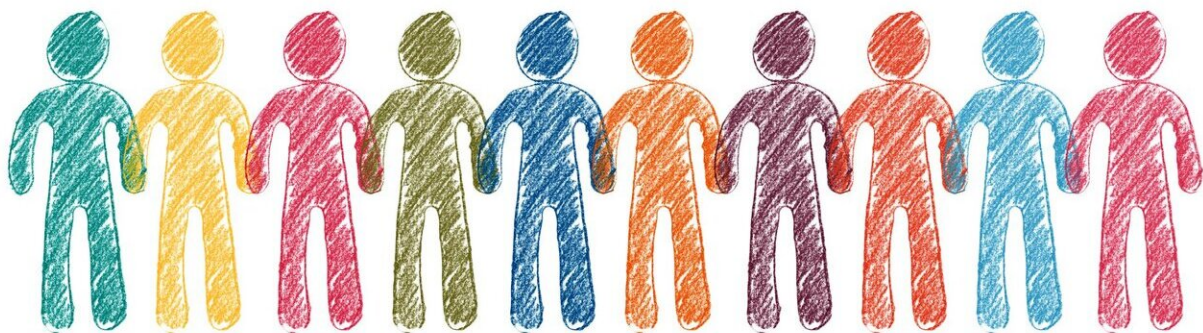


Fairness 'important - but not enough'

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Being treated fairly is important—but fairness alone isn't enough to make people feel valued in a workplace or other groups, new research suggests.

Researchers found that "distinctive treatment"—where a person's talents and qualities are recognised—provides this sense of value while also

reinforcing their sense of inclusion. It also promotes [mental health](#).

The findings suggest there is no conflict between "fitting in" and "standing out" in groups—in fact, they complement each other.

But while the importance of fairness is widely accepted, the researchers say distinctive treatment is often overlooked.

The research was carried out by the University of Exeter, UCLA and Sonoma State University.

"Organisations and other groups often recognise the importance of members treating each other fairly—with dignity and without bias," said lead author Dr. Christopher Begeny, of the University of Exeter.

"In six studies of workplaces and other groups, we find that this is indeed key to fostering individuals' sense of belonging.

"However, individuals also need to be shown that they have some distinct value to the group.

"When colleagues or fellow group members show interest and appreciation for an individual's more distinguishing qualities, that individual benefits.

"This kind of distinctive treatment has real benefits for mental health too, including less anxiety and depression.

"To be clear, fair treatment is a must—but our studies show it's also woefully insufficient on its own.

"Individuals need to feel more than inclusion. As well as 'fitting in', they need to 'stand out' - to feel that they have some distinct value and worth

that they bring to the group."

Asked how organisations could embed distinctive treatment in their [workplace](#), Dr. Begeny said: "It helps to have supervisors with the time and energy to recognise and tap into the particular skills and knowledge of the different people they supervise.

"Another method is to create well-developed systems of mentorship, allowing people to share their experience and expertise.

"This can also foster a workplace culture that is not just inclusive, but value-affirming—where people regularly seek each other out for advice, which is beneficial to both parties."

Dr. Begeny added: "Expressing distinctive treatment does not simply mean sending out a mass email saying 'if anyone has any ideas about this project, please let me know'.

"It's about going to an individual, or small group of individuals, and saying, 'hey, I really think your insights and perspectives could be an asset to this project. Would you be willing to offer your thoughts?'

"It's not a passive process of hearing people when they have ideas to share.

"It involves actively seeking them out—taking the initiative to learn what an individual has to offer -and showing recognition and appreciation for it."

Of the six studies, four were based in workplaces, while the others examined fair and distinctive treatment in student communities, and in racial/ethnic minority communities.

In all cases, distinctive treatment provided clear benefits.

More information: Christopher T. Begeny et al, Being treated fairly in groups is important, but not sufficient: The role of distinctive treatment in groups, and its implications for mental health, *PLOS ONE* (2021).

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