Wadel's Concept of 'incorporation': A Means of Improving Sustainable Work Inclusion?[1]

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable work inclusion for marginalized individuals poses a significant challenge worldwide, not just in Nordic countries. In this paper, we explore the potential of 'incorporation', a concept formulated by Norwegian sociologist Cato Wadel, to offer fresh insights. We assess its contribution by 1) using it as an analytical lens to examine 20 micro-level, workplace-oriented studies conducted on inclusive work life in Norway, and 2) discussing it in the context of international research on work inclusion, job retention, and return to work. Our findings emphasize the relevance of Wadel's concept as a general theory from which work inclusion efforts for marginalized individuals could benefit. Wadel's concept highlights the role of colleagues and workplaces as complementary resources for sustainability, and underscores the importance of facilitating continuous reassurances of relationships and the development of status over time. These insights are often overlooked in work inclusion endeavors.

KEYWORDS

Active Labour Market Policies (ALMP) / employer engagement / job retention / return to work / work inclusion

Introduction

A central goal of welfare policies globally, particularly in Nordic countries, is to enhance the employment and job retention rates of marginalized groups. These groups, including individuals with disabilities, inexperienced youth, ethnic minorities, low-skilled workers, and those with mental health or substance abuse issues, often face significant barriers to entering the labor market or retaining jobs. However, the results of active labour market policies (ALMP) in creating sustainable work inclusion for these groups, which require tailored support, have been disappointing (Bonvin & Galster 2010; Ingold & Stuart 2015). Andersen et al. (2017) argue that the employment rate for citizens who are typically harder to employ and more marginalized than other unemployed individuals 'has seen no significant change in the last couple of decades'. They concur with van Berkel et al. (2017) that ALMPs in European countries face considerable challenges in enhancing the labor market participation of marginalized citizens.

Concepts such as 'work inclusion' (Frøyland et al. 2019), 'activation' (Andersen et al. 2019), 'supported employment' (Probyn et al. 2021), and 'labour market inclusion' (Bjørnshagen & Ugreninov 2021) have been invoked to address this challenge. A common thread in this research is a predominant focus on job finding and recruitment with less emphasis on job retention, long-term growth, career development, and assimilation into the work environment (Sissons & Green 2017; West et al. 2015). In this article, we primarily refer to this as 'sustainable work inclusion'.

Some studies have delved into issues of job retention, emphasizing the importance of social inclusion in the workplace through early disclosure of disability, natural support, and fostering a sense of social belonging in the work environment (Gustafsson et al. 2018). These studies contribute valuable insights, but often discuss the challenge of inclusion from the perspective of the marginalized individual. Recent studies from other research streams such as return to work (RTW) suggest that issues related to the work environment and work organization may be crucial to meeting the needs of both included individuals and workplaces (Enehaug, Spjelkavik, Alves, et al. 2022; Gensby et al. 2019). Since colleagues, managers, union representatives, and other workplace actors may influence the sustainability of the inclusion process, it is vital to reflect on this challenge also from a workplace perspective. Despite the growing interest in sustainable work inclusion of marginalized groups and an increased focus on the demand-side of work inclusion in research streams such as employer engagement (Bredgaard 2017; Ingold & Stuart, 2015), RTW (Enehaug, Spjelkavik, Alves, et al. 2022; Spjelkavik et al. 2022), human resource management (HRM) (Sissons & Green 2017; van Berkel et al. 2017), and work inclusion (Enehaug, Spjelkavik, Falkum, et al. 2022; Frøyland 2017, 2020), knowledge of how to effectively facilitate sustainable work inclusion is lacking. There is a dearth of longitudinal studies illuminating the processes of relevance for inclusion occurring at the workplaces over time and seen from the perspective of the workplace (Frøyland et al. 2022).

In this study, we explore these challenges by summarizing findings from studies on job retention, RTW, and work inclusion, and by discussing whether the concept of 'incorporation' developed by Norwegian sociologist Cato Wadel can add workplace-based perspectives to the task of achieving sustainable work inclusion for marginalized populations. Recognizing the absence of a suitable term that encompasses all aspects of inclusion efforts, Wadel sought to establish 'incorporation' as a general concept in the social sciences. The concept was developed outside the field of work inclusion, and we reintroduce it here because it provides a comprehensive and long-term approach to what it may take to incorporate someone into a community, which, to our knowledge, seems to extend beyond the scope of the aforementioned research. The term 'incorporation' represents a perspective on inclusion rooted within the community where the inclusion efforts occur, as opposed to viewing it from the individual's perspective. Our research questions are:

1. What is required to facilitate the sustainable work inclusion of marginalized citizens?
2. Does Wadel's concept of 'incorporation' introduce new perspectives on sustainable work inclusion for marginalized citizens?

To explore the potential of Wadel's concept, we first provide a summary of the knowledge on sustainable work inclusion of marginalized groups, drawing on recent studies on

job retention, RTW, and work inclusion. Second, we introduce Wadel's concept. Third, we examine the potential of Wadel's concept by applying it as a lens for an in-depth analysis of workplace-oriented studies on inclusion, selected from a review of literature on inclusive work life in Norway (Frøyland, Nordberg, et al. 2018). Finally, we discuss the potential contribution of the 'incorporation' concept.

Background: update on sustainable work inclusion

In this section, we construct a framework of what sustainable work inclusion might entail, drawing on findings from various research streams that focus on workplace inclusion efforts, albeit with different emphases. A limitation of the current literature is that knowledge production often occurs within the boundaries of each research stream, with little knowledge sharing across streams, despite significant commonalities. In addition to relevant studies we were already familiar with, we conducted searches in Web of Science and Academic Search Ultimate for pertinent review studies using search terms such as 'disability/vulnerability', 'job retention/work inclusion', and 'workplace'. We selected nine studies/reviews that all address the challenge of sustainable work inclusion for marginalized groups.

Work inclusion

A review on the inclusion of marginalized youth in work, school, and society, summarizing 100 Nordic studies, primarily argues that individualized strategies and long-term follow-up, combined with an appropriate match between each youth and the workplace, are necessary to integrate marginalized young people into the workforce (Frøyland et al. 2022). Support may be needed in several areas simultaneously and can vary between individuals, and even for the same individual over time. According to this review, support agencies play a pivotal role. However, to fulfill this role effectively, staff must possess relevant knowledge and competence. Approaches such as Individual Placement and Support (IPS) and Supported Employment (SE) are suggested as effective. This review found few studies addressing how to engage employers and workplaces to promote sustainable work inclusion. The review did not find any studies that examined workplace inclusion processes from a longitudinal perspective, although some studies indicate that such inclusion necessitates long-term learning processes in which the young person, the employer or workplace, and the support system collaboratively develop lasting support solutions.

A separate study suggested that sustainable work inclusion necessitates not only Inclusion Skills Competence (ISC) in support services but also Workplace Inclusion Competence (WIC) within workplaces. WIC refers to 'the workplaces' customized and contextually adapted approach to the daily support of individuals with reduced work ability, and knowledge-based accommodation of work tasks in order to balance the needs of the individual and the organization (Enehaug, Spjelkavik, Falkum, et al. 2022). This study thus addresses the workplace and elevates it as a crucial contributor to sustainable inclusion. However, the study provides little insight into the types of needs the organization might have that may need to be addressed for successful inclusion.

Return to work

Gensby et al. (2019) conducted a review of Nordic studies on initiatives and organizational processes in the workplace aimed at preventing mental health–related work disability, with the aim of developing a program theory for RTW processes. They depicted RTW as the outcome of a multifaceted, workplace-focused change process, and presented the nature of Common Mental Disorders (CMD) and illness trajectories as a complex challenge in the workplace. Issues are related to an imbalance between individual and organizational resources and job demands. Timely interventions are challenging to manage, and interacting with authorities and external support can be problematic. Gensby et al. found that several studies view work-focused training and individual support as critical for regaining work ability. Facilitating RTW processes necessitates closer attention to work modifications and social relations. Other key insights are that managers and coworkers should participate in RTW processes, and that work tasks and demands should be tailored to the individual. Task-related psychosocial factors should be considered, and working conditions should be modified. External stakeholders should provide and coordinate relevant support. Gensby et al. highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the role of psychosocial work environments and the importance of considering broader organizational and managerial elements, such as enhancing collective social support and the organizational capacity to manage sufficient accommodation at work (Gensby et al. 2019).

A clear workplace focus with similar findings is also present in recent studies of RTW for individuals with traumatic brain injury (Craven et al. 2024; Spjelkavik et al. 2022). These studies suggest that facilitators for RTW and retention include appropriate work accommodations, gradual RTW, and supportive, collaborative relationships with coworkers and employers. For instance, Enehaug et al. (2022) found that inclusion efforts need to address barriers to RTW processes in the psychosocial work environment (such as workplace conflicts, unsupportive management, and insufficient or excessive social support), the characteristics of employees, the organizational work environment, and barriers related to a lack of knowledge on how to facilitate RTW processes. They concluded that a long-term focus on RTW processes is required because many barriers emerge or become increasingly significant over time. For example, managers or colleagues may demonstrate less willingness and patience to provide sufficient accommodation of work tasks, as this might increase their workload.

Job retention

A narrative literature review from the USA on job retention for people with various types of disabilities (mental, psychiatric, autoimmune) identified four intervention strategies that statistically improved job retention for people with disabilities (Thomas & Morgan 2021). These strategies focused on developing the skills of the disabled person, such as self-determination/self-advocacy skills for discussing accommodations and resolving work-related challenges, social skills, or learning how to manage medications. Additionally, receiving natural support was found to be effective. Similar findings were reported by McDowell et al. (2021), who found that skills training, cognitive interventions, psychological interventions, and supported education can

enhance job retention for individuals with psychiatric disabilities. The importance of support from peers, family, and friends was also highlighted. McDowell et al. also found evidence suggesting that practices of employment specialists, technology, self-management, and workplace accommodations may influence job tenure (McDowell et al. 2021). Furthermore, the Swedish study by Gustafsson et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of social inclusion in the workplace for job retention. A central element of this is the involvement of workplace actors through early disclosure of disability and facilitation of natural support to establish a sense of social belonging and involvement.

Sustainable work inclusion

The studies mentioned above describe sustainable work inclusion as complex processes requiring holistic and long-term approaches, involving action or support from individuals, workplaces, and involved support agencies (Frøyland, Andreassen, et al. 2018). We have summarized the major insights in table 1:

Table 1 What does sustainable work inclusion require?

The individual	The workplace	Support agencies	Time and process
• Self-determination • Social skills • Working skills • Reception of individual and natural support	• Involve managers and co-workers – improve social and natural support • Manage work modifications • Address barriers • Meet and balance the needs of the individual and the organization • Multifaceted change process • Workplace inclusion competence • Manage relations with authorities/external support	• Facilitate long term support • Coordinate support from different stakeholders • Inclusion skills competence	• Gradual • Individualized • Long term • Shifting support and accommodation needs • Shifting barriers

Wadel's concept of 'incorporation'

Wadel's goal was to enhance our ability to understand the essential elements of human interaction, relationships, and processes (Wadel 2008, p. 252). Wadel perceived incorporation – the act of becoming a part of something – as both a process and a relationship. He stated that 'incorporation occurs in families, kindergartens, schools, universities, workplaces and among pensioners', as well as 'in families, local communities, private organisations, friendships and ethnic groups' (Wadel 2008, p. 237). Wadel viewed incorporation as an action and as a collaborative effort with others. From this perspective, incorporation also involves transitioning from one social position with certain rights and duties to another social position with different rights and duties, thereby necessitating the learning of new rights and duties.

Wadel identified three distinct processes within incorporation: The first is mobilization in any relationship, which means active involvement in and contribution to interactions with others. The second involves the reassurances of such relationships. Wadel posits that reassurances of relationships can be particularly important when certain actions or a lack of interaction can easily be perceived as exclusion. The third is a continuous change in status during one's life course. As both environments and individuals evolve and change over time, incorporation depends on the ability to adapt to these changes.

In Wadel's theory, most types of incorporation require the acquisition of two kinds of skills that enable participation: 1) personal skills, referring to an individual's preferences, knowledge, and abilities related to a specific environment or task, and 2) relational skills, referring to the ability to establish and maintain relationships. While personal skills do not immediately require complementary skills from others, relational skills do because they are co-developed with other people. From a workplace perspective, this implies that focusing solely on the included individual is insufficient; contributions of other employees or coworkers must also be considered.

According to Wadel, incorporation takes two different but complementary forms: symmetric, when it occurs among incorporated individuals themselves (coworkers), and asymmetric, when it is facilitated by others (such as support providers). Distinguishing between these approaches can be relevant since marginalized individuals may prefer the more 'invisible' symmetric approaches, while the potentially more stigmatizing asymmetric approaches, such as support from a skilled job specialist, may be vital (Gustafsson et al. 2018).

While other studies have also addressed the concepts drawn from Wadel's theory – processes, skills, and approaches – Wadel's primary contribution lies in proposing a theory of incorporation and how communities integrate individuals as fully integrated members through a combination of processes, skills, and approaches in which both the organization and the individual contribute.

Methods and data

To further assess the relevance of Wadel's theory, we have expanded on the potential of the concept 'incorporation' by applying it as an analytical lens to a sample of workplace-oriented studies on inclusion at the workplace. We selected 20 studies from a scoping review, which summarized the major findings of Norwegian studies on inclusive work life (Frøyland, Nordberg, et al. 2018). Before describing how we selected studies from this review for further elaboration in this article, we present the 2018 study:

> The review was part of a research project financed by the Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The review process followed the stages described by Arksey and O'Malley (2005): 1) identifying the research questions, 2) identifying relevant studies, 3) selecting studies, 4) charting the data, and 5) collating, summarizing, and reporting the results. Literature searches were conducted on the Web of Science, Scopus, Academic Search Premier, SocINDEX, and ORIA, yielding 2931 candidate studies. 85 studies were included in the analysis. These studies covered work environment issues, prevention of sickness absence, RTW, inclusion of marginalised groups, or job retention—all focusing on the challenge of making the workplace more inclusive for the already employed and for marginalised groups. The flow of the process is illustrated in figure 1 below.

Figure 1 Flow of literature search.
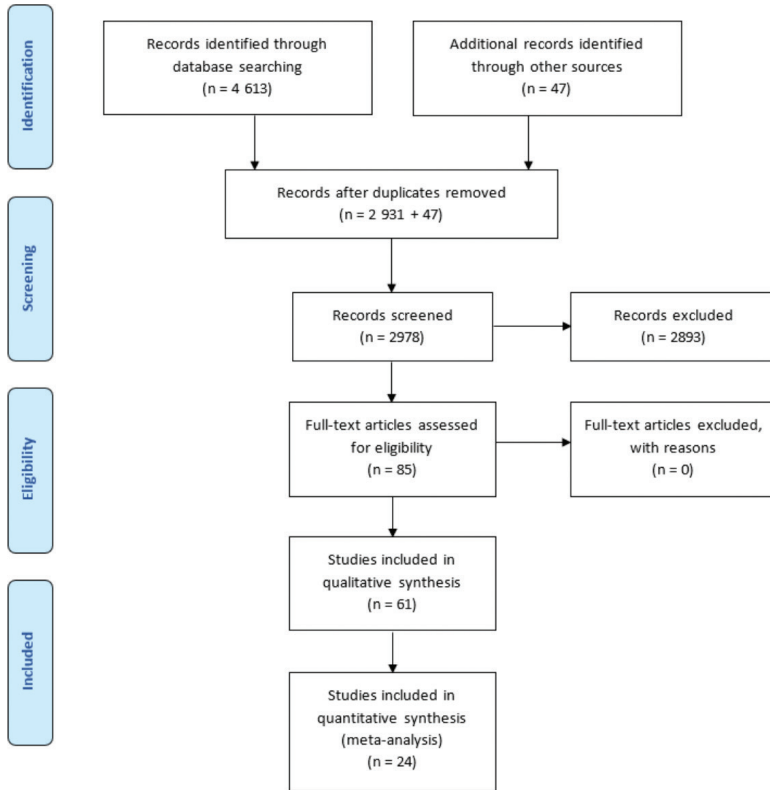
Further details of the analysis are outlined in the project report (Frøyland, Nordberg, et al. 2018).

To assess the potential of Wadel's concept in introducing new perspectives relevant for sustainable work inclusion, we selected studies from this review that specifically explored challenges, characteristics, and actions at the workplace level pertaining to inclusion efforts. We evaluated these studies with a specific aim to address:

- The kinds of processes, skills, and approaches at the workplace that these studies present as relevant.
- Whether analyzing these studies using Wadel's concept can bring forward perspectives not already presented in the studies.

To achieve this, we selected data from the 20 studies using a concept-driven approach that focuses on the processes, skills, and approaches relevant for sustainable work inclusion (Gibbs 2007; Yin 2014). As part of the analysis, both authors read each study multiple times. For comparison purposes, relevant data were recorded in Excel files. The researchers discussed the findings and cross-checked each other's interpretations of each study. An overview of the selected studies is presented in table 2:

Table 2 Workplace-oriented studies selected for in-depth elaboration of Wadel's concept

No.	Author(s)	Title (our translation)/ contents	Research focus/ population	Major findings
I	Buvik et al. (2018)	Cooperation of parties and preventive work environment	Work environment Persons already employed	Successful organizations identify challenges and facilitate and adapt work. They record changes after implementing measures and emphasize cooperation. Managers are visible, present, and accessible and welcome external support.
2	Vold Hansen (2014)	Health-promoting work in the workplace – The road to reduced sick leave?	Work environment Persons already employed	An overall strategy for promoting health may reduce sick leave rates. Successful measures reduce work demands by increasing flexibility and strengthening employees' resources through skills, management, welfare, and social capital.
3	Lien and Bogen (2018)	Sick leave in private and municipal nursing homes and cleaning businesses	Work environment Persons already employed	In workplaces with low sick leave rates, managers play a crucial role in creating a positive work environment. Managers work closely with their employees, observing and facilitating breaks, as well as preventing strain and sick leave.
4	Knardahl et al. (2016)	What conditions in the workplace have an impact on sick leave?	Work environment Persons already employed	Important factors related to sick leave include exposure to physical demanding work, control over one's work situation, work shifts, and the social climate in the workplace.
5	Proba (2016)	Reporting your own illness – 365	Work environment Persons already employed	The use of self-certified sick leave and a measure providing employees with information about musculoskeletal disorders and mild mental health problems strengthened employee–manager relationships but resulted in reduced cooperation and trust levels.
6	Løyseth (2014)	The good working environment is profitable for everyone	Work environment Persons already employed	Crew composition and 'tribe' maintenance influence employee motivation, involvement, and workflow. Supportive colleagues and good relationships promote common ownership and increase job engagement.
7	Ose et al. (2015)	Cooperation and communication around the IA (Inclusive Worklife) agreement and the Job Strategy	Work inclusion Unemployed persons	Work inclusion requires better coordination of the employment and welfare services's work life centers, higher priority of regional work, improved local cooperation, and clarification of the roles of union and safety representatives in work inclusion measures.

#	Author (year)	Title	Category / Target group	Findings
8	Schafft (2014)	Employer guides: Improving job retention for people with mental health issues.	Job retention / Persons with mental health challenges	'Employer pilots' who provide support to the individual and the organization contribute to improved ability to handle employees with mental health problems.
9	Kuznetsova and Yalcin (2017)	Inclusion of persons with disabilities in mainstream employment: Is it really all about the money?	Work inclusion / Unemployed persons	Implementing targeted measures is important for ensuring good experiences with and increased competence in the inclusion of people with disabilities. Support and awareness-raising activities are more important than legislation and subsidies.
10	Falkum et al. (2017)	Reporting sick at work	RTW / Persons returning to work	A flexible scheme through which employees' capacity for work during illness could be tested led to positive results in terms of scaling instead of complete absence. However, too few employees used the scheme for it to affect national leave rates.
11	Bogen and Lien (2015)	From absence to presence: The Room for action for successful sick leave work in nursing homes	Work environment/sick leave / Persons already employed	Three types of measures strengthen work inclusion: 1) better sick leave follow-up through surveying causes and adapting facilitation, 2) a work environment that prevents illness and sick leave, and 3) reallocating resources — for instance, by increasing staff.
12	Osloeconomics (2018)	Testing work ability with your own employer after the sickness benefit period has ended	RTW / Persons returning to work	Testing the capacity for work in the workplace had no significant positive effects. However, the actors viewed the measure as suitable for creating better dialogue and contributing to an ability to cope and return to work, fully or scaled. Low participation rates led to an uncertain statistical relationship between participation and return to work.
13	Nicolaisen (2017)	Inclusion of young people at AAP – an employer's perspective	Work inclusion / Unemployed persons	Occupations with low education requirements have better conditions for the work inclusion of youth. They have systems for on-the-job training, and young people participate in a work community. Many employers provide comprehensive training. Employers want a contact person at the employment services who is available.
14	Jensen and Nergaard (2017)	Retail as an arena for inclusion	Work inclusion / Unemployed persons	The retail trade is a suitable arena for the inclusion of young people with little formal competence and extra support needs. Appropriate work tasks, adequate training and follow-up, and good cooperation with the support system is necessary.

(Continued)

Table 2 *(Continued)*

No.	Author(s)	Title (our translation)/contents	Research focus/population	Major findings
15	Frøyland (2017)	Key qualities in work inclusion of vulnerable youth.	Work inclusion Unemployed persons	Work inclusion qualities include 1) establishing 'normal' relationships, 2) long-term follow-up, 3) building self-confidence and faith in the future, and 4) helpers prepared to drive the process at times.
16	Erstad (2017)	'For us, you are worthy all the way': Managers' experiences of providing following up to sick employees with mental health problems	RTW Persons with mental health problems	There may be challenges related to openness, communication, and the opportunities for facilitation that exist in the workplace. Managers are ambivalent regarding conflicting considerations of the needs of employees and the needs of the workplace. Some managers need more knowledge of mental health and sick leave.
17	Espenes (2016)	Facilitating work for employees with mental health problems: Managers' handling of employees and challenges that managers face in this context	Work environment People with mental health problems Persons already employed	Contrary to a task-oriented management, a relational management style promotes inclusion in the workplace. However, relational management is more demanding for managers. The challenges faced by managers are related to balancing considerations of the individual and considerations of the organization.
18	Kinn et al. (2014)	'Balancing on skates of the icy surface of work': A Metasynthesis of Work Participation for Persons with Psychiatric Disabilities.	Work inclusion Persons with mental health problems Unemployed persons	For persons with mental health problems, retaining work means balancing several contradictions: helplessness and overconfidence, routine and excess stimulation, isolation and social demands, and discouragement and unrealistic expectations. Successful work inclusion requires skills and sufficient assistance.
19	Skarpaas et al. (2016)	Maximizing work integration in job placement of individuals facing mental health problems. Supervisor experiences.	Work inclusion Persons with mental health problems Unemployed persons	There are three prerequisites for job placement: 1) a committed manager who offers work tasks based on the employee's motivation, 2) strong, open relationships with a common understanding of the problems and what the work will entail, 3) continuous cooperation. Both the manager and the employee need support.
20	Mandal and Ose (2015)	Social responsibility at company level and inclusion of disabled persons: The case of Norway	Work inclusion Persons with disabilities Unemployed persons	Employers' attitudes and actions are more important for employees with disabilities than the sector, industry type, and company size. Regular contact with work life centers and anchoring work inclusion in companies' health and safety work and collective practices may be fruitful.

In-depth elaboration of Wadel´s concept

In this section, we apply Wadel's concept as a lens for an in-depth analysis of selected studies on workplace inclusion efforts, exploring its potential to provide new perspectives.

Workplace characteristics and processes

The selected studies explored a broad spectrum of processes and workplace characteristics that may influence the sustainable work inclusion of marginalized citizens. They described both intrinsic qualities and external obstacles related to the overall evolution of work life. They also identified processes and qualities at various levels. At the societal level, qualities such as the general progression of modern work life, increasing demands for efficiency, and the growing complexity of work tasks were discussed. Almost all studies referred to processes or characteristics at the organizational level – for example, reorganization processes, competitive tendering, or issues like staffing/understaffing – as barriers to the inclusion of employees with diverse support needs. An overview of workplace characteristics and processes described in the selected studies is presented in table 3:

Table 3 Processes and characteristics that may affect inclusion

Topics addressed	Processes and characteristics with potential influence
Qualities of work environment	• Conflicts between professions/employee groups – 'us' and 'them' (1). • Inadequate feedback culture (1). • Prejudice/discrimination because employers think that inclusion of marginalized groups incurs costs (6, 8, 9).
Perceived limitations in possibilities for task adjustment	• Limitations to how much facilitation is possible at a given time (3, 16). • Conflict between the needs of employees and the needs of the workplace (16). • Difficult to adjust work tasks; work organization viewed as fixed (10). • Workplace belief that it is not possible to combine illness with work (10).
Conflict and discontent	• Following up on health problems can be difficult. Conflicts may arise, managers may go 'beyond limits', knowledge of the challenges may be needed, employees may reveal more personal information than wished/needed (5). • Absence and being late lead to discontent among colleagues (13). • Work inclusion may lead to extra work for colleagues (13).
Periods with more challenges	• The first weeks of (re)employment are challenging. Later, (re)included employees feel more secure and can manage on their own (14).
External hindrances	• Doctors who quickly grant sick leave (11). • Confidentiality requirements are experienced as problems because employers do not obtain the required information about jobseekers, which makes it difficult to follow up, adjust work sufficiently, and prepare colleagues (13, 16).
Challenging work life in general	• Increased demands and complexity of work execution (1). • Restructuring and reorganization (1). • High demands, low control, and low social support (4). • Ethical dilemmas at work may lead to feelings of guilt and absence (11).

Note: The sources are numbered according to the list of included studies (see Table 2).

Characteristics that may affect inclusion processes, according to these studies, are associated with the work environment, such as the quality of dialogue between worker groups and the feedback culture (Buvik et al. 2018), or the presence of discriminatory attitudes and actions among colleagues or managers (Kuznetsova et al. 2017; Løvseth 2014; Schafft 2014). Employment protection can also become a barrier as companies may prioritize the involvement of employed 'insiders' over hiring unemployed 'outsiders' (Ose et al. 2015).

Several studies described a lack of possibilities for task adjustment. For instance, Erstad (2017), exploring managers' experiences with employees with mental health problems, found challenges related to openness and practical possibilities for facilitating tasks. Managers experienced conflicts between employee needs and workplace needs. Espenes (2016), studying managers' experiences with facilitating the work situation for employees with mental health problems, identified challenges related to balancing employee and workplace needs, finding the follow-ups could be emotionally straining.

Furthermore, a study on the retail industry found the need for follow-ups and task adjustment might shift in different periods (Jensen & Nergaard 2017), suggesting that processes and needs change over time. Some studies found that inclusion might lead to conflict and discontent among included employees, colleagues, or managers due to challenges related to different work speed or quality expectations, or difficulties in communication or involvement in the work environment (Nicolaisen 2017; Proba 2016).

Relevance and possible contribution of Wadel

The selected studies described a wide range of processes not commented on by Wadel, but like Wadel, they indicated that the quality of the relationships between the employee, the workplace, and/or the employer were crucial for sustainable work inclusion (Buvik et al. 2018; Knardahl et al. 2016; Lien & Bogen 2018; Løvseth 2014; Ose et al. 2015; Proba 2016; Schafft 2014). The reassurance of such relationships was also commented on, but directly only in one study (Frøyland 2017) that found acknowledging and praising positive workplace performance was a means of incorporation. The role of reassurances was, however, indirectly present in some studies (Buvik et al. 2018; Jensen & Nergaard 2017; Lien & Bogen 2018; Vold Hansen 2014). Processes of change in status as an employee were observed in one study (Jensen & Nergaard 2017) that described the retail industry as well-suited for including marginalized employees due to suitable tasks, low competence demands, and a focus on learning and career development.

We interpret the fact that the selected studies addressed processes relevant for inclusion at the workplace level, including the processes described by Wadel, as a sign of the relevance of Wadel's concept. However, none of the selected studies highlighted the importance of reassurances and processes of change in the same manner as Wadel. This may indicate that Wadel's concept, based on this limited sample of studies, introduces a perspective not so common in these fields. Thus, Wadel's perspective may increase the awareness of the role of reassurances of relationships and the ongoing development of work tasks and employee status.

Skills related to work inclusion

The studies refer to various types of skills in employers or job seekers necessary for sustainable work inclusion. Regarding personal skills, marginalized citizens – despite other research documenting their positive contributions to production – were often perceived as lacking experience, motivation, punctuality, and eagerness, and as having limited interests or capabilities from the workplace perspective. Table 4 contains an overview of skills related to work inclusion in the selected studies:

Table 4 Skills and skill deficits related to work inclusion

Groups examined	Skills and skill deficits
Employers, managers, or colleagues	• Facilitation can be difficult and requires knowledge of the health condition's implications for work (5). • Work inclusion and management necessitate considerable responsibility on the part of managers, who must be close to employees and observe, and prevent strain and sick leave (3). • Managers lack training, competence, and knowledge related to mental health challenges, as well as the skills necessary for dialogue about health-related issues (5, 8, 16, 17). • Employers have many daily tasks to perform and lack the capacity to handle and provide follow-up of troubled labor (7). • Employers lack experience in hiring workers with reduced work capacity (7). • There is a lack of continuity in persons holding employer or union representative positions, which may lead to frequent loss of acquired skills (7). • Mental challenges are experienced as more difficult than physical challenges (14). • Managers may need to address employees differently, as an employee's personality is important for cohesion and productivity (6). • There is a need for different leaders (15). Leaders need to shift from task-orientation to relation-orientation (17) and from being authoritarian to being transformative (16). • There is a need for active, visible, and qualified leaders who follow up (re)included individuals closely and can embed agreed-upon approaches in employees (11).

Note: The sources are numbered according to the list of included studies (see Table 2).

Several studies emphasized the importance of employer competence for facilitating inclusion processes and the workplace's ability to provide adequate facilitation (Erstad 2017; Espenes 2016; Jensen & Nergaard 2017; Ose et al. 2015; Schafft 2014). These studies suggested that leadership and management competence consisted of dialogue, facilitation, and follow-up of individuals with challenges, which was often difficult. Employers lacked training, experience, and competence in such matters, associating risks and potential costs with workplace facilitation and follow-up. Buvik et al. (2018) and Lien and Bogen (2018) found that successful leaders were visible and available. They stayed close to their employees, participated in informal settings, were curious and good listeners, and involved employees in finding good solutions. They could also be strict on agreed-upon policies and employees' duty to cooperate.

Studying two oil rigs, Løvseth (2014) found that a strong work culture, cooperation among colleagues, and the quality and style of managers contributed to increased presence and job engagement. Managers with transformative abilities and an emphasis on the psychosocial work environment had a stronger impact on employees' presence and work motivation than managers with an authoritarian management style. Similarly, Espenes (2016) advocated for a relation-oriented approach instead of a task-oriented approach, which often tended to pay more attention to the work task than to inclusion. Relation-oriented management was more demanding for managers and could thus be given lower priority.

Kuznetsova et al. (2017) argued that, if disabled persons were to be included in work life, their employers needed to be given greater responsibility. However, greater responsibility could lead to greater challenges in the relationships between employers and employees. Reporting on a trial in which employees could be absent from work without consulting a doctor by merely reporting directly to the manager, Proba (2016) found that the function of the scheme was to shift the responsibility for sick leave from doctors to the workplace. The dialogue between managers and employees became closer and with a greater emphasis on facilitation. However, the dialogue with employees could be challenging for managers to handle, and employees could share more personal issues than they wished as a result of this collaboration.

Relevance and possible contribution of Wadel

The skills of employers, included individuals, and colleagues were frequently referenced as relevant for understanding work inclusion efforts in several studies. Many of these studies highlighted the personal and relational skills described by Wadel. From the workplace perspective, challenges were perceived to stem from a lack of personal skills among included individuals who might struggle with working independently, managing fluctuating demands at work, or lack motivation while presenting themselves as more skilled than their colleagues might perceive. Other studies pointed to the need for relational skills in the workplace and among employers.

While the literature thus seems to support Wadel's emphasis on personal and relational skills, none of the included studies have thoroughly addressed the need for complementary skills among colleagues to maintain and develop relationships. Based on the analysis of these selected studies, Wadel's concept introduces a clearer focus on the role of colleagues in inclusion processes.

Approaches to facilitating sustainable work inclusion

Several of the selected studies followed a symmetric approach, suggesting the engagement of the work environment through the organization of work and tasks. For example, Vold Hansen (2014) demonstrated the possibility of creating an inclusive work environment, albeit challenging and requiring continuous efforts. Other studies found it feasible to adjust team tasks and workloads according to daily abilities of team members (Lien & Bogen 2018; Løvseth 2014; Vold Hansen 2014). Teams were portrayed as flexible and adjustable units that could boost motivation among employees

and could be tailored to the needs of team members. However, challenges arose when a team member did not conform to the team's specific culture. In table 5 we present an overview of approaches to facilitating sustainable work inclusion found in the selected studies:

Table 5 Approaches to sustainable work inclusion

Topics addressed	Inclusion approaches described or suggested
Engagement of the work environment	• Facilitating learning processes (8). • A culture that recognizes knowledge and offers the opportunity to work according to interests and competencies (11, 19). • Participation and co-determination; close involvement of employees (11). • Establishing a culture characterized by politeness and inclusion (11).
Organization of work	• Flexibility of work organization, adjustment of tasks, extra resources (10). • Task facilitation and adjustment to individual challenges (11).
Character of business/industry	• Industries such as construction, and retail sectors are suitable for inclusion because they have training systems, low competence demands, and are organized in groups/teams (13). • All training is conducted at the worksite (14).
Teams and groups	• Teams as means of relationship development, reassurances, and continuous change. Teams may increase informal task adjustment and have the ability to include (2, 3, 15). • The culture of the team/organization is important (6). • Group organization makes everyone visible and important and promotes participation/co-determination (11).
Support and follow-up	• Close follow-up of marginalized employees (7). • Mentoring in the workplace (7, 14). • Leaders as major facilitators (3, 19). • Support from external support agencies/professionals/the Labour and Welfare Administration (7, 8, 14, 20). • Quickly resolving conflicts at the lowest possible level in the workplace (11).
Support for leaders	• Individual and system-oriented on-the-job-support focusing on the indicative (individuals with challenges), selective (groups at risk), and universal levels (all employees) (8). • Support from employment and welfare services is needed (15).
Combined approaches	• Inclusion of marginalized groups can be combined with the production as long as not too many marginalized persons are included at the same time (14). • Combination of team support at work and advice/support from external services (15, 19).

Note: The sources are numbered according to the list of included studies (see Table 2).

Examining how individuals with psychiatric issues achieved and maintained work-life balance, Kinn et al. (2014) found that social support and encouragement from employers/colleagues were crucial facilitators. Support and assistance, combined with new skills and competencies, promoted the employment of persons with mental health problems. They also underscored the importance of work organization, suggesting

that clear and predictable tasks, roles, and responsibilities, and a balance between routine and structure on one hand and stimulation and challenges on the other were important.

A different symmetric quality was related to industry characteristics. For instance, Jensen and Nergaard (2017) suggested that the retail industry was well-suited as most learning and qualification occurred at the workplace. Some employers in this industry found that having a diverse workforce promoted inclusion and the development of inclusive leaders.

Other studies referred to the level of available support – often an asymmetric approach – as a vital element. In many companies, such support existed in HR departments, union representatives, and safety representatives, but might also be present in supportive and inclusive colleagues with related abilities and interests. External support agencies, such as occupational health services, employment and welfare services, and Supported Employment agencies, are also important facilitators of work inclusion (Eftedal et al. 2017; Nøkleby & Hernes 2017).

Some studies suggested combined approaches. For example, Skarpaas et al. (2016) identified three conditions central for successful job integration: 1) an engaged supervisor who based job activities on trainees' motivation, 2) strong, candid relationships promoting a common understanding of challenges and a realistic picture of the work in question, and 3) a commitment to continuous cooperation among all stakeholders (e.g., supervisor, trainee, and contact person at the Labour and Welfare Administration) (Skarpaas et al. 2016).

Relevance and possible contribution of Wadel

The approaches highlighted in the reviewed literature encompassed both symmetric and asymmetric methods, and combinations thereof. Studies on the work environment often focused on symmetric approaches, whereas studies on work inclusion and RTW tended to emphasize asymmetric approaches. Another observation is that work environment studies often focused on processes within the work environment, such as conflicts or feedback culture, whereas studies on work inclusion and RTW more frequently highlighted processes related to included individuals, such as facilitation or extra workloads for other employees. Studies on work inclusion and RTW often focused on the skills and abilities of leaders and others (e.g., workplace mentors) to facilitate and perform close follow-ups, whereas work environment studies often focused on leadership in general and the organization of work.

Few selected studies discussed combinations of symmetric and asymmetric approaches to inclusion in a direct and comprehensive manner, although some appeared to suggest such combinations. For instance, Kuznetsova et al. (2017) argued that a combination of support systems and flexible work arrangements was necessary for the inclusion of disabled persons in work life (Kuznetsova et al. 2017). Future studies may aim to unify these perspectives to learn more about the potential that a systematic and well-planned combination of symmetric and asymmetric approaches may hold. Wadel's concept has the potential to remind future researchers that both symmetric and asymmetric approaches are relevant and should be explored and facilitated.

What is the contribution of 'Incorporation'?

The in-depth exploration above demonstrates that adopting Wadel's concepts as a lens for inquiry brings focus to a multitude of processes, characteristics, skills, and approaches at the workplace that may impact inclusion efforts. As such, a workplace perspective on inclusion efforts is brought forward, which may serve to 'open up' the terms 'employer' or 'workplace' by providing concrete descriptions of the complexity of factors at play as part of incorporation processes. While the limited sample of studies selected for in-depth analysis pointed to a range of factors not directly commented on by Wadel, or to the same perspectives as those of Wadel, Wadel's concept seemed to bring a clearer focus to some issues:

1. The importance of continuous reassurances of established relationships.
2. The need to alter and develop employee status over time.
3. The necessity for complementary skills in employees.
4. The view of incorporation as a combination of processes, skills, and approaches.

Continued reassurances

Wadel suggests that for marginalized individuals, continuous reassurances of established relationships with the community may be of particular importance. This is supported by a substantial amount of literature on the role of social relations in the work inclusion of young people, indicating that for marginalized youth, a lack of inclusive relationships and minor issues at the workplace such as lack of smiles or polite responses from co-workers may lead to drop-out (Frøyland 2020). Much of this research has emphasized the need for close follow-up, the facilitation of ongoing mastery, natural support, and social inclusion. However, the concept of 'reassurance' of established relationships is rarely used directly in the studies we have read. Perhaps the act of providing such 'reassurances' lies at a level of detail of inclusion processes that is not often mentioned. Thus, while Wadel does not bring a completely new perspective with this concept, it serves as a reminder of an action that facilitators of work inclusion need to pay attention to, and that scholars in the field should also keep in mind, as the lack of such 'reassurances' may be a reason why included citizens fall out of work again.

Develop employee status

Although factors that can facilitate long-term inclusion are discussed in the reviews we referred to in the background section, such as Enehaug, Spjelkavik, Alves, et al. (2022), both the selected studies for in-depth analysis and the reviews seem to lack a particular focus on the development of employee status. Gensby et al.'s (2019) view of RTW as a multifaceted change process may, however, overlap with this aspect. The importance of career development – which may be closely affiliated with the change of status – is not new in the field of work inclusion. For instance, it is a vital part of Supported Employment approaches (Frøyland 2018). However, the topic receives little attention in the literature we have studied. This is perhaps related to the fact that much of the

research literature focuses predominantly on job finding and employment, and does not view job-match as something to be developed over time. Little focus is generally put into how to support marginalized citizens to stay in work and to develop as a worker. Wadel's concept, therefore, serves as a reminder of an important issue that is not new, but is often given little attention.

Complementary skills in colleagues

The idea that incorporation requires not only skills and qualities in the included individual but is also dependent on complementary skills in co-workers perhaps represents the most important contribution from Wadel's concept. This idea shifts the focus away from the included individual (supply-side) toward the role of the colleague/the workplace (demand-side) and suggests that it is the combination of the two that is required. While the idea that incorporation is something you do together with others may not be new, the focus on this as part of work inclusion efforts is limited. A vital critique toward ALMPs and work inclusion efforts across several countries is that they are too supply-side focused, aiming mainly to develop the employability of the individual (Frøyland et al. 2019; Ingold & Stuart 2015). Also, the increasing demand-side focus tends to address employers (employer engagement) rather than workplaces and colleagues (Ingold & McGurk 2023).

Wadel's concept, thus, emphasizes more clearly the importance of co-workers' ability to build relationships with included citizens, which requires a shift in focus from the employer's role to co-workers' actions and 'workplace engagement'. While this shift is in line with several of the reviews/studies we referred to in the background section (Enehaug, Spjelkavik, Alves, et al. 2022; Gensby et al. 2019; Gustafsson et al. 2018; Spjelkavik et al. 2022), Wadel's focus on 'complementarity' underlines in a more distinct manner that in order to incorporate, one must address the collaboration and match between the included individual and the nearby colleagues at the workplace.

Incorporation as a combination of processes, skills, and approaches

A significant attribute of Wadel's concept lies in suggesting a theory of incorporation as a combination of a limited number of processes, skills, and approaches. None of the selected studies for the in-depth elaboration attempted to develop a theory of how to incorporate someone into a community. However, some of the studies/reviews similarly adopted a comprehensive perspective on sustainable work inclusion. This is particularly true for Gensby et al. (2019), who derived a program theory on RTW for persons with CMD with the following key components: 1) The nature of CMDs and illness trajectories pose complex workplace challenges. 2) Work-focused training and individual support are critical for recovery and regaining work ability. 3) Facilitating RTW requires close attention to work modifications and social relations. 4) RTW is the result of a multifaceted workplace-focused change process.

A different kind of theory of sustainable work inclusion was suggested by Enehaug, Spjelkavik, Falkum et al. (2022) who, without focusing on a particular target group, contended that sustainable work inclusion depends not only on a certain level of workplace

inclusion competence but also on the inclusion skills competence of frontline workers in support services related to individuals, workplaces, and inclusion/exclusion processes. According to Enehaug et al., these competencies are largely interdependent and it is essential that external support organizations are involved in the organizational context in which these inclusion processes take place. Enehaug et al. perceive sustainable work inclusion as a kind of co-creation in which the included individuals, actors in the workplace, such as colleagues and managers, and external support providers participate. Such collaborative processes can be seen as a kind of engagement of the workplace through a combination of asymmetric and symmetric approaches.

While there are differences between these attempts to understand sustainable work inclusion that we have referred to in this study, they share the view that inclusion processes are complex and long change processes that shift over time and in which both the workplace actors, external resources, and the included individuals participate. By focusing not on a particular target group nor on a particular type of community, Wadel's theory is of a more general kind than that of Gensby et al.'s and Enehaug et al.'s. Wadel's theory adds valuable insights on what incorporation may require on a general level, and that inclusion efforts directed toward certain target groups or arenas such as those referred to above, may learn from.

Conclusion

In this article, we reintroduced Cato Wadel's concept of incorporation and assessed its relevance and potential contribution to the field of sustainable work inclusion through a) an in-depth analysis of selected Norwegian studies of inclusion efforts at the workplace and b) in light of recent international studies/reviews on work inclusion, RTW, and job retention. We have drawn on research from various fields and provided an overview of processes, skills, and approaches that may be relevant to sustainable work inclusion. Our analysis suggests that different research fields sharing a focus on inclusion at the workplace level have the potential to complement each other. Wadel's concept contributes to the challenge of facilitating sustainable work inclusion of marginalized individuals in particular by representing a general theory of incorporation that studies and attempts at theory development for certain target groups or on certain arenas can relate to and learn from.

In addition, the concept of 'incorporation' seems to highlight some qualities that receive little attention in many studies of work inclusion. One is the importance of continuous reassurances of established relationships, another is the significance of continuous change and development of status as an employee, and a third is the prominence of complementary skills of colleagues. Thus, viewing the challenge of sustainable work inclusion through the prism of Wadel's concept provides a perspective on incorporation into a community, such as a workplace, that differs from that adopted in the studies analyzed. A broad and well-developed framework on the incorporation of marginalized citizens into work is evidently rare. We believe that further analysis of work inclusion efforts using this framework and other comprehensive approaches, such as Gensby et al.'s (2019) program theory, Enehaug, Spjelkavik, Falkum, et al.'s (2022) reflections on workplace inclusion skills, and possibly others as well, may generate new knowledge on how to facilitate sustainable work inclusion or incorporation of marginalized citizens in the workplace.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The reformulation of Wadel´s theory is our attempt to extract its major points. It is possible that we did not select what Wadel would have seen as crucial elements. The fact that the literature selected for in-depth analysis was drawn from the Norwegian context can represent a weakness since we cannot be sure that other studies have similar findings. Other research on Nordic work life, however, shows many similarities between Nordic countries. Therefore, Norwegian experiences should be relevant to other Nordic countries. The generalizability to non-Nordic countries is more uncertain. The varying quality of the selected studies may constitute another weakness, which was due to a lack of high-quality studies on inclusion effort in the workplace.

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