in the decision-making processes and if there were opportunities, their voice might not be valued, while managers stated that they encouraged employees to voice, or they did not mention voice at all.

Integration of differences
Integration of differences was determined by how well employees were valued and appreciated for their demographic differences, and whether employees felt respected and had the capacity to reveal their authentic selves and a sense of work-life balance (Nishii, 2013).

The intersection of gender and other demographic variables seems to heighten the lack of women’s voice in the workplace. Specifically, female employees felt that they were not valued due to their demographic backgrounds, either because of their gender, race, disabilities, age or a combination of some or all those demographic characteristics, heightening their undervalued experiences of intersectionality being identified as a woman, racial minority and/or a person with a disability. These perceptions were often tied with equitability of employment practices. For example, a female faculty member mentioned that male colleagues received better workload allocation than women, being offered more research than teaching opportunities:

There’s still a tendency to sort of, in a nutshell, favor the blokes for research and sort of push the teaching towards women.... (FG3)

Another white female employee believed that racial differences were not appreciated and valued in their work units, resulting in majority group members receiving more favors and advantages:

...I would dare say that when you have 100 applicants for a position, you are probably more likely to recruit people with Anglo Saxon sounding names than people who do not have those names, if that makes any sense? (FG5)

Similarly, another female racial minority employee commented:

...I do not get asked along the way when there’s an opportunity coming up, because they did not ask “would you like to consider it?”... I think it’s more because I’m not [an] Anglo Saxon. (FG5)

Similarly, a female employee with disabilities felt that she was not a valued member of the organization, and her ideas were sadly not considered, due to an array of demographic characteristics:

I did [voice] at a school meeting; I talked about inclusion and discussion and people having visibility of what was going on and that was nodded and moving right along...We have school committees and nothing comes out of it. We do not hear what’s going on and I do not think this is a disability issue. I just think it’s a very poor management issue. But with me, I think there’s a gender, an age and disability issue. You become invisible as an older woman... (FG4)
Nevertheless, several racial-minority female employees did not experience unfavorable differences at work. They felt that their differences were respected in their work unit. It was explained that their work unit was sufficiently culturally and racially diverse, so the participants were not minority members:

... it's very multicultural and especially, I think in IT and in engineering—these kinds of disciplines—there is lots of multicultural environment probably more than in some other schools, so I felt comfortable. (FG6)

However, no specific evidence was raised as to how much those demographic differences were valued, shared and learned within their work unit. It seems that if the work unit had many more minority members than majority members (i.e. White), minority employees would have positive perceptions regarding integration of differences.

Less surprising, many of the managers did not speak of any critical issues regarding whether employees from all demographic backgrounds or gender were valued or not. As expected, they perceived integration of differences to be favorable, noting that staff were treated with respect regardless of their gender; as one said:

We as a team do not have a problem with that [discrimination], we're lucky that we're a team that gets on well together, of course from time to time there's conflict between different members of the team, but I think it comes down to me having to set an example for them and expecting them to treat each other the same way as I treat them; so far we have not had an issue. (J. C., male manager)

As can be seen from this theme, the perceptions of integration of differences differed between employees and the managers.

Discussion and implications

Discussion
This paper examines climate for inclusion in the workplace through the lens of managers’ and female employees’ perspectives of organizational justice. In examining the three dimensions of inclusion, we identified the different perceptions between employees and managers to answer the two research questions.

In relation to the first research question, “What are female employees’ and managers’ perceptions of climate for inclusion through the lens of organizational justice?” we found that managers’ perspectives differed from female employees’ perspectives in all three dimensions of climate for inclusion. Contrary to the female employees’ views in the FGs of many more negative justice experiences in fair employment practices, involvement in decision-making processes, and the integration of differences, managers tended to emphasize positive justice experiences, with only a few negative perceptions regarding the performance review process. Notably, only two female managers (out of four) shared concerns about disadvantages for female employees in relation to barriers to promotions, which were partially attributed to the women’s own lack of confidence and self-esteem.

The above perceptions of managers aligned with gender norm expectations. Confidence can be perceived as being assertive and assured, characteristics often attributed to a manager. Research shows that women are often evaluated against a “masculine” standard of leadership, which results in lower rewards than their male counterparts (Braun et al., 2017). That is, when women behave in ways that are contradicting gender norms, they are perceived as unfeminine. Whereas, if women behave in a manner that is consistent with gender stereotypes, they are seen as less competent. Thus, this double bind can be perceived as one of the many barriers to women’s career advancement (Shapiro et al., 2008).

In relation to the second research question, “how might female employees’ and managers’ perceptions of climate for inclusion influence employee voice?”, we found that women’s voices were not heard, although research indicates that hearing the voice of...
women is critical to systematically transforming organizational structures, processes, work practices, and mental models of inequity in the higher education sector (Bilimoria et al., 2008). Specifically, some employees were reluctant to speak up about unfavorable work practices, whereas others felt that expressing voice did not provide a different outcome; hence, women tended to accept the status quo, as explained by system justification theory (DiTomaso et al., 2007).

In contrast, managers did not mention any issues regarding voice, while one believed that female employees were encouraged to voice and their views were taken into account. These findings were explained by empirical evidence, as employees who make their opinions/views heard can potentially “put stress on existing interpersonal relationships” and “employers risk being seen as troublemakers who disrupt the status quo” (Ng and Feldman, 2012, p. 217). Women often lacked opportunities to express voice, or if they had opportunities, their voice was ignored, suppressed or missing in the organizational decision-making processes (Wilkinson et al., 2015). Their voice was not heard in relation to executing flexible work arrangements and managing their work demands in the higher education sector (Donnelly et al., 2012). Consequently, they limit their use of voice to avoid potential risk, energy, cost, and time involved (Detert and Burris, 2007; Ng and Feldman, 2012). Discrepancies in managerial and employee perspectives in this study provide evidence that female employees’ inputs into the decision-making processes were limited.

Theoretical and practical implications
This paper contributes to the inclusion and organizational justice literature in a substantive way. The first contribution is that we used the theoretical perspective of group-value or relational model of authority (Tyler, 1989) and multiple sources of data to argue that justice-based organizational practices make a critical foundation to building a climate for inclusion, where organizational procedures and practices are fairly implemented and discussed with all employees, making sure that employees with lower statuses are included in the key decision-making processes and their voice is heard. This paper illustrates the importance of giving opportunities for women to voice their justice perceptions in shaping decision-making processes, employment practices, and the acceptance of all members in organizations.

Our second contribution is that we identified that justice-based organizational practices have critical consequences for individuals’ active participation in organizations’ processes by having their voice. Research demonstrates that justice pulls people together and injustice pushes people apart by withholding dignity and respect through perceived unfair treatment, practices and outcomes (Bies and Moag, 1986). In line with the group value model (Tyler, 1989), people tend to form a sense of self-identity, self-regard, self-worth and self-esteem through others’ attitudes, behaviors and HR decisions toward them (Cropanzano et al., 2001). Individuals deprived of positive human relations and fair HR practices tend to become lonely, depressed, and over time, withdraw, posing a potential problem for organizations (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Tyler et al., 1996). Therefore, justice-based employment practices enabling inclusion in organizational decision-making processes are crucial to promoting all aspects of climate for inclusion and encompassing integration of differences.

Finally, this study supports the group value model (Tyler, 1989) and the organizational justice literature (Cropanzano et al., 2007; Cropanzano et al., 2001) by illustrating that the fair treatment of employees by authorities, with respect and openness in sharing varying fairness perceptions among members, are a fundamental requirement in building a climate for inclusion in organizations. This is because employees tend to exhibit more positive interactions, attitudes and behaviors when they are valued, respected and treated fairly by authorities. The findings of this study highlight that the likelihood of diversity management
strategies achieving the intended goals of building inclusive work environments depend substantially on the ability of organizations to address the levels of fairness in perceptions of equitable employment practices, and the extent to which organizations involve all members in the inclusive decision-making processes.

A number of implications for practice on how to develop high levels of climate for inclusion are proposed. First, organizations should adopt a number of strategies to improve the climate for inclusion. For example, managers should consider involving all employees by proper consultations and engagement, building trust and transparency through developing contextualized, equitable employment policies and practices that are perceived as fair to all members (Simons and Roberson, 2003). Scott et al. (2011) suggest that organizations that emphasize the role of inclusion and integrate all members’ perceptions into all organizational policies and practices would benefit more than those organizations that focus on diversity practices alone.

Second, as the findings suggest the importance of including women’s voice, given that they felt the environment was unsafe to voice, there were limited opportunities to voice, and/or their voice was often unheard in key decision-making processes, managers might start by enhancing direct contact to allow employees to share their justice perceptions. In this pursuit, managers can be open toward different communication styles, so as to relate with women in an effective way. For example, research indicates that women’s communication styles tend to be communal, using more supportive, emotional, and expressive forms of language (Popp et al., 2003), and as communication is an important pathway to building meaningful relationships among employees, managers might consider putting extra effort into having suitable communication styles with their female subordinates on key work-related practices. This may be a valuable strategy to promote their sense of fairness and belongingness within organizations. The perceived fairness of women may empower them to speak up in workgroups and enable them to gain a sense of positive justice perceptions in employment practices and decision-making processes occurring in their workgroups. Ultimately, we expect that organizations will reap positive behavioral (voice) outcomes when authorities in groups and organizations actively involve all members in key decision-making processes in a transparent and open manner (Härtel, 2004).

Third, while the onus should be on management to create an inclusive environment, wherein individuals feel safe to challenge the status quo and play an integral role in the decision-making process, we provide some potential solutions of how women may enhance their standing in organizations by taking advantages of the following resources: employee resources groups (or affinity groups), mentoring relationships, and strong exchange relationships with supervisors. Employee resource groups are voluntary, employee-led groups that act as a resource for both members and the organization. They are typically designed around specific attributes or interests (i.e. women, generational, disability). Previous literature has pointed to the value of employee resource groups, as providing both social and professional support to members, along with advocacy and avenues for information sharing (Welbourne and McLaughin, 2013). This is especially critical for women (and other minority identities), because they might feel more psychologically safe to express voice to similar others than to management.

Women employees may consider seeking a mentor(s) within the organization. Generally speaking, a mentor is someone in a position of leadership and authority that provides instrumental and psychosocial support to a junior-level employee. Research has shown that mentors can provide support in controversial situations and also provide their protégés with greater visibility (McGuire, 2000; Ragins, 1997). More importantly, a mentor may provide the protégé with the confidence to express concerns and issues that are occurring in the workplace, that he/she may feel uncomfortable voicing to direct supervisor or manager.
Finally, research suggests that employees who had a high quality leader-member exchange were more active in exhibiting their voice to improve work processes and practices (Jiang et al., 2018). Therefore, the responsibility also rests on women, who should take a more active role in developing quality personal contacts with their supervisors and senior managers, whereby they can build higher levels of trust, psychologically safety, and their confidence to voice.

**Limitations and future research directions**

We acknowledge several limitations in this study. First, this study was conducted within one university setting; therefore, the findings may not be applicable to other industries. The findings, however, might be applicable to the education sector in Western societies with similar contexts to Australia. Second, this study is a qualitative exploration of the topic; hence, we are not able to establish causal relationships among studied variables. Future research on gender, the voice of women, and organizational justice should be conducted in multiple workplace settings or multiple types of organizations or use a longitudinal, quantitative approach to examine the topic. Third, this research is limited in that we draw from a small sample size, making it non-generalizable. We invited many potential employees and managers to participate in this project; their participation was entirely voluntary, and many FG participants did not attend on the day as per their initial agreements. However, through rich qualitative accounts of integrating an organizational justice lens into the work experience of women, the current findings shed light on the similarities and differences in organizational justice perceptions among managers and employees towards shaping the climate for inclusion.

**References**


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