

Is Social Exclusion a Useful Concept for Policy-Makers in Australia?



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In Australia the concept of social exclusion has permeated government thinking about welfare reform with policy solutions centred on the idea that social exclusion can be prevented by integration into paid employment. However, the term continues to attract criticism — in particular for the lack of emphasis on redistribution and on the ways in which social exclusion is generated through mainstream processes such as market competition. Any assessment of the usefulness of contested concepts such as social exclusion needs to focus on whether or not the concept assists policy-makers to tease out the complex, interconnected, factors pertinent to particular experiences of poverty and deprivation. I argue that Amartya Sen's way of thinking about poverty and social exclusion and the analytical distinction he draws between constitutive and instrumental forms of exclusion and active and passive forms of exclusion assists policy-makers to do just that.

Introduction

In Australia the concept of social exclusion has permeated government thinking about welfare reform with policy solutions centred on the idea that social exclusion can be prevented by integration into paid employment. For example, a discussion paper put out by the Commonwealth Government on a new working-age income support system identified self-reliance and social inclusion as the two key objectives of Australia's needs-based social support system, with paid work being the primary mechanism through which both objectives were to be achieved:

The Government believes that paid work enhances both self-reliance and social inclusion and that policies to enable paid work benefit the whole community...[Consequently] people who can work, whether full-time or part-time, are expected and assisted to do so. People who are not yet job ready are expected and assisted to improve their chances of getting paid work over the longer term (DFCS 2002: verso and 9).

More recently, the idea that employment is the best safeguard against social exclusion was given concrete expression in the Commonwealth government's welfare-to-work legislation which, from 1 July 2006, requires single parents with school age children and people with disabilities assessed as being able to work 15 hours a week to be actively looking for work (Treasury 2005).

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For social policy-makers the concept of social exclusion raises the question 'excluded from what and by whom?' That is, it focuses attention on the "social and economic processes and the institutions and agents that create exclusion" (Jones and Smyth 1996:16). Advocates of the concept argue that this emphasis on process helps policy-makers better understand the causes and consequences of exclusion and deprivation which in turn opens up new possibilities in terms of policy intervention (Berghman 1997:7; Bradshaw 2004:168; Fincher and Saunders 2001:14).

However, critics of the concept argue that policy responses (such as those adopted by Australian and European governments) that focus on integrating excluded individuals into mainstream processes are inadequate because they ignore the ways in which mainstream institutions and processes create or exacerbate poverty (Atkinson 2000:1041). Thus, unemployment is seen as a problem but low paid insecure employment is not because the individual is participating in the labour market. Critics argue that if society is viewed as consisting of an included majority and a number of excluded minorities, attention is drawn away from inequalities within the included (for example, inequalities resulting from gender or age) and policy solutions tend to focus on changing the circumstances of the excluded individuals so that they are pushed over the line rather than changing existing structural inequalities affecting both included and excluded (Goodin 1996:342; Geddes 2000:791; Levitas 1998:7). For example, while Australian women currently experience expanded educational and employment opportunities compared with those available to their grandmothers and great-grandmothers, they continue to be responsible for most of the unpaid caring work and domestic labour which, in a labour market that still operates on the assumption that full-time employees do not have significant caring or domestic responsibilities, makes it difficult for women to access career type jobs or higher level positions.

Critics of this 'weak version' of social exclusion propose an alternative 'strong version' which takes account of existing unequal power relations by acknowledging the way in which disadvantage is distributed and perpetuated throughout society (Martin 2004:89). I argue that Amartya Sen's way of thinking about social exclusion — in particular his view of the relationship between poverty and social exclusion and his analytical distinction between constitutive and instrumental forms of exclusion and active and passive forms of exclusion — assists policy-makers to focus on the ways in which mainstream processes and institutions create or exacerbate poverty and inequality.

The relationship between poverty and social exclusion

Social exclusion occurs when an individual is unable to participate in the key activities of the society in which they live.¹ Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachaud (2002b:31) identify four key activities relevant to inclusion in British society in the 1990s. These are: consumption (the capacity to purchase goods and services); production (participation in economically or socially valuable activities); political engagement (involvement in local or national decision-making); and social integration (integration with family, friends and community). This definition is not significantly different from Townsend's (1979:31) influential definition of poverty.

¹ Individuals can be prevented from participating in key activities or they can choose not to participate. For example, individuals may choose not to engage in the political process. While voluntary non-participation may have negative effects on those who choose not to participate, or on the wider community, involuntary exclusion is of more concern. Therefore, in this paper, the term 'social exclusion' refers to involuntary exclusion.

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Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary...in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, *excluded* [emphasis added] from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities.

Both Townsend and Burchardt *et al.* recognise the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion. Both definitions emphasise exclusion from participation in everyday activities as the defining characteristic of poverty and social exclusion and in both definitions poverty and social exclusion are defined in relative rather than absolute terms. Where the two definitions depart from each other is in relation to the causes of poverty and social exclusion.

For Townsend, individuals, families or groups are said to be in poverty if they lack, or are denied, the resources enabling them to participate fully in society (Townsend 1987:140). Burchardt *et al.* (2002a:7-9) go further, identifying a wide range of individual, family, local, national and international factors that may affect the resources an individuals have at their disposal. For example, the extent to which an individual is able to participate in key activities may be affected by their age or gender, whether they have children or other caring responsibilities, the level of access to schools or health services, the country's social security system, or global factors such as the way the international trading system operates.

Definitions of contested concepts such as poverty are inevitably bound up with attempts to operationalise the concept. While Townsend's definition of poverty does not preclude the possibility that an individual lacks both material and non-material resources, poverty researchers have traditionally focused on lack of material resources in empirical studies. Thus, because poverty researchers have focused on income measures of poverty, they regard poverty as a sub-set of social exclusion. That is, poverty occurs when a lack of material resources (income) leads to deprivation and non-participation, whereas social exclusion encompasses non-participation resulting from a broad range of factors, not just a lack of material resources (Larsen 2003:5).

Sen views poverty as a matter of capability deprivation. That is, an individual is said to be in poverty when they lack the capability to lead a minimally decent life (Sen 2000:4). For Sen, living a minimally decent life goes beyond the obvious physical requirements of meeting nutritional requirements, escaping avoidable diseases and having access to shelter and clothing, to include access to education, living without shame and being able to participate in community activities (Sen 1983:163-64). Just as the conditions that constitute a minimally decent life are diverse, so too are the reasons why an individual is unable to live such a life. Thus lack of income is a major reason, but not the only reason, an individual lacks basic capabilities (Sen 1999:87). Unemployment, ill health, lack of education or social exclusion may also restrict people's choices to such an extent that they are no longer able to live the kind of life that they value (Sen 1999:108). Therefore, for Sen, poverty is the broader concept, with social exclusion being part of capability deprivation (poverty) as well as a reason why individuals do not have the capability to lead a minimally decent life (Sen 2000:5).

But does it matter how policy-makers think about poverty and social exclusion? I believe that it does. Concepts such as poverty and social exclusion are simultaneously descriptive and prescriptive. Because they describe an unacceptable state of affairs, some sort of policy response is demanded. Competing definitions, often reflecting differing political and

intellectual traditions, are of more than academic interest because the way poverty or social exclusion is conceptualised influences the type of policies put forward to overcome the unacceptable state of affairs labeled poverty or social exclusion (Townsend 1979:32; Alcock 1997:4; de Haan 1998:12). For example, if poverty is defined as a lack of material resources (measured by cash income) then the policy response is to provide individuals with additional cash benefits — as Australia does through means-tested pensions and benefits. On the other hand, a more multi-dimensional view of poverty implies that policy-makers need to look beyond the maintenance of adequate cash incomes and cannot assume that enhancing material resources will necessarily lead to improved outcomes (Hills 2002:227).

Thinking about poverty as a lack of freedom to live the kind of life that is valued focuses attention on the question of agency (the ability to take control of one's life) and the structural impediments preventing individuals from exercising agency. Furthermore, taking poverty as the broader concept means that everything does not have to be explained in terms of exclusion — deprivation can result from unfavourable inclusion as well as exclusion.

Many problems of deprivation arise from unfavourable terms of inclusion and adverse participation. ... [It is] very important to distinguish between the nature of a problem where some people are being *kept out* (or at least *left out*) and the characteristics of a different problem where some people are being included — may even be forced to be included — in deeply unfavourable terms (Sen 2000:28–9 emphasis in original).

Recognising that deprivation can be caused by unfavourable inclusion in the labour market, for example, as well as unemployment (exclusion from the labour market), focuses attention on the nature of the employment experienced by a particular individual or group of workers and hence on the processes that lead to capability deprivation. For example, in Australia the contracting out of cleaning services in offices, schools, hospitals and factories together with the deregulation of the cleaning labour market through the introduction of individual workplace agreements has led to lower rates of pay, increasing workloads, poorer conditions and more insecure hours in an industry already characterised by low wage levels (Watson, Buchanan, Campbell and Briggs 2003:127–29).

Policies such as those embodied in the welfare-to-work legislation are based on the belief that any job is better than no job. That is, exclusion from employment is a problem, but unfavourable inclusion is not. The view has been clearly articulated by the then Minister for Workplace Relations, Kevin Andrews. "We believe that the best form of welfare that a person can have is to have a job. We know that within a year four in 10 people who have got a job have moved on to another, better job" (quoted in Secombe 2005). For some workers, particularly those employed in larger workplaces, low paid jobs are the stepping stone to better paid and more secure employment, but for others, particularly casual employees, low paid employment is a permanent reality.

In Australia, estimates of the working poor range from 10.6 per cent to 18.3 per cent of workers depending on the data source and poverty benchmark used (Watson *et al.* 2003:123 and 125). Furthermore, the distinction between employment and unemployment is often less than clear cut. Access to full-time permanent employment declined during the 1990s with only one quarter of all new jobs being full-time, and labour market 'churning' increased with workers moving between unemployment and employment in short-term casual or part-time positions, interspersed with participation in training and labour market programs or withdrawal from the work force (Watson *et al.* 2003:31–7).

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Sen's view of the relationship between poverty and social exclusion opens up the possibility that unfavourable inclusion may be an important causal influence which allows researchers to go beyond a simple included/excluded dichotomy to capture the complexity of the links between deprivation and mainstream institutions and processes. This process is further assisted by distinguishing between constitutive and instrumental and active and passive forms of exclusion and unfavourable inclusion.

Constitutive and instrumental

Sen (2000) argues that it is important to distinguish between exclusion (or unfavourable inclusion) that will always lead to capability deprivation (that is, the exclusion has constitutive relevance) and exclusion that is instrumental. Exclusion is not necessarily adverse, but may lead to other deprivations that do have constitutive relevance.

This difference can be usefully illustrated by exclusion from two services, health care and public transport. Lack of access to health services always leads to capability deprivation as an individual's health declines. On the other hand, lack of access to affordable public transport is an example of exclusion of instrumental importance. Not being able to access affordable public transport may not necessarily restrict an individual's capacity to enjoy the kind of life he or she values if, for example, the individual lives close to friends and relatives who are able to drive them to social events or doctor's appointments. However — as, for example, low income residents on the East and West coast of Tasmania are well aware — access to health care (which directly affects an individual's capacity to enjoy the kind of life he or she values) is often dependent on access to affordable public transport.

I don't have any transport. I can't get to hospital for physiotherapy. I should have it twice a week. I only have enough money to get the taxi one way but I don't have the strength to walk back. My leg has deteriorated something shocking (West coast resident cited in Anglicare Tasmania 2000:22).

Lack of access to public transport can also restrict an individual's ability to access education, labour market and community support services or family support and social activities. While clients of welfare services and welfare service providers are well aware of the ways in which lack of access to public transport contributes to capability deprivation, the link is less often made by government policies and programs or, where it is recognised, policy solutions remain under-funded. For example, residents living in Sambell Lodge (a residential care facility run by the Brotherhood of St Laurence in inner city Melbourne) with impaired mobility are unable to use public transport and funding limitations mean that Sambell Lodge is unable to meet the desires of these residents to maintain their independence and connection to the community (Waterhouse and Angley 2005:18). More generally, it is important for policy-makers to recognise these causal links if welfare service provision is to move beyond the fragmented 'silo' approach that still characterises much of service delivery in Australia.

As Sen (2000:4) notes, some deprivations may have both constitutive and instrumental importance. For example exclusion from the labour market (unemployment) or unfavourable inclusion in the labour market (low wage, seasonal or casual work) has constitutive importance because it is a direct cause of capability deprivation. However, unemployment or unfavourable inclusion in the labour market can also be the cause of further deprivations if, for example, individuals are unable to participate in social activities or community life.

Active and passive

As the name implies, active exclusion is the result of a deliberate decision to exclude certain people from particular opportunities. The Commonwealth government's decision to deny certain categories of refugees access to a range of benefits and government welfare programs is an obvious example of active exclusion. On the other hand, passive exclusion occurs when "there is no deliberate attempt to exclude" (Sen 2000:15); deprivation is the unintended result of social processes or policy decisions, as for example, when economic restructuring results in increases in unemployment in certain sections of society (Bryson and Winter 2002). Asking whether exclusion (or unfavourable inclusion) is active or passive forces policy-makers to consider the ways in which policies and practices at the international, national and local level contribute to capability deprivation.

This can be illustrated by an analysis of the situation facing Iraqi refugees who have settled in Shepparton, a regional town 180 kilometres north of Melbourne. The majority of the Iraqi refugees living in Shepparton experience exclusion from, or unfavourable inclusion in the labour market in spite of the fact that, like many regional towns in Australia, Shepparton suffers from a shortage of both skilled and unskilled labour. As a community leader explained:

We've got an agricultural base that needs a constant stream of relatively unskilled labour. ... we've also got a manufacturing and industrial base that arises out of the primary industry that needs skilled workers. We need food technologists, chemists, engineers, doctors, lawyers, dentists, nurses, teachers... we're not doing a very good job of attracting Australian-born people to move to regional centres. So now we are looking to attract migrants to fill those positions (Taylor and Stanovic 2005:23-4).

While there is unmet demand for skilled and unskilled labour, sixty to seventy per cent of Iraqi men living in Shepparton are unemployed, with those who are in employment working as interpreters or in low-wage seasonal work such as fruit picking (Taylor and Stanovic 2005:25 and 18).

This situation is the result of a combination of active and passive forms of exclusion. Active forms of exclusion include the limitations placed on temporary protection visa holders,² lack of recognition of professional qualifications and, at the local level, employers not wanting to take on people they do not know. Active forms of exclusion are compounded by passive forms of exclusion such as limited English, lack of local work experience and knowledge of the Australian work environment, as well as lack of affordable child care (Taylor and Stanovic 2005:16-26).

Identifying causal factors as active forms of exclusion focuses attention on the reasons behind the deliberate decision to exclude which in turn allows debate on whether the reasons for the exclusion are justified. In some cases, for example where the standard of professional qualifications acquired overseas are not as high as those in Australia, exclusion may be justified and policy responses should therefore focus on the ways in which people can be assisted to upgrade their qualifications to meet Australian standards. If the overseas qualification does meet Australian standards, policy responses should focus on changing existing regulations to recognise this fact.

In some cases, identifying the reason for the deliberate decision to exclude is all that is needed in terms of developing appropriate policy responses. For example, the exclusion

² Temporary protection visas are issued for three years. At the end of that time temporary protection visa holders have to reapply for refugee status. Temporary protection visa holders are denied access to federally funded English language programs and are effectively excluded from tertiary education because they are required to pay full fees. While temporary protection visa holders are not denied the right to work, the temporary nature of their visa often makes it difficult to find employment.

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experienced because local employers do not want to employ people they do not know can be overcome through programs which increase the social interaction between Iraqi refugees and local business people.

Identifying causal factors as the unintended consequences of policy decisions or social processes focuses attention on how these unintended consequences can be ameliorated. For example, limited English and lack of local work experience and conditions can be overcome by expanding access to relevant work experience and integrating the work experience with individual tutoring in English.

As the Iraqi case study illustrates, both active and passive forms of exclusion can have constitutive and instrumental importance. For example, the active forms of exclusion experienced by Iraqi refugees living in Shepparton (the limitations placed on temporary protection visa holders, the lack of recognition of professional qualifications and employers not wanting to take on people they do not know) all contributed to the very high levels of unemployment in the Iraqi community as did passive forms of exclusion such as limited English and a lack of affordable child care. However, as noted earlier, unemployment can have instrumental as well as constitutive importance, as it did for the Iraqi refugees who were unable to provide social and educational activities for their children.

The [Centrelink] payment is just enough [for] rent and to pay the bills, but you can't respond to any requirement from the children, you can't have any fun for them, you can't do anything (Taylor and Stanovic 2005:19).

Conclusion

When the term 'social exclusion' was first introduced into British political discourse, some social policy-makers were concerned that a focus on social exclusion signaled a retreat from policies designed to assist those living in poverty (Saunders 2005:258). While such concerns were allayed when it became clear that the Blair Government was prepared to take poverty seriously, the term continues to attract criticism, in particular for the lack of emphasis on redistribution and on the ways in which social exclusion is generated through mainstream processes such as market competition (Davies 2005:23). Any assessment of the usefulness of contested concepts such as social exclusion needs to focus on whether or not the concept assists policy-makers to tease out the complex, interconnected factors pertinent to particular experiences of poverty and deprivation. I argue that Sen's view of social exclusion offers a number of important analytical distinctions which assist policy-makers to do just that.

First, Sen takes poverty as the broader concept, with social exclusion only one of a number of reasons why an individual is unable to obtain adequate basic capabilities. Treating social exclusion as a sub-set of poverty means that everything does not have to be explained as some form of exclusion. Being open to the possibility that unfavourable inclusion may be an important causal influence means policy-makers are less likely to fall into the overly simplistic included/excluded dichotomy which has been criticised as obscuring the ways in which mainstream processes and institutions create or exacerbate capability deprivation. Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between exclusion and unfavourable inclusion because each process requires a different policy response.

Secondly, the distinction Sen (2000) draws between forms of exclusion (or unfavourable inclusion) that are in themselves a deprivation and those that are not necessarily adverse but which can lead to deprivation, gives policy-makers an analytical tool which lets them elaborate the causal chain, an important ability when analysing situations characterised by complex causal factors.

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- content is written in plain, non-technical English, and avoids the use of discipline-specific jargon unless absolutely necessary — in which case usage should be clearly defined.

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- have a clear system of headings and sub-headings;
- make limited use of footnotes; and
- clearly identify sources for figures, tables and other data where necessary.

Any diagrammatic representation of data should include the data from which the representation was generated (e.g. Microsoft Excel spreadsheets). These data should be submitted as a separate file.

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