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Who is ‘In’ and Who is ‘Other’: A Broad Introduction to Inclusion and Exclusion

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The terms “social inclusion” and “social exclusion” are now used in many service settings, policy debates and research fields. Yet, it seems that different speakers may be endowing these terms with quite different, sometimes even distinctly contested, meanings. The following attempts to offer a degree of speech therapy to these different uses and proceeds in two sections. Firstly, using a broad brush, the major emphasis is to identify three varieties of usage:

- ‘the neo-liberal’;
- those concerned with ‘the health of communities and the well-being of individuals’; and
- those associated with ‘the critical tradition’.

Two concluding reflections are then raised. The first argues that attempts to ‘intervene’ with those who are excluded can lead to the unwanted consequence of reinforcing stigma and disadvantage and, secondly, at a different level of analysis, that it is important that we do not assume that being an ‘insider’ is always the place to be.

Mutual Obligation: A Neo-liberal Example

It is generally accepted that there are marginalised, that is, excluded – social groups. However, controversy arises as to who makes up these groups, the degree of marginalisation or exclusion, its various causes and perhaps most importantly, the appropriate response.

So, what do the different speakers mean when they use the phrase “social inclusion / exclusion?” Perhaps the most relevant starting point is the Federal government’s policy of Mutual Obligation. At the centre of this policy is the view that the head, heart and lungs of a society is its economy. It follows then that those who are employed have a doubly positive role. As insiders, they have a righteous self respect as they not only look after themselves, they also know that they are the dynamic components of an engine that generates the common good. So, what of those who are not in the paid workforce? At the very least, people who are unemployed do themselves and society as a whole no good as being unemployed means one is outside of the productive whole. More likely, in being unproductively inactive, one is behaving as a self-scuttling dependent, a position that authors embarrassment, even shame, as one is aware of being a drain on society.

A certain form of activism flows from this view of the relative value of those on the “inside” and those on the “outside”, one that sees “social inclusion” and “social exclusion” as a frame for analysing ‘welfare dependence’. This framework says that social policy should never reinforce poor behaviour and should seek to recruit the unemployed into the free market as financially independent actors. This thinking is at the centre of the Mutual Obligation policy and sees the “social inclusion/exclusion” frame as a demand to introduce procedures to ‘encourage’ those from the employment periphery into the market centre where they will be stimulated to perform affirming rather than self-defeating roles.

According to the proponents of Mutual Obligation the task is to identify opportunities for ‘behavioural’ adjustment – the compulsory inclusion – of those who have been self-defeating into the economic mainstream. In so far as this step can be accomplished, the financial burden on the state will be lowered from the current level where approximately 20% of the population is (directly or indirectly) dependent on benefits. If a significant proportion of these unproductive persons can be prodded into participation within the labour market, this is a clear win. Intervention, even intensive assistance, is sensible so that muscular, non-collusive responses actively target those with deficits to their market readiness.

In summary, the neo-liberal use of social exclusion takes this frame in a particular, purportedly apolitical, direction (Hariss, 2002). Stripped of a declared ideological badge, this appropriation can be used to provide a rationale for the blaming of individuals and their groups as “(p)poverty and social exclusion is mainly interpreted as being the result of individual deficits” (McClelland; 2002; 2). Thus, if the focus becomes the supposedly problematic characteristics of ‘this group’ – the indigenous; the poor; the homeless etc – this re-purposing recycles the old conservative interest in social order with a ‘it is for their own good’ rationale where the intention to control, hurt or punish is plausibly denied. Rather, it is simply ‘sensible’ to vigorously target the bad habits (‘behaviours’) of those who are out of step as this promotes self mobilisation reduces budgetary liabilities. That additional powers of surveillance and policing might be introduced, that benefits may be suspended as part of the behavioural intervention, that this approach may be tough, is not contested as it is understood that this approach is ‘just pragmatism.’

The Health of Communities and the Well-being of Individuals

An interest in ‘the health of communities and the well-being of individuals’ can be directly connected with the social inclusion and exclusion frame and this interest has been examined in a number of ways, for example in terms of ‘attachment’ (Maris, 1998). For the current purpose two (arguably) adjacent developments will be reviewed. The first of these is social
capital, a construct most identified with the North American researcher Robert Putnam, that has assumed a prominent profile over the last decade. Whilst there remain definitional and programmatic uncertainties with the concept, the gist of it concerns a focus on public trust and civil – that is non-governmental and non-instrumental – participation between citizens. Putman (2000) argues that both public trust and civil participation are in decline and it is this contention that, in part, potentially aligns the idea of social capital with the current concern with exclusion. Although the subject of vigorous critique (Mowbray, 2004), Putnam’s notions of promoting citizen activities around ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ capital, and his interest in programs for ‘community capacity building’ and ‘enhanced participation’, could be particularly relevant to those who are seen as marginalised.

An allied development to that of social capital is the current interest in, and the empirical measurement of, (more) relational and holistic understandings of health and with the longer term causes of pathology and disease. Rather than beginning with the traditional starting point that ‘health is the absence of disease’, a number of research groups – such as The Harvard Centre for Public Health – have undertaken studies that suggest health outcomes are statistically conditional on social factors, such as the variables around a person’s intimate networks (Kawachi & Berkman, 2003). This type of finding is associated with the development of more psycho-social measures of ‘well-being’ and ‘quality of life’, indices that seek to clarify risk and protective factors that are associated with the non-contraction of, and/or being able to recover from, physical and psychiatric ills. This kind of analysis clearly has consequences for how an individual’s longer-term health status is understood and offers scope for thinking about exclusion in terms far more complex than the simply economic.

In these studies psychosocial health and well being is seen to be differentially distributed according to the presence of these protective and risk factors that themselves are differentially allocated in even ‘anglo’ environments. Who does not do well in terms of health? It is no surprise that the excluded do poorly, especially those that are stigmatised. That health outcomes for indigenous people are recognised as appalling is one fact, yet it seems likely that all ‘outcast’ groups do less well than those who are of the mainstream. For example, the work of McDonald (1999) on marginalised, socially dislocated youth in “post-industrial” suburbs paints a discouraging picture of psycho-social prospects which, more speculatively, gives no cause for optimism about longer term morbidity. In terms of mental illness the National Mental Health Strategy discussion paper on The Interactions of Social Capital with Health and Mental Health canvases the difficulties of this multiply at-risk, highly stigmatised population.

The Critical Tradition: Identity as Destiny

Commentators on structural change agree that globalised, new-economy environments challenge expectations of equity and inclusiveness. Within these increasingly competitive settings some groups experience greater risk of marginalisation, a vulnerability that is associated with factors such as educational level, geographic location and culture as well as with disability and stigma. With varying accents, for ‘third way’ policy makers such patterns are a trigger for interventions, particularly those concerned with education, that seek to improve participation and social mobility. In France, and less radically, in the United Kingdom, this focus on social exclusion could be seen
as a bridge that links ‘modern’, progressive thinking with an older, left-wing tradition. For example, terms like ‘anomie’ and ‘alienation’ are familiar to many, even if they may now seem somehow dated and without theoretical moorings. Yet, it can be argued that a thoroughgoing interest in patterns of ‘social inclusion’ and ‘social exclusion’ denotes a similar, prepared-to-be-questioning attitude to social arrangements that was itself the soil from which these older terms grew.

In the early work on social exclusion in France it appears that the commitment was to focus upon, and critically theorise, the practices supporting institutional and structural inequity whether these practices were based on racial, educational, discursive or other variables. These practices were understood to continually, yet in a dynamic manner, construct dividing lines within ‘first world’ societies. Thus, the concern was upon explicating the particular forms of, and processes for, constructing and maintaining differential privilege in democratic, and supposedly equal, industrial societies.

An example of this critical impulse is offered in Bourdieu’s research on the role the French educational system played in mal-distributing social goods and reproducing inequality. In this project Bourdieu (1986) was the first to introduce the concept of ‘cultural capital’, a construct he characterised as concerned with the individual’s capacity to perform the ‘right’ language skills, have the right taste, display the correct manners, exude a particular confidence and authority, and so forth, which he argued is crucial to social performance. He contended that inherited money, educational level, current income and social connections are important, as are the presence, or relative absence, of determinants such as legal discrimination on the basis of disability, race or gender, for understanding patterns of inclusion and exclusion. That noted, Bourdieu argued that these factors were insufficient in themselves to explain the persistence of inequality.

Why?: he argued that explanations for the perseverance of, and evolutions to, patterns of inequalities in outcome require supple and multi-centred enquiry. For those writers interested in understanding the processes that embed privilege and maintain iniquitous probabilities of outcome – why most people who are indigenous ‘perform’ less well economically; why health outcomes are mal-distributed across groups – it is rarely so simple as to say ‘they are not allowed in, they are locked out’ as late capitalism, second modernity – call it whatever one will – is more de-centred in its regimes of privilege and exclusion. Yes, all citizens are equal before the law, at least nominally, each has an equal vote, cannot be explicitly discriminated against, and so forth. Yet, how I talk, what particular attitudes I perform, how I dress, how I think of, and socially project myself, my entitlements and prospects – what Rose and other Foucauldians call the ‘specifications of the self’ – are proposed to influence the odds, if not determine the outcome, in any single encounter or, in longer terms, the trajectory of a life course. It is argued that the maintenance of patterns of inclusion and exclusion in ‘free and fair’ democracies are now mostly not gated by way of fixed entry points and locked passageways. A case in point might be the example that an Afro-American woman is now the Secretary of State in the U.S.A. (even if her boss is the second male in a dynastic family to be President in less than a generation.)

Given the broad, albeit incomplete, advances in anti-discrimination law and the formal de-regulation of privilege, in many respects it is more ‘social identity’ than categorical discrimination that tends to weight probabilities with respect to personal prospects. Whether, ‘prospects’, are indexed to health, employment, income, place of residence, ethnicity or education, outcomes do not conform to a normal distribution. If, for example, I come from the wrong side of the tracks, I am more likely to be perceived as surly and bad mannered; if my old man’s trade was one that has been dislocated by ‘structural change’, there is a greater chance I will be on and off benefits; if I am from one of the negatively stereotyped ethnic groups – like the ‘Lebos’ – it is harder to be given a start.

And, more specifically as it relates to the life course, if someone has got off the educational-developmental train and has been, for example, living as a junkie or a crim, that person’s looks and manner, their otherness, will often be experienced as ‘a negative’: mainstream people – the ‘straights’ – will feel this person brings them down. In these ways the software of destiny is the uneven distribution of cultural capital. Following the work of post-colonial and anti-racist theorists, such as Paul Gilroy, and the advocacy of politics of identity activists who have disrupted the inferior, received subject positions and social locations traditionally accorded to some groups – such as people who are gay or physically disabled – we are left with a clear protocol: who you are, and how your type are seen and valued, tends to stack the deck with respect to your prospects. Not that the battles around gender and sexuality, disability and race, have been won. Rather, the rules of the discrimination game changes as it is played. Who gets ‘othered’ may change but the cap will always be put on someone’s head.

So, what of the particular position of the most vulnerable, those people who may be seen as in one, or several, of the categories of ‘at-riskness’ – such as people who are indigenous, mentally ill, homeless and unemployed? To have a strong application for an insiders place individuals have to have the right specifications for, have to conform to, that which is now required to get and keep a current ticket. To return directly to the use of the terms social inclusion and social exclusion, if the above discussion of the critical tradition has significant practical and ideological traction for a speaker, if this tradition illuminates key landmarks in their view of marginalisation and privilege, then it is likely that this person uses these terms in ways that connote the importance of social relations that is characteristic of a critical politics.

The Paradox of Pushing ‘Others’ In

Particular programs have been introduced to promote inclusiveness for the some of the more at-risk populations. For example, mentoring programs for people who are disenfranchised – such as refugee groups – have been established. Prompted by the links between well-being and social capital, health advocacy bodies have sought to promote relationships for identified at-risk groups. In this way an interest in “social inclusion”
has been taken up. However, it is important to note that people who are homeless or mentally ill, people who have been othered and cast down, are just like the rest of us: these people can be – like teenagers or the wealthy, indeed like every person from every group – tribal and apparently snobbish. And, to expect otherwise is to farm the wrong acres.

People who have been homeless, or people who have belonged to any excluded sub-group for any length of time, will not be immediately, or perhaps even eventually, welcoming of representatives of the mainstream especially if their ‘invitation to participate’ is the result of compulsion or sanction. We all live in our sub-groups and tend to run with, to be in step with, our own particular pack. To expect these people to be enthusiastic ‘subjects’ is to take away that which makes each of us human, our selectivity in our identity and allegiances, our pride in our difference.

To be deemed ‘at risk’, to be ‘eligible’, is to say that this person has a status which is, at best, marginal or, more likely, is to assert that their personhood is culpable and their morality transgressive. If this is the experience this sets up a definitional process and a sequence of subsequent interactions in which what is assumed to be ‘insight’ – for the subject of intervention to agree with the policy-maker/practitioner that ‘yes, I am the problem’ – offers the subject a choice between ‘subservience’ or ‘resistance.’ The identity of those who have been ‘other-ed’, that is generally stigmatised, has to be at issue for this reason and practitioner and subject can then easily become locked into an existential battle on the identity of subject to be “treated”.

It is for this reason that ‘we’ – as deliverers of programs, as policy makers, as students and teachers – need to be reflective and respectful. By trying to push people in, we can reinforce or even exacerbate that which we seek to reduce. Perhaps, the key task is to respect the subjectivities of the sub-group and the power of group processes (Mullaly, 2002). While our aim may be to ‘normalise’ those who have been other-ed, this needs to be done in a way that is neither prescriptive nor corrective; that is, to offer experiences within which ‘their’ difference is accentuated and accepted, is legitimated even celebrated, and where this represents choice and not co-option.

And who is to say being an “insider” is necessarily following the better path? Some jobs are stigmatising, even exploitative, so that participation can result in lowered self-respect rather than in self-fulfillment just as some relationships can be unhealthy. Likewise is it not possible that some high status, ‘insider’ positions, roles that are exclusively concerned with the bottom-line for example, might ferment individual psychopathy and social divisiveness? Similarly, there are dangers in being an intensely leveraged earner and consumer. Indeed, it ‘pays’ to be less than completely obedient: just as it is illogical to equate one hours paid work a week with gainful employment, it remains the case that however the social inclusion/social exclusion frame might be employed, this frame itself is not beyond criticism, for example in setting the terms for debate in an ‘either’ – ‘or’ fashion. Many of us would be unhappy about the assumption that being ‘in’ is necessarily the one and only place to be.

References