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Editorial

Effecting Systemic Change: Critical Strategic Approaches for Social Inclusion

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Abstract
This thematic issue focuses on critical, insightful, and innovative strategic approaches to social inclusion through a change in social systems. Contributions propose effective and responsive approaches, principles, practices, and/or models for impactful systemic change towards meaningful and practical social inclusion in our institutions, communities, and societies, adopting a systemic view—a wide-angle lens—to explore opportunities for transformation.

Keywords
civil society organizatons; disabilities; health policy; refugees; social services; systems analysis; systems change; women's reproduction

Issue
This editorial is part of the issue "Effecting Systemic Change: Critical Strategic Approaches to Social Inclusion" edited by Nick J. Mulé (York University) and Luann Good Gingrich (York University).

We find ourselves in a political and social moment of tense distrust and growing divides, along with deep disappointment in institutions and initiatives that are ostensibly intended to provide social and economic support, promote social inclusion, and build community. A collective cynicism has settled in for a wide range of sociodemographic groups in societies, as the precarity of day-to-day life leaves many feeling vulnerable, powerless, and even fearful (Camfield, 2017; Haiven & Khasnapbish, 2014). A critical analysis of the dynamics that lead to such conditions demands a shift from a familiar neo-liberal perspective that perpetuates the "cult of the individual and 'individualism' " (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 11), to a focus on the systemic processes and practices that contribute to the further marginalization of the marginalized (Mulé, 2011). Yet how does one effect change within such systems? Should such systems be dismantled and reconstructed? Or abolished altogether?

In this thematic issue, we feature articles offering critical, insightful, and innovative strategic approaches to social inclusion through a change in social systems. There is much in the literature regarding the need for systemic change to address growing divides within and between nations that leave many individuals and groups increasingly marginalized and disenfranchised (Kat͡senelinboĭgen, 2020; Wagener, 1993), yet there's very little on *how* this can be done (Aragón & Giles Macedo, 2010; Murphy & Jones, 2021). Global crises have drawn attention to the disproportionate vulnerabilities and hardships experienced by people who are immigrants and refugees, living with disabilities, LGBTQ, Black and Indigenous, low income, precariously employed, elderly, young and female workers, to name a few. Perhaps as never before, there is widespread recognition that social institutions and systems have let many of us down. The public health, labour, and resulting economic crises of the Covid-19 pandemic have given rise to calls to "build back better" (Funnell et al., 2023). Given the paucity of academic literature that proposes and operationalizes systemic analyses and change strategies to promote dynamics of social inclusion rather than social exclusion, we were motivated to begin to fill that gap.

Contributing authors of this thematic issue adopt a systemic view—a wide-angle lens—that analyses social institutions and societies to be mutually productive and malleable, rather than self-reproducing and inevitable, to explore opportunities for transformation (Good Gingrich & Lightman, 2015; Mulé, 2019). Such perspectives contest common sense notions of social exclusion that inspire static, categorical, and individualized models of social inclusion geared toward people-change measures for identified social kinds. This ideal of social inclusion implies and conceals an uncontested "centre" or series of "centres" whereby voluntary engagement or mandatory insertion moves an individual from social exclusion to inclusion. But this common-sense idea of social inclusion is not for everyone. On the contrary, integration of the Other into the divided social spaces of the "centre" is impossible, as it is the exclusion of all that contradicts dominant norms and values that forms its very essence (Good Gingrich, 2016; Good Gingrich & Young, 2019).

A systems analysis is radical, as it reorients our gaze from the static conditions of the excluded kind to the relational and dynamic realities of social exclusion (Taket et al., 2009). The contributing authors of this thematic issue situate the social world as nested social environments, structured by and structuring various social systems and institutions, including business, labour, health, education, legal, political, and social service sectors—all of which are implicated in organizing individuals and communities, thus perpetuating social divides and disparities. Moreover, a systems analysis brings outcomes *and* processes into view (Mulé & DeSantis, 2017), to see and know the social dynamics and trends over time that result in everyday/every night realities in a moment in time. Such a view invites innovation in specific practices that challenge and interrupt those dynamics. The articles in this thematic issue offer effective and responsive approaches, principles, practices, and models for impactful systemic change, whether internally and/or externally, towards meaningful and practical social inclusion in our institutions, communities, and societies.

Löve (2023) examines an Icelandic governmental consultative process to address the needs of people with disabilities, and those with intellectual disabilities, in particular, towards their inclusion in policy making. Through a mixed methods qualitative approach, the author found the government fell short of adequate inclusion of the input and lived experiences of the specified populations, for they were not included in the latter crucial stages of preparing the implementation report of the Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disability, capturing only parts of what people with intellectual disabilities shared during the consultations. Drawing from the literature, the author points to crucial steps the government missed in carrying out consultations for effective social changes through policy development. Such observations contribute important insights into addressing social exclusion through processes and practices of social inclusion.

Two case studies in the US regarding the education of refugees that exemplify refugee-driven models of integration and inclusion are shared by Greene et al. (2023). These examples lay out means of systemic change that get to the root causes via cultural humility. Situating practice approaches in their case examples, the authors clearly outline how a careful commitment to cultural humility must include reflexivity and relationship building, and importantly that change-making is more about the process than the outcome. Central to these transformational models are the refugees themselves, as their unique perspectives and knowledge are essential for effective innovation in the education system.

The profession of social work and its role in advancing social justice while inevitably perpetuating social injustices is critically examined by Köngeter and Schreiner (2023). The authors argue the importance of social service organizations engaging in inclusive processes of developing policies and services that centre the voices of the service recipients. The implications of this organizational education can promote systemic change at micro, meso, and macro levels. Core to this endeavour is a careful re-examination of the power differentials between social service organization staff and clients that in turn, opens a route to deeper self-determination and meaningful social inclusion for clients.

A nuanced analysis of policy regarding women's reproductive decision-making in Victoria, Australia, is undertaken by Haintz et al. (2023). The extent to which intersectionality is taken up in reproductive health policy was found to be inconsistent both within and across the policies examined. These authors show that policy can have a direct exclusionary impact on reproductive decision-making when intersectional recognition is not captured. Overlooking (or denying) the realities of intersectional power dynamics has negative consequences that are most severe for marginalized women and, in turn, emphasizes the importance of the meaningful engagement of diverse women in policy development. Intentional reflexivity in policymaking is imperative for the effective regulation of reproductive decision-making.

Through autoethnographic case studies, McKenzie and Khan (2023) share their personal experiences as disabled faculty members of a faculty of social work at a Canadian university. They highlight the numerous ways in which the neoliberal university system contributes to social exclusion despite surface efforts to implement principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Much of this is due to ensconced working dynamics in academia that emphasize individualism, efficiency, and productivity that falls short of considering equitable access to resources to do such work, and usually at the expense of work-life balance and personal care. Utilizing intersectionality and disability justice theoretical frameworks, the authors challenge such work notions in academia by providing strategies geared towards social inclusion in the social work discipline that is applicable to other disciplines within post-secondary institutions.

Banerjee (2023) takes on an intensely systemic approach to the challenges of civil society organizations (CSOs) engaging in social inclusion initiatives in response to increasing neoliberal governmentality in India. The author reports that in this context, both government and donor institutions are imposing more and more procedures that in effect decapacitate and depoliticize CSOs. As a result, their much-needed political work towards effecting social change has been reduced to service provision that is disconnected from participation in the political process. Banerjee identifies a shift from resistance (a fight for social change) to resilience (finding new ways to work within the system), but argues that these two concepts are not binary nor mutually exclusive. Finding resilience within an ever-constrictive yet changing system can in turn lead to new powers of resistance—a re-politicization.

Finally, in an innovative way, Skyer et al. (2023) conflate anarchistic principles and practices with deaf advocacy for system change in deaf education. The longstanding conflict of approaches between the biomedical and the sociocultural within deaf education systems are taken up at the micro level, with a view to macro implications by centring the deaf. Outlined are four themes of social inclusionary practice that can be shared between anarchistic groups and deaf communities. These include collectivism, mutual aid, direct action tactics, and a form of self-governance. The authors argue that by merging anarchistic principles and approaches with the will of deaf communities regarding their own education, real opportunity for deaf-positive system change, as guided by the deaf themselves, is possible.

A common theme among all of the contributions in this thematic issue is that of centring the voices and agency of those most negatively impacted by social exclusion. This, in turn, calls for a redistribution of power, in which professionalized notions and procedures need to be disrupted and reoriented towards not only the issues of but the ideas and approaches put forth by those who will most benefit from interrupting dynamics of social exclusion.

Through a range of applications, the contributors bring to our attention that social inclusion is not so much an outcome that is evidenced by change *to* or *for* excluded individuals. Rather, social inclusion is *dynamic*, requiring processes and practices that re-value devalued perspectives, knowledges, and people for collective change. All authors engage with conceptual, empirical, or theoretical perspectives that delve deeply into critical thought and analysis that go to the core of systemic issues—"the causes of the causes"—to posit strategic approaches to systemic transformation. Each of these contributions goes beyond a mere critique of what ails our social systems, importantly offering approaches to address various forms of social exclusion. Some applications are premised on a particular social location or with regard to a specific sector, but each one transcends such positionalities towards processes and practices of social inclusion that involve transformation at all levels—personal, relational, institutional, and societal—for the benefit of all.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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