EDITORIAL

The words we use to communicate are constantly changing and like our clothes intensely subject to fashion. Thus, ‘social disadvantage’ - or, even better, ‘social exclusion’ - has replaced ‘social class.’ We are all discouraged from calling a spade a spade.

This edition of Just Policy discusses the twin terms social exclusion and social inclusion which have become another set of weasel words’ (thank you, Don Watson!). Many people use such terms with very different, often elusive, meanings and assumptions, but our authors say what they mean by them.

Though ‘social exclusion’ is a much-disputed term, it is generally defined as what individuals or groups in particular areas experience when they experience such interconnected problems as unemployment, low incomes, poor housing, high crime-rates, ill health and family breakdown. While ‘social exclusion’ appears to be another name for what used to be called ‘poverty,’ it implies a focus on the ‘institutional processes at the heart of the poverty debate’.

All too often these days, the term has shifted from being a verb (being socially excluded) to a noun (the socially excluded). Talking e.g. about ‘social exclusion affecting people’s life chances’ evades the question of who is doing exactly what to whom with which effects. People and places get excluded, but how and why goes unnoticed or unquestioned. Notions of exclusion that are taken for granted also ignore the fact that there is a difference between positive exclusions (not participating in commodity fetishism) and negative inclusion (having to participate in Centrelink’s mutual obligation schemes).

Our authors explore the ways in which explicit policies, practices and programs serve to obscure, exclude or marginalise different groups.

People are excluded because of their class, race, age and gender, access to work, sexual preference, family forms (nuclear families versus singles), abilities or place.

Sara Hammer argues for a fair distribution of work by pointing to the phenomena of increasing part time, casual and precarious work on the one hand and longer working-hours on the other. She reminds us of the striking example France has set with its introduction of the 35 hour week, as a result of the Aubry and Robien laws. These laws are an alternative to the deliberately divisive politics of employment in Australia which still focus on activity tests, mutual obligation, and which pathologize the un(der)employed person.

Kathryn Arthurson discusses this concept and its ‘ambitious and indeterminate nature.’ She then disentangles the various meanings of social exclusion within the context of the Australian estate regeneration policy and identifies the problems that arise when the principles of social exclusion/inclusion are applied to public housing policies.

Marty Grace illustrates just how difficult and complex it is to apply social inclusion principles in the area of child-rearing. Her understanding of mothers’ ‘crippling double shift’ and the ‘gender-neutral rhetoric of public policy’ have led her to critically examine possibilities of change by talking to leading social policy commentators and subsequently discussing their ideas with mothers in focus groups. Grace offers short-term and long-term solutions which lie in a ‘gendered citizenship’ which assumes women and men to be neither the same nor completely different.

Gender is also central to the article by Marie Cooke, who describes the change from wife to widow and its emotional, financial and social impact. This transition provides a good example of how processes of social inclusion and exclusion operate.

This issue of Just Policy includes two commentaries, both about researching social disadvantage. Peter Norden writes about how to account for the spatial distribution of social disadvantage and which indicators researchers have been using in these accounts. Martin Mowbray writes about how social research can easily be used for unintended purposes: whether through confusion between causation and association or with political purpose.

At least since Watzlawick (1967), we know that every communication has an informational (factual) and a relational (associational) aspect which are inseparable from each other. These aspects are not only important in social interactions but also in reporting on and engaging in any research.

And by the way we wish all Just Policy readers a happy holiday season.

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Just Policy • No. 34, December 2004