4 Nov 2019 - **Jonny Gifford, Senior Research Advisor**

# Infinity and beyond diversity

What's the philosophical root of inclusion and what can we learn from this?

The concept of 'inclusion' is usually defined in relation to diversity. It's a pretty familiar line. Diversity concerns the demographic mix of a group – people's physical characteristics, background, identity or circumstances – and related to this, equality concerns the opportunities these people have. Inclusion, on the other hand, is the cultural and psychological issue of whether people feel valued, accepted and supported to succeed.

Patently, workplace inclusion is a less technical and more profound concept than workforce diversity. But how deep does it go?

To understand inclusion and its implications for increasing equality, it's helpful to look at its philosophical underpinnings. The key reference point is Emmanuel Levinas, a major influence in 20th century philosophy, who argued for 'a multiplicity of diverse families', not 'a humanity united by resemblance'.

In his most influential work, *Totality and Infinity*, [1]  first published in French in 1961, Levinas argued that the foundation of existence was the sensing, reciprocated face-to-face relationships between living beings. This was ground-breaking stuff, coming in sharp contrast to Heidegger's relatively abstract notion of Being.

> 'For Levinas, we literally face each other, one individual at a time, and that relationship becomes
>  one of communication and moral expectation. We do not merge; we respond to one another.'  [2]

This is not just any kind of face-to-face. It is not about being embraced and incorporated into another's world view, but a demand to be acknowledged as an individual. Levinas wrote:

> '... it refuses the clandestinity of love, where it loses its frankness and meaning and turns into
>  laughter or cooing. The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other – language is

justice
… The poor one, the stranger, presents himself as an equal.' [3]

This is stern stuff, a far cry from being 'just a girl standing in front of a boy asking him to love her'. [4]

The 'infinity' of the title of Levinas' book is the endless possibility of otherness when we are not co-opted into another person's world view. What of 'totality'? Levinas' experience of totalitarianism was first-hand, from being held in a prisoner-of-war camp for Jews during the Second World War. He recounted how his Nazi captors stripped him and the other inmates of their humanity by refusing to recognise them. The reprieve came from a dog, who welcomed the inmates as they walked back from their daily work, wagging its tail in happiness to greet them; giving them recognition. [5]

At its extreme, Levinas wrote that rejecting a face-to-face relationship with someone becomes a brutal 'total negation':

'Neither the destruction of things, nor the hunt, nor the extermination of living beings aims at
the face … To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely
Murder exercises a power over what escapes power.' [6]

What we term inclusion – Levinas used the word fraternité – is the polar opposite.

Levinas' thinking was seminal. Various scholars have drawn on his work to develop ideas on equality, diversity and inclusion [7] and, more broadly, organisational ethics. [8]

His ideas offer various challenges to today's society. For one, his insistence on face-to-face relationships would seem to have little to recommend our supposedly 'social' online world. Perhaps trolling and gross misunderstanding are inevitable when channels like social media allow faceless interaction.

He also gives an interesting take on the idea of 'otherness'. The term 'othering' people is commonly used to mean to alienate them. In contrast, Levinas argues that recognising otherness is a vital mark of respect. Which sense is more helpful – to reduce otherness or celebrate it?

Above all, he shows that inclusion (or fraternité) is a profound psychological and interpersonal phenomenon, inseparable from diversity and equality and very far from a tick-box exercise.

'Equality is produced where the other commands the same and reveals himself to

> the same
>  in responsibility; otherwise it is but an abstract idea and a word. It cannot be detached from
>  the welcoming of the face, of which it is a moment.' [9]

And yet there is a tension between inclusion and a limited enactment of diversity. Focusing on a 'six-pack' of protected characteristics (sex, race, disability, age, sexual orientation and religion or belief) does not equate to inclusion; nor does looking at strands of diversity in isolation and ignoring intersectionality (Diversity management that works: summary of recommendations). Such lists of categories may be legally indispensable, but ultimately, they constrain inclusion.

The tension here between diversity and inclusion is a natural one. There is a practical limit to Levinas' theoretical infinity. We must remain open to questioning and breaking down any categories we have of people, and yet we do still need to deal with categories in order to get representative people data, establish generalisable practices, and so on. In a similar way, G.K. Chesterton wrote,

> 'Thus when Mr. H.G. Wells says (as he did somewhere), "All chairs are quite different", he utters not merely
>  a misstatement, but a contradiction in terms. If all chairs were quite different, you could not call them "all chairs".'

The grouping of LGBT+ and especially expansions such as LGBTTQQIAAP are sometimes derided for being unnecessarily long. But they strike me as a way of managing this potential tension quite well. The terms give a category of sexual minority groups, which is useful to understand the discrimination this group faces, but at the same time, acknowledge that a single category doesn't cut it – there are different shades and experiences within the grouping and the multitude of identities is important.

A practical need for groupings exists because we deal in numbers as well as stories. But as a mindset, the *attitude* of accepting infinity is important. Face to face, day to day, we can learn to look at other individuals, accepting that they may not fit into our pre-existing schemata and there is a multiplicity of diversity. Indeed, to all intents and purposes, an infinity of it.

## References

[1] Levinas, E. (1969, 2016) *Totality and infinity: an essay on exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

[2] Bakewell, S. (2016, p196) *At the Existentialist Café: freedom, being and apricot cocktails.* London: Chatto & Windus.

[3] Levinas (1969, p213)

[4] Julia Roberts in the film, Notting Hill

[5] Bakewell (2016)

[6] Levinas (1969, p198)

[7] For example:

Lim, M. (2007) The ethics of alterity and the teaching of otherness. Business Ethics: A European Review. Vol 16, No 3. pp251–263. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8608.2007.00497.x

Muhr, S. L. (2008) Othering diversity – a Levinasian analysis of diversity management. International Journal of Management Concepts and Philosophy, Vol 3, No 2. pp176–189. doi:10.1504/IJMCP.2008.021273

Rhodes, C. (2017) Ethical praxis and the business case for LGBT diversity: political insights from Judith Butler and Emmanuel Levinas. Gender, Work & Organization, Vol 24, No 5. pp533-546. doi:10.1111/gwao.12168

[8] For example:

Soares, C. (2008). Corporate legal responsibility: a Levinasian perspective. Journal of Business Ethics. Vol 81, No 3. pp545–553. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10551-007-9523-0

Bruna, M.G. and Bazin, Y. (2018) Answering Levinas' call in organization studies. European Management Review. Vol 15, No 4. pp577–588. doi:10.1111/emre.12137

[9] Levinas (1969, p214)