

social exclusion

Hilary Silver

Social exclusion is a rupturing of the social bond. It is a process of declining participation, access, and solidarity. At the societal level, it reflects inadequate social cohesion or integration. At the individual level, it refers to the incapacity to participate in normatively expected social activities and to build meaningful social relations.

The idea of social exclusion originated in France. It has many affinities with French Republican thought, especially the concepts of solidarity and the social bond. Its sociological pedigree is clearly Durkheimian, as Levitas (2000) has noted. However, the concept is also adumbrated in Georg Simmel's *The Stranger*, Norbert Elias's *The Established and the Outsiders*, *Stigma*, and Howard Becker's *Outsiders*. Social exclusion may also be conceived in terms of Max Weber's concepts of status groups and social closure.

Despite the concept's novelty and ambiguity, definitions of social exclusion abound. They vary by national context and sociological paradigm. Some scholars refer to an inability to exercise the social rights of citizenship, including the right to a decent standard of living. These approaches see social exclusion as synonymous with poverty and deprivation, and thus as an aspect of social stratification. Other approaches, especially in Britain, emphasize the importance of individual choice, for a person cannot be excluded if inclusion is accessible, but undesired. These perspectives emphasize exclusion from opportunities and thus conceive of the concept as one similar to discrimination. However, the original meaning of social exclusion stresses social distance, marginalization, and inadequate integration.

Social exclusion is most frequently defined in contrast to poverty. It is a relational rather than a redistributive idea. Although poverty can lead to social exclusion, as well as the reverse, one can easily imagine rich members of excluded groups. Thus, it is not strictly a question of insufficient material resources. As Touraine (1991) put it, exclusion is an issue of being in or out, rather than up or down. Because

exclusion is about broken relationships, there are always two parties to consider: the excluders as well as the excluded.

Exclusion is also multi-dimensional, combining economic and social deprivation. However, analysts differ on whether exclusion is always a cumulative process of multiple, interrelated disadvantages. The UK's Social Exclusion Unit defines exclusion as "a shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems." Emphasizing joined-up social problems, especially when spatially concentrated, resonates with the idea of an "underclass." This is even more the case when, as Vlemminckx and Berghman (2001) claim, exclusion implies entrapment or intergenerational transmission.

Certainly, research confirms that exclusion along one dimension may increase the risks of exclusion along other dimensions, but very few people are totally excluded from all social relations at once. There are many more people who are socially excluded in some respects than there are people excluded in all respects. Indeed, it is virtually impossible for human beings to exist totally outside societal influences.

Social exclusion may be considered as both a condition and a process, although it is most frequently treated in dynamic terms. Castel (1991), for example, eschews the term exclusion, preferring the notion of *disaffiliation*. Paugam (1991), another French sociologist, refers to a process of *social disqualification*. These authors consider exclusion along a continuum, with intermediate steps of vulnerability or precariousness.

There are many mechanisms of social exclusion: extermination, exile, abandonment, ostracism, shaming, marginalization, segregation, discrimination. Sometimes, even social assistance can produce exclusion. In general, groups deliberately use exclusion as a means of social control and boundary maintenance. It reinforces internal solidarity and may allow insiders to monopolize resources.

Although most scholars agree that social exclusion is multi-dimensional and has different forms in different social contexts, there is little consensus over what are the most important dimensions of social exclusion. Studies have so far examined the dimensions that are easiest to measure with available data. This has first and

foremost meant extending poverty and unemployment indicators to take account of time and place. A. B. Atkinson, a British economist, proposed the initial exclusion measures for the European Union, most of which consisted of income and joblessness indicators (Atkinson et al. 2002). In the second EU Joint Inclusion Report these indicators were accompanied with education and health measures.

However, several sociological studies, especially in the UK, have tackled other social and political dimensions of exclusion. For example, Gordon et al. (2000) conducted a new *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain* survey for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation specifically for this purpose. In addition to income poverty and material deprivation, exclusion from the labor market and from public services, they examined four aspects of exclusion from social relations: socializing, social isolation, social support, and civic engagement. The researchers identified these aspects directly by asking Britons themselves what they considered “normal” social activities, whether they experienced constraints upon participating in them, and, if so, the nature of those obstacles. This and other studies (see Hills et al. 2002) reveal that income distribution and unemployment are weakly associated with sociability and community participation. Gallie and Paugam’s (2000) research suggests material deprivation may even be positively related to social relations in Southern Europe.

The dimensions of social exclusion receiving the most recent attention concern the recognition and rights of racial and ethnic groups, especially of immigrants. This emphasis is largely due to the adoption of the 2000 EU “Racial Directive” on equal treatment irrespective of racial and ethnic origin, and the EQUAL program to fight labor-market discrimination. In 2005 the British Council of Brussels and other agencies released a European Civic Citizenship and Inclusion Index that uses uniform indicators to gauge the extent to which immigrants to a country have rights and obligations comparable to EU citizens. While these attempts to measure social dimensions of exclusion are important advances, many cultural, political, and social aspects of life lack good indicators. The Joint Report on Social Inclusion called for more attention to neglected types of disadvantage,

such as access to the Internet, housing, transportation, continuing education, and language acquisition. Further methodological advances are expected in the future.

Social exclusion has expanded its meaning over time to encompass more social problems and disadvantaged groups. In France, when the term originated in the 1960s, a group of “Social Catholics,” especially the ATD-Fourth World movement headed by Father Joseph Wresinski, used the term to refer to the extremely poor of affluent and less developed countries living in the slums. In the 1970s, when René Lenoir (1974) used the term, the socially excluded referred to the handicapped, substance abusers, juvenile delinquents, and deviant groups. In the 1980s, as unemployment rose after the Oil Shocks, the term applied to youth and older unskilled workers whom deindustrialization displaced. As long-term joblessness, homelessness, and racism all became issues in the next two decades, they added yet more complexity to the meaning of social exclusion. A coalition of social movements concerned with these many issues demanded action, leading to France’s anti-exclusion laws enacted in 1988, 1998, and 2005.

In the 1990s the European Union adopted the term. Leaders passed resolutions to fight social exclusion as part of the European Social Model, one that wed economic growth with job creation and social cohesion. Since 2001, member states of the EU have produced National Action Plans for social inclusion submitted to Brussels for coordination in a Joint Inclusion Report. The European Union will shortly consider the fight for social inclusion in the larger context of social protection. Already in 2005, the Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion coupled national progress reports on inclusion with benchmarks on pensions. The next Joint Report will further streamline the monitoring process, adding medical and other dimensions. As the EU expands from 15 to 25 members, new issues of social exclusion are likely to arise, such as discrimination against the Roma (gypsies) in Central and Eastern Europe. In sum, Brussels will probably determine the direction of the study of social exclusion for the near future.

Interest in social exclusion has expanded beyond Europe, although so far the concept

has not caught on in the US. International agencies working in less developed countries have found the concept useful for studying the challenges of integration in pluri-ethnic societies, caste structures, religious cleavages, and indigenous peoples' rights. UN agencies and international development banks have funded programs to promote social inclusion in the global South.

Thus, political and policy considerations have been as important as sociological interests to the development of social exclusion as a subject of study. For example, Giddens (2000) discussed "social exclusion" in his book on *The Third Way* just as Tony Blair was adopting the idea. Esping-Andersen referred to the challenges of social exclusion in his 2002 book, *Why We Need a New Welfare State*. And France's full-fledged National Observatory for the Study of Social Exclusion produces annual research reports for the government.

Programs to fight social exclusion ideally take a comprehensive approach, progressively tackling multiple problems and tailoring solutions to a person's particular combination of needs. Solutions usually entail the participation of the excluded in their own inclusion. The European Social Funds have co-funded local projects that help rebuild social relations and "reinsert" excluded people in socially useful activities. These projects might include working in a subsidized job, taking a training course, or renovating housing for the homeless. They may not lift someone out of poverty, but they do reknit the social bond. Inclusion does not rely only on having a paid job in a for-profit business.

Finally, there are many critiques of the idea of social exclusion. Central among them is the argument that it distracts attention from social inequality and class conflict. The excluded have a wide range of problems and do not share interests that might cement them into a political force. In addition, inclusion is usually a euphemism for rejoining the labor force. Other critics point out the lack of a theory that identifies the causes and consequences of exclusion. There is not a zero-sum relationship in which greater exclusion means less inclusion. Rather, both processes are interrelated and can occur simultaneously. These and many other controversies will ensure the further development

of the concept of social exclusion in the years to come.

SEE ALSO: Discrimination; Occupational Segregation; Outsider-Within; Poverty and Disrepute; Residential Segregation; Social Integration and Inclusion; Solidarity; Stigma; Stranger, The

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