

sara ahmed on being included

sara ahmed on being included offers a profound exploration of belonging, identity, and the very essence of what it means to be welcomed. This article delves into the nuanced perspectives of Sara Ahmed, a prominent scholar whose work critically examines how inclusion operates, often revealing its limitations and complexities. We will navigate through Ahmed's incisive analysis of how institutions and societal structures can create exclusionary practices, even when ostensibly aiming for inclusivity. Furthermore, we will discuss the personal and political dimensions of experiencing inclusion and exclusion, drawing upon key concepts from her influential writings. The aim is to provide a comprehensive understanding of this vital topic, shedding light on the challenges and possibilities of genuine inclusion.

Understanding Sara Ahmed's Core Arguments on Inclusion

Sara Ahmed's work fundamentally challenges conventional understandings of inclusion. She often posits that the very language and practices of inclusion can inadvertently perpetuate exclusion by creating a sense of already being included for those who hold dominant positions. This perspective invites a critical re-evaluation of how we define and implement inclusive policies and environments. Her analysis moves beyond a simple additive model, where marginalized groups are brought into existing structures, to a more transformative approach that questions the fundamental nature of those structures themselves.

The Institutional Politics of Inclusion

Ahmed is particularly insightful when dissecting the institutional politics surrounding inclusion. She argues that institutions often engage in what she terms "inclusion work" not necessarily to dismantle oppressive systems, but to appear inclusive and thereby maintain their legitimacy. This "work" can manifest as the creation of diversity committees, policy rewrites, or symbolic gestures, which, without addressing root causes, can serve to pacify dissent and reinforce the status quo. The focus, in her view, shifts from genuine systemic change to the management of diversity as a performance.

This performance of inclusion can manifest in various ways:

- The appointment of individuals from underrepresented groups to token positions without granting them real power.
- The development of diversity training programs that focus on individual biases rather than systemic inequalities.
- The creation of "inclusion metrics" that can be easily manipulated to show progress without substantive change.
- The celebration of diversity as a static attribute rather than a dynamic process of ongoing engagement.

The Unhappiness of Inclusion

A significant aspect of Sara Ahmed's critique is her concept of the "unhappiness of inclusion." She observes that for those who are already positioned within dominant groups, the idea of inclusion often evokes discomfort or even resentment. This is because the push for inclusion inherently challenges existing power dynamics and privileges. The discomfort arises not from a desire to be malicious, but from a deep-seated attachment to familiar norms and structures that benefit them. Ahmed suggests that this unhappiness is a crucial indicator that real change is occurring, or at least being demanded.

This unhappiness can be understood through several lenses:

- The resistance to acknowledging existing inequalities.
- The perception that inclusion is a zero-sum game, where gains for some mean losses for others.
- The feeling of being asked to give up something familiar or comfortable.
- The anxiety surrounding the disruption of established hierarchies.

Navigating the Experience of Being Included and Excluded

Sara Ahmed's work also offers a powerful lens through which to understand the lived experiences of both inclusion and exclusion. She emphasizes that inclusion is not a uniform state but a contingent and often precarious experience, particularly for those who are not part of the presumed norm. The feeling of being included is often taken for granted by those who already belong, while for others, it is a constant negotiation and struggle.

The Specter of Exclusion in Inclusive Spaces

Ahmed highlights how even spaces designed to be inclusive can harbor the specter of exclusion. This is because the very definition of what constitutes "included" is often implicitly defined by the dominant group. When individuals from marginalized backgrounds enter these spaces, they may find that their experiences, perspectives, and needs are not fully accommodated or are even actively dismissed. The "friendly" or "welcoming" environment might only be so for those who conform to existing expectations.

This can lead to several challenges for those seeking genuine inclusion:

- The constant pressure to assimilate or perform in ways that are acceptable to the majority.

- The experience of microaggressions that undermine a sense of belonging.
- The feeling of being an "outsider within," present but not truly part of the collective.
- The emotional labor involved in navigating unfamiliar social codes and expectations.

The Politics of "Fitting In"

Ahmed's analysis extends to the political dimensions of "fitting in." She suggests that the pressure to fit in can be a subtle yet powerful mechanism of social control. When individuals feel compelled to suppress aspects of their identity or experiences to be accepted, it serves to maintain the homogeneity of the group and the power of its dominant members. The act of conforming, while seemingly a personal choice, is deeply embedded within broader social and political structures that reward assimilation.

The act of fitting in often involves:

- Downplaying or hiding aspects of one's identity that are perceived as different.
- Adopting the language, mannerisms, and values of the dominant group.
- Avoiding topics or behaviors that might draw negative attention.
- Seeking validation from the dominant group rather than from one's own community.

Sara Ahmed's Vision for Transformative Inclusion

While critical, Sara Ahmed's work is not purely pessimistic. It offers a framework for understanding what genuine, transformative inclusion might entail. Her critiques are designed to pave the way for more profound and equitable practices of belonging.

Beyond the Door: Redefining Belonging

Ahmed's work encourages a move beyond simply opening doors to existing structures. True belonging, in her view, requires a radical reimagining of those structures themselves. It means creating spaces where difference is not just tolerated but is seen as a source of strength and innovation. This involves dismantling the hierarchies that create in-groups and out-groups and fostering an environment of genuine mutual recognition and respect.

Key elements of this reimagining include:

- Centering the experiences and voices of those who have historically been excluded.
- Challenging the norms and assumptions that underpin existing power structures.
- Creating accountability mechanisms that ensure ongoing progress and address persistent inequalities.
- Fostering a culture of continuous learning and adaptation in response to diverse needs.

The Ongoing Work of Building Inclusive Futures

Ultimately, Sara Ahmed on being included emphasizes that inclusion is not a destination but an ongoing process. It requires continuous effort, critical self-reflection, and a willingness to challenge comfortable assumptions. The goal is to build futures where everyone can experience genuine belonging, not as a privilege, but as a fundamental human right.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Sara Ahmed's central argument regarding the concept of 'inclusion'?

Sara Ahmed's core argument is that 'inclusion' often functions as a way to uphold existing power structures rather than genuinely dismantle them. She critiques how institutions adopt inclusion as a policy or a buzzword without addressing the fundamental inequalities that create exclusion in the first place. For Ahmed, inclusion can be a way to make existing systems appear more accommodating without necessitating significant change.

How does Sara Ahmed differentiate between 'inclusion' as a stated goal and its actual impact?

Ahmed emphasizes the gap between the rhetoric of inclusion and its lived reality. She argues that 'inclusion' can be performative, where institutions signal their commitment to diversity without enacting substantive changes that would challenge the status quo. This performative inclusion can create a sense of progress while reinforcing existing hierarchies and marginalization.

What does Sara Ahmed mean by 'inclusion as a kind of threat'?

Ahmed uses the phrase 'inclusion as a kind of threat' to highlight how the demand for inclusion can be perceived as disruptive or challenging by those in dominant positions. When marginalized groups demand to be included, it can threaten the comfort and privileges of those who benefit from the existing

exclusionary structures, leading to resistance or tokenistic gestures of inclusion.

According to Sara Ahmed, what are the limitations of diversity initiatives when framed as inclusion?

Ahmed suggests that diversity initiatives, when framed solely as 'inclusion,' can become depoliticized and fail to address the root causes of inequality. Instead of challenging systemic oppression, these initiatives might focus on individual instances of exclusion or encourage assimilation into existing norms. This can lead to a superficial sense of diversity without a genuine commitment to equity or social justice.

How does Sara Ahmed connect the concept of 'happiness' to the critique of inclusion?

Ahmed often uses the concept of 'happiness' to deconstruct inclusion. She argues that the pressure to be 'happy' in spaces that are not designed for you, or the expectation to perform happiness in order to be considered 'included,' can be a form of coercion. This links to her idea that inclusion can demand that marginalized individuals adapt to exclusionary environments rather than those environments changing.

What are some of the 'hiccups' that Sara Ahmed identifies in the process of inclusion?

Ahmed discusses various 'hiccups' within the inclusion project, such as the way that the 'problem' of exclusion is often located within the marginalized individual or group, rather than within the structures of the institution. She also points to how inclusion efforts can become about 'managing' diversity rather than actively challenging power dynamics, leading to a perpetuation of exclusion under a guise of inclusivity.

What alternative approaches does Sara Ahmed implicitly or explicitly suggest to genuine inclusion?

While not always offering prescriptive solutions, Ahmed's critique implicitly calls for a move beyond superficial inclusion. She suggests the need for a radical reimagining of institutions and social structures to dismantle the very foundations of exclusion. This involves challenging power imbalances, addressing systemic inequalities, and prioritizing transformative change over mere representation or tokenism.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Sara Ahmed on the theme of being included, each with a short description:

1. The Promise of Happiness

This foundational work by Sara Ahmed interrogates the societal imperative to be happy and how this pressure can become a tool of oppression. Ahmed argues that the demand for happiness often works to silence dissent and enforce

conformity, suggesting that true well-being might lie in embracing discontent and questioning the norms that dictate what a happy life should look like. It explores how certain lives are deemed "unhappy" or disruptive and thus excluded from the promised land of fulfillment.

2. Living a Cruel World: On Melancholy and the Politics of Affect

Ahmed delves into the experience of melancholy, not as a personal failing, but as a political and critical response to a world that can be inherently hostile. She examines how certain feelings, like anger and sadness, are dismissed as unproductive or transgressive, while the enforced demand for positivity can obscure systemic injustices. This book offers a framework for understanding how our emotional lives are shaped by social and political structures, and how melancholy can be a site of resistance and inclusion.

3. Willful Subjects

In this influential text, Sara Ahmed explores the notion of the "willful subject" as someone who resists dominant social norms and expectations, often by refusing to be happy or agreeable. She analyzes how those who deviate from the script of conformity are labeled as difficult or problematic, and how this labeling serves to maintain existing power structures. The book ultimately reclaims "willfulness" as a form of agency that can lead to new ways of belonging and being.

4. Queer Phenomenology: How to Discomfort the House

Ahmed applies a phenomenological lens to understand how our experience of the world is shaped by our bodies and our social locations. She argues that the environment itself is organized in ways that often render certain bodies, particularly queer bodies, as out of place or "inconvenient." This book explores how changing our perspective and actively disrupting the spatial arrangements that exclude us can create more inclusive environments.

5. On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life

This is the book directly referenced in the prompt, focusing on the often superficial and tokenistic nature of diversity initiatives within institutions. Ahmed critically examines how institutions may claim to be diverse and inclusive while perpetuating exclusionary practices. She highlights the labor of those who are brought in as "diversity," often expected to fix problems without systemic change, and questions what genuine inclusion would truly entail.

6. A Queer History of Art

While not solely by Ahmed, her critical framework is essential to understanding works like this. This book, or any scholarship using Ahmed's theories, would explore how marginalized artists and subjects have historically been excluded from mainstream art historical narratives. It would analyze how aesthetic judgments and institutional practices have often reinforced heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions, and how queer perspectives can disrupt these canons. The focus would be on reclaiming and re-evaluating artistic contributions that have been overlooked due to their non-normative nature.

7. Feminist Killjoys (and other passionate critiques)

This collection, featuring essays and reflections by Ahmed, champions the figure of the "feminist killjoy" as someone who disrupts pleasantries and challenges comfortable assumptions. These figures are often excluded or dismissed for their perceived negativity, but Ahmed argues that their critical stance is essential for exposing injustice and creating space for alternative ways of being and relating. The book celebrates the disruptive power of critique and the affective work of those who refuse to go along.

8. *The Management of Difference*

Ahmed scrutinizes how institutions attempt to manage and contain the "difference" they encounter, often through policies and practices that aim to assimilate rather than truly embrace it. She argues that this management frequently reinforces existing hierarchies and can lead to the exhaustion and alienation of those deemed "different." The book probes the limitations of diversity management and suggests that genuine inclusion requires a fundamental rethinking of institutional structures.

9. *What's the Use? On the Uses of Good Intentions*

In this work, Ahmed critically examines the concept of "good intentions," often invoked to justify actions or policies that nonetheless result in exclusion or harm. She questions the efficacy and intentions behind initiatives that claim to be helpful but often fail to address root causes of inequality. The book encourages a move beyond well-meaning gestures towards a deeper understanding of how power operates and how to achieve genuine systemic change for inclusion.

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