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Psychological Aspects of Inclusive Socio-Cultural Projects

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ABSTRACT

This article presents, for the first time, a delineation of the primary psychological dimensions inherent to inclusive socio-cultural projects. The author conducts an analysis of the sources on inclusion, highlighting the conspicuous absence of a dedicated focus on the psychology of inclusive interaction. Additionally, the author introduces case studies derived from personal project experiences accumulated over several years, which facilitate the identification of both strengths and challenges associated with inclusive socio-cultural endeavors. An operational definition of such projects is provided. A comprehensive table outlining the psychological characteristics specific to inclusive socio-cultural projects is developed. The paper demonstrates distinct psychological situations and features encountered at each project stage - namely, ideation, implementation, and evaluation. These insights are intended to inform future practical efforts aimed at fostering inclusive cultures across diverse national contexts.

Keywords: *inclusion, inclusive interaction, inclusive culture, values of inclusion, inclusive socio-cultural project, project stages, empathy, engagement*

Introduction

Given their relative cost-effectiveness and potential for substantial long-term social impact, socio-cultural projects are critically important within the inclusion area in the culture. In this context, issues related to interaction, communication, and collaborative decision-making play a pivotal role in cultivating a psychologically harmonious environment. However, fundamental concepts associated with the aforementioned terminology remain underdeveloped both in theoretical frameworks and applied practices.

A socio-cultural project is often broadly interpreted as any cultural activity; however, this paper delineates its specific features and distinctions. Frequently, inclusive projects are conflated with segregation rather than genuine engagement or integration of diverse social groups into shared spaces and activities. Consequently, the psychological components underpinning these processes have been insufficiently studied - often only acknowledged through participant or initiator comments rather than systematically analyzed.

The relevance of this research is underscored by contemporary cultural trends:

- the tendency among cultural professionals to reduce communication parameters without sufficient familiarity with the nuances of different social groups' perceptions and behaviors;
- the underestimation of creative capacities across various demographic categories;
- the prevalence of unprofessional design practices characterized by stereotypes and unsubstantiated assumptions aimed at achieving impressive results while neglecting individual well-being;
- the near-complete absence of practical guidelines for implementing inclusive interactions.

Research hypothesis. This study proceeds from the premise that psychological factors increasingly influence inclusive socio-cultural projects due to their inherently complex nature and significant variability in participants' conditions, abilities, and behaviors. Accordingly, an analysis combining personal experiential insights with theoretical sources will facilitate a clearer identification of prevalent psychological phenomena. These findings can subsequently inform practical approaches and serve as a basis for classifying socio-cultural inclusive initiatives.

Methodology

Currently, scholarly research predominantly focuses either on the inclusivity of environments - such as social or cultural centers, public spaces, and urban areas in general [Dohotariu], [Keeling at all], [Starovoit] - or on the socio-cultural dimensions of inclusive education within specific domains, for example, engineering [Bystrova, Tokarskaja, Agilera], [Sudakova]. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11 emphasizes the necessity of making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. This entails attention not only to static environments but also to dynamic contexts - such as project-based, event-driven, and communicative settings. Consequently, the subject of this research is the elucidation of psychological aspects inherent to socio-cultural inclusive projects, which have been developed, implemented, and analyzed by the author and colleagues over more than a decade.

The initial section of this study involves presenting refined definitions of core concepts underpinning the research and clarifying what constitutes an inclusive socio-cultural project as an object of psychological analysis. Central to this inquiry is the model of the human being within humanitarian research paradigms, including psychological sciences. Notably, between 2010 and 2020, two prominent trends are observable:

A shift away from narrowly specialized, quantitative representations of individuals - focusing on abilities, states, and actions—toward more holistic and comprehensive existential

constructs such as “happiness” (R. Florida, N. Salingaros [Salingaros]), “well-being” (C. Ellard [Ellard 2021], [Ellard], C. Ryff [Ryff], L.V. Tokarskaya [Sensory...]), which posit that individuals attain these states within “friendly”, “responsive”, “adaptive”, “responsible”, and similar environments that encompass both social and material surroundings.

An acknowledgment of the necessity for interaction among diverse individuals to facilitate societal development at all levels - from microgroups to entire cities or large communities [Noon], [Zwilling].

The potential for generating and creating new phenomena as an intrinsic human capacity - distinguishing humans from animals - has been discussed in early works by K. Marx (see [Bystrova 2017, pp. 171-175]). The systemic nature of design as a discipline is most thoroughly examined by representatives of industrial design and marketing: D.A. Azrikan, B. Archer, T. Brown, V.L. Glazychev, J.Ch. Jones, P. Row; from a socio-cultural perspective - A.S. Avtonomov and N.D. Khananishvili [Avtonomov]. Interpreting their insights within our thematic framework benefits from understanding the socio-cultural sphere as a space of values and meanings - a conceptualization developed through Russian scholars in cultural studies such as M.M. Bakhtin, Yu.B. Borev, V.V. Bychkov, I.Ya. Murzina, M.S. Kagan, A.Ya. Flier among others.

The cognitive foundations of design are extensively presented in works by J.Ch. Jones, B. Lawson [Lawson]. The psychology of the socio-cultural sphere remains underexplored; notable exceptions include E. Makarova's studies related to teacher-student relationships within inclusive processes [Makarova]. Therefore, it is pertinent to adapt pedagogical frameworks concerning community-building in inclusive education [Sreckovic] and psychological approaches examining inclusion within labor collectives [Cassidy] to the context of socio-cultural projects.

This methodological approach aims to integrate interdisciplinary insights -spanning humanitarian sciences, design theory, cultural studies, and

psychology -to comprehensively analyze the psychological dimensions underpinning inclusive socio-cultural initiatives across various stages of development and implementation.

A.Y. Shemanov explores various dimensions of inclusive interaction, highlighting the systemic transformation of inclusion. He positions it as a strategy to combat the stigmatization of the “other”, often seen as foreign and unwelcome [Shemanov, p. 653]. The researcher emphasizes the creative potential of inclusive education in fostering harmonious social interactions, addressing the complexities of perceiving individuals with physical and mental differences as fully realized beings through the lens of inclusive anthropology. He examines the socio-cultural implications of developmental deviations in individuals.

It is important to emphasize that such a transformation becomes feasible due to a paradigmatic shift in the socio-humanitarian framework as a whole: pragmatism [Vilchinskaya] gives way to an understanding of the uniqueness and potential inherent in each individual.

The second section of this article will present a series of author-developed inclusive socio-cultural projects, primarily involving individuals of various ages with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Participant observation conducted at different stages of these projects facilitates the identification of their underlying psychological components. To structure this information, we employ a systemic conceptualization of the socio-cultural project as a social-communicative process, which encompasses the initiator (and/or client), implementers, participants, the environment of project realization, the tangible outcomes, the stance of experts, and modes of its expression. Each component exhibits psychological features that are conditioned both by the socio-cultural nature of the project and by its inclusivity.

Commentaries on these case studies illuminate these psychological characteristics, enabling their synthesis in the concluding section of the work. Furthermore, they serve as a foundation for

outlining future research directions aimed at enhancing the quality of cultural activities and fostering the development of an inclusive societal culture as a whole.

Results

For the first time, a definition of an inclusive socio-cultural project has been provided, taking into account its value-based and psychological components.

The synthesis of data derived from theoretical sources and the author's personal experience has enabled the creation of a unique table illustrating the key psychological characteristics of an inclusive socio-cultural project (Table 1). The characteristics listed in columns 1-3 should be summarized when it is necessary to consider all potential challenges associated with an inclusive project.

Table 1 - Psychological features of the stages of an inclusive socio-cultural project

Project phase	1 Psychological issues or potential difficulties of any project, identified in the works on project thinking	2 Additional psychological factors of the socio-cultural project identified during the practice	3 Additional psychological factors of an inclusive socio-cultural project identified during practice
Pre-project analysis	<p>Realistic assessment of the initial situation by the initiators of the project</p> <p>Empathy as a stage and quality of project activity</p> <p>Overcoming stereotypes about the situation or future actions and products</p> <p>Building communications between team members</p>	<p>The adequacy of understanding the basic values of a socio-cultural project</p> <p>Emotional and value component of analytical work (which is not present in technical design)</p>	<p>The inability of a part of the participants in the process to fully understand the project situation, the growing number of informing and explanatory actions</p> <p>Recognition of the equal importance of all participants in the process, including themselves</p>
Implementation of the project idea	The coherence of the actions of the team	The difficulty of maintaining a working	Additional psychological stress during interaction

	<p>members and those involved in the project</p> <p>The difficulty of recognizing mistakes and the associated "rollbacks" by several steps back</p> <p>Ability to overcome stressful situations</p>	<p>attitude in the case of a long-term project - if necessary, its continuance for the interiorization of values (long-term effects from the project)</p> <p>The ability of project participants to self-organization</p>	<p>with representatives of other social groups</p> <p>Negative emotions generated by the possible delay of individual project actions</p> <p>The need for some participants to overcome the "As it is, everyone is obligated to give us what we need" position</p> <p>Closeness of some of the project participants to new information, new contacts and actions (for example, parents of children with mental disabilities)</p>
Presentation of project results to society	<p>Willingness to defend one's point of view</p> <p>Willingness to be criticized by experts</p>	<p>Anti-stress qualities, overcoming attitudes towards "unimportance" or the insignificance of socio-cultural projects</p>	<p>The fatigue of the participants, which prevails over the recognition of the importance of the project results</p> <p>Lack of built-in communications for longer-term interaction outside the project</p>

Derived and systematized, these characteristics provide a number of "reference points" for initiators or experts of inclusive socio-cultural projects, providing an understanding of where psychological barriers or even conflicts may

arise, or providing additional efforts to regulate the situation. Thus, inclusive cooperation will turn from the declaration into a reality, and inclusive culture in society will develop more actively.

Discussion

1 The analysis of the basic concepts of work in their connection with possible psychological processes and problems

It should be noted that the psychological aspects of project activity have been studied mainly not in connection with team interaction, but only from the point of view of cognitive processes occurring in the head of an individual. The **project** (Latin. *projectus* - thrown forward, protruding) how the “forward-thinking” of a thought or idea is based on the actual initial situation, which not only suggests a future result, but also significantly limits it. This requires immersion in the situation, clear, complete data from the pre-project analysis, ensuring an accurate formulation of the goal. This is also served by the presence of a conceptual framework that provides specification of goals and objectives: an idea born in the head of one person must be understood by other people and objectified in the way it was intended; otherwise, the vectors of efforts will be different and lead away from the result. The cognitive clarity of the formulations provides an understanding of the goals, which, in turn, determines the productive activity of the participants.

Goal setting is facilitated by setting the initiators of the project to solve a specific, even if not too large-scale, problem [Avtonomov], [Bystrova 2025]. Identifying and clarifying the problem is an important part of the pre-project stage, it is important not to give way to stereotypes, and to look at the situation, potential participants, their expectations and opportunities as objectively as possible. The idea of a project, including a socio-cultural one, cannot be arbitrary declared, it must be defined or at least clarified during the analysis of the initial situation, and only then adjusted to the most significant of the external requirements. An example of replacing a real problem with a certain, albeit humane, social stereotype was provided by the unfinished project to create a

public space for people of different ages, “Agora” (Yekaterinburg, 2019–2023). The initiators of the project sought to introduce elderly people who are currently retired and, as they believed, seeking to expand their social circle into common actions to create a platform. In fact, pensioners did not perceive isolation as a problem, considering it much more burdensome and somewhat unfair for them to regularly participate in labor activities. The initiators focused on the stereotype of the “lonely old person”, whereas the real problem was a powerful social distrust that gave rise to the idea among older people that their work was being “used”. Misunderstanding on both sides, even with a draft of the future public space and an information company in the form of posters and souvenirs, led to the fading of the project, which involved the involvement and interaction of previously unknown people during the formation of a multifunctional urban site. As for the psychological component, there is an obvious underestimation of the complexities of intergenerational communication in the early stages of the project.

Experience has shown that the expectations of the target audience, for example, parents of people with disabilities, are very often overestimated, which leads to asymmetric communications and, as a result, does not allow the project to be realized. Common actions were not regarded as such, but were interpreted as assistance, moreover, mandatory (in the spirit of “as it is, everyone is obligated to give us what we need”). For example, in the “School of Inclusive Design” project (Presidential Grant 2021), students with mild mental disabilities did not want to perform simple actions to select photos for a calendar intended for their mothers, shifting this “work” to volunteers.

Along with goal-setting, project activity requires, at least for the stage of divergence, different opinions and positions that “undermine” (J.Ch. Jones) and expand the initial habitual situation, freeing from predetermined and possibly arbitrary or biased decisions. This moment is difficult for different people for a variety of reasons, from the difficulty of abandoning the usual, stereotypical course of action to

uncontrollable worries that “everything is in vain and we won’t do anything”. Here we can talk about the psychology of the perception of novelty (or rejection of the known, going beyond it), excitement, skepticism, high expectations, etc. and then project this onto the project team, that is, multiply worries by the number of participants in the process of developing a new one.

In **socio-cultural projects**, due to the multiplicity of participants and determinants (grant conditions, the inclusion of professionals with their attitudes and stereotypes in an extra-professional situation, the dependence of participants on parents, etc.), the degree of ambiguity of the result may be no less high than in scientific or engineering. At the same time, they are distinguished by the equal importance of the design process and result, since the interaction of the participants and their “discovery” of each other are no less important than the substantive embodiment of any design idea. The unifying element of a socio-cultural project as a whole is the presence of certain cultural values in it and the possibility of their development or elaboration by the participants [Bystrova 2025]. In inclusive projects, along with the experience of novelty, “constant confrontation with “otherness” requires tolerance and knowledge from everyone who strives for dialogue and communication” [Makarova]. The psychological component becomes much more significant in them, and it must be taken into account when developing the idea and concept of such projects. If, following N.V. Starovoi, inclusion is considered a special philosophy, a special form of worldview [Starovoi], then it is necessary to pay research attention to the degree of participants’ conviction in their chosen path, their superficial or deep living of the values of inclusion. For the initial assessment, you can use the data from surveys or other research activities.

Based on the author’s definition of an inclusive space, we can formulate the definition of an inclusive socio-cultural project in a similar way. “An inclusive urban space is a space that provides opportunities for its use to meet the needs of the widest possible range of possible users, regardless of social, property or other status” [Bystrova, Tokarskaya, p. 163], ensuring emotional, physical

and sensory well-being [Emirati Dictionary]. A socio-cultural project as such involves creative actions based on shared spiritual values. An inclusive socio-cultural project adds to this the development of new, inclusive values in the course of interaction between representatives of different social groups. In turn, the most important condition for the emergence of these values is compliance with the level of mental development and the needs of each group, which brings its psychological component to the fore when developing a project.

Since this topic has not been developed in world and Russian theory, we will analyze the experience of the author’s projects in 2016-2025, commenting on it from the point of view of psychology.

2 Psychological components of inclusive socio-cultural projects: cases from 2016-2025, developed by T. Y. Bystrova, L. V. Tokarskaya

2.1. Inclusive project with involvement

The “Learning to Learn” project (2018) assumed the activation of interaction between parents of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) on the eve of their children’s admission to school. We have identified as a problem the lack of educational and educational efforts of parents and teachers; the lack of popular and competently presented information about the education and socialization of children with autism spectrum disorders for specific target audiences (parents, teachers, tutors); numerous facts of incomplete information about the child or overestimation of his capabilities by parents, interfering with learning and socialization and harmful to himself the child. The idea of the project was to create and enhance communication between parents of children with ASD, on the one hand, and teachers and tutors, on the other, during the preparation and adaptation of the child to school, including at the stage of passing the psychological, medical and pedagogical commission (PMPC), during the creation by parents of comprehensive objective presentations, including the necessary information about a child with ASD. Presentations can be addressed to the teacher, the children of

the class, and specialists and take into account their level of awareness. The project was complex in nature, based on cultural and anthropological foundations, i.e. It was not limited to a medical or pedagogical (methodical) component.

During seminars and master classes, parents exchanged experiences, learned to capture and present various aspects of their child's behavior, skills, characteristics, achievements, difficulties of interacting with him, etc. They understood the need to provide specialists, teachers, and classroom children with information that helps overcome fears and alienation; as well the importance of parents' communicative efforts to adapt a child with ASD to school and other children; as well the importance for parents, educators, and psychologists of consistently collecting and systematizing information about a child with ASD, helping to track the positive or negative dynamics of his development in various areas, from everyday behavior and communication to academic skills.

The clarity of the pre-project analysis has reduced many of the risks of this project. However, the "adult" designers refused to be invited to it, citing a variety of circumstances, from employment to inability to speak in public. The presentation training was carried out by volunteers from among the students of the Ural Federal University. During the analysis of the results, it became clear that the initiators of the project underestimated the negative stereotypes of one of the groups (professional designers) regarding parents of children with disabilities. Wariness and disunity were not spoken out directly, but led to refusals that affected the start of the project.

2.2. Inclusive projects without direct interaction of participants

Taking into account the experience gained, in some cases we began to provide only for correspondence interaction of different groups of people. For example, in 2022-2024, an exhibition for the whole family was held twice, which included books on the topic of people with disabilities. The initiators of the project conducted webinars for parents, teachers, students and

trainees of professional retraining programs on the use of biblio-therapy resources. Further, students and trainees were offered tasks on collecting and systematizing lists of books for their own therapeutic library. At the final stage, more than 150 works are presented. There are five large sections: books by specialists; books by parents raising children with disabilities; books written by people with disabilities; works whose characters have limited health opportunities. At various stages of the project, about 200 people participated in the project, who got acquainted with the lives of people with disabilities and their loved ones, and learned how to contact them.

It must be recognized that projects without direct interaction lack the "atmospheric effect" [Turley] necessary to activate emotions and memory, that is, communicative and value changes occur among participants at a much more superficial level. Therefore, such actions cannot be limited only to informing about people with disabilities, in the future they need to be transferred to a more applied direction.

2.3. Inclusive projects with partial interaction of participants. "Yekaterinburg - my legacy", 2023

Those who perform the main tasks in a sociocultural inclusive project need preliminary data on the abilities, perceptions, and skills of people with disabilities involved in the project, as well as feedback from them at the final stage. Socio-cultural inclusive projects have become another type, reducing the psychological burden on participants due to the autonomous work of each group in the main part of the project.

So, in 2023-2024, a project was implemented to make it easier for people with disabilities and their relatives to get acquainted with the cultural locations of Yekaterinburg. The goal was to create an open resource for people with disabilities of different nosologies about the most important cultural sites, monuments and heritage sites of the Yekaterinburg agglomeration in three formats (digital, offline, polygraphic) indicating their value, accessibility and visiting opportunities: transport and physical accessibility, availability of food outlets, sensory-safe areas, inclusive support. The

project was dedicated to the 300th anniversary of Yekaterinburg.

When we proposed the project idea, we understood that people with disabilities (autism spectrum disorders, hearing loss, mild forms of mental retardation, etc.) are often confined in very narrow spaces at home and at school. For their development, career guidance, and socialization, it is necessary to broaden their cultural and social horizons, but due to the poor financial situation of their families, they often do not have access to information and places themselves. In Yekaterinburg, which is rich in culture and heritage, there are few inclusive forms of working with it. Monuments of the XVIII-XX centuries. They are often unknown or underestimated (for example, constructivism), and the project will create the prerequisites for studying and visiting. For our target audience, with their absent-mindedness and short-term memory, multiple repetitions and tactile contact with information are important [Rodionova], but there are no cultural and educational products of this format, which means that we need to develop appropriate content and organize it correctly, taking into account the level of abilities of various participants.

After a pre-project analysis using the empathy method, it was decided that the information is placed on a touchpad, which can be mastered by a person with disabilities, for whom tactile communication methods are important. At the same time, information is posted on the website and in a paper guide. For each facility, its brief description and history, transport and pedestrian accessibility, data on the sensory well-being of the environment, food outlets, recreation, working hours, and the availability of inclusive programs and staff are reported. QR-codes provide access to websites of organizations that can be used by a parent or teacher. Three trajectories contribute to memorability in people with disabilities. The envisaged multiplicity of trajectories ensured greater availability and efficiency of the resource. It required volunteers to access heritage sites, analyze the terrain, noise levels, transport accessibility, and so on. By photographing and writing a text about a place in the so-called "simple

language" format, the participants unwittingly put themselves in the place of a person with disabilities, and saw the city in a new way. At the final stage, they showed their products to children with disabilities, looked at how understandable they were, and communicated (Fig. 1).

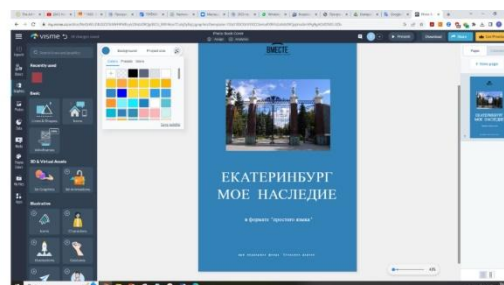


Fig. 1. The project's splash screen and the cover of the book "Yekaterinburg - my legacy". 2023-2024. Design: T. Yu. Bystrova

Conclusion

Due to the relative youth of the topic we are presenting, all its components - inclusion as a special type of human interaction and a special culture, involvement as a process of nonviolent entry of an individual or group of people into a community, and finally, socio-cultural design - have a low degree of scientific development in Russia and abroad. Requiring great tact, skill, and thoughtfulness of all actions, inclusion is replaced by segmentation and segregation [Mentor], [Uslaner], sometimes initiated by teachers or parents of people with disabilities who have negative experiences or simply seek to save effort; involvement results in formal enrollment in a group, perhaps without changing anything in the value scale and character communication of an individual; a socio-cultural project involving problematics and novelty is a standard event.

Genuine inclusion erases not only social, but also age, psychological, and educational boundaries. The fundamental principles and techniques of sociocultural projects implementing an inclusive approach can be derived only from practice, only through understanding failures, bottlenecks, weaknesses and achievements. Being at the beginning of this journey, the authors understand that it requires the interaction of researchers and

designers from different cultures and different countries. The derived psychological aspects of socio-cultural inclusive projects will help them to be more thoughtful, conceptual and effective in the future. The experience will lead to the development of an inclusive culture of society and can become a valuable resource in supporting people with disabilities [Ashworth], those who care for them, as well as those who are not indifferent and seek to help people from other social groups.

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