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Social exclusion and the plight of asylum seekers living in Ireland

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This paper examines the term social exclusion and how it has been conceptualised and operationalised within society. The expression has become a key issue for contemporary governance in understanding disadvantage, and in so doing tackling the lack of resources as well as inadequate social participation. This paper traces the origins of the term social exclusion and its evolution into the multidimensional process it has become. It examines weak and strong conceptualisations of the term and argues that in Neoliberal societies the views and social needs of disadvantaged groups are measured quantifiably without exploring the subjective realities of how they view their own personal welfare and quality of life. This paper also draws on primary research conducted by the author, which explores the lived experience of (female) asylum seekers[1] in Ireland and argues that the Irish States' policies of Dispersal and Direct Provision severely marginalize this group and exacerbates their social exclusion in society.

Introduction:

The term social exclusion has become popular in public discourse since the late 1980's. It can best be defined as a multidimensional process in which restricted or non participation in decision making and political processes, access to

[1] Asylum Seekers are persons who seek to be recognised as a refugee in accordance with the terms of the 1951 Convention. An asylum seeker has a legal right to seek refuge in Ireland under the terms of the Geneva Convention – they are not "illegal immigrants" but legally resident while they are in the asylum process.

A refugee is: "Any person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail her/himself of the protection of that country; or (any person) who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of her/his former habitual residence, is unable, or owing to such fear is unwilling to return to it." Definition contained in UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951

employment and material resources, and integration into common cultural processes are defined as forms of exclusion (Madanipour et al cited in Byrne 2005, p.2). Neoliberal viewpoints are the dominant discourse of today's globalised societies. Such discourse is presented as self evident and with the conjecture that maximum growth, and therefore productivity and competitiveness, are the definitive and exclusive goal of human actions (Bourdieu 1998, p.30). Within this view the social needs of disadvantaged groups, such as the unemployed, the low-paid, children, the ill, lone parent families and ethnic minorities become quantifiable. It does not however further our understanding of how being socially excluded shapes the social reality of affected groups. Accordingly this paper will explore the concept of social exclusion, and how it is conceptualised and operationalised within society. It will also specifically explore how social exclusion impacts upon the lives of asylum seekers living under Direct Provision in Ireland. Drawing upon qualitative primary research, I will illustrate the various forces that shape social exclusion and illustrate how the concept is operationalised within the lives of this disadvantaged minority.

The origins of social exclusion

The genesis of the term social exclusion lies in the French term *Les Exclus,* which was used to describe certain members of society who were excluded from participating fully in society, and had fallen through the social welfare net (Pierson 2002). Karl Marx highlighted social division, with an emphasis on social inequality and the exploitation of the working class population in the nineteenth century. He rejected the capitalist society which saw a marked distinction between the rich and the poor, and a society that treated human well-being as a market commodity (Macionis and Plummer 2005, p.84). Byrne (2005, p.1) argues that the concept of social exclusion emerged from an intermingled process of ideological formation, political argument and social

analysis, which is as old as modernity, and began in the political discourses of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He argues that exclusion is a "crucial contemporary form of exploitation" (ibid 2005, p.1). Therefore, access to employment and the fight against poverty play a major role in achieving equal distribution of life chances, and promoting social integration and cohesion**.** Latterly the term has become firmly embedded in EU discourse since the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1996 (Pierson 2002, p.4). The British Labour Party adopted the term in the 1990's, and vowed to reduce social exclusion, and achieve inclusion of all groups in society, which had wide appeal in political terms (Pierson 2002).

Social exclusion continues to be key issue for contemporary governance in understanding disadvantage, and in so doing tackling the lack of resources as well as inadequate social participation. Advancing globalization further challenges the concept of exclusion. The very real presence of globalization in all aspects of the ways in which our societies are governed, organized and experienced, is crucially important to the way exclusion is conceptualized and operationalised within contemporary societies (Byrne 2005, p.60). As such it is noteworthy that Neoliberal policy presents free market capitalism as the only possible form of future social arrangement.

Evolution of Social Exclusion in today's Society.

Focusing on social exclusion draws attention to the problem that comes with high unemployment rates and increasing inequality and poverty, i.e. that people have fewer opportunities to participate in society. Bourdieu suggests that societies are essentially concerned with processes of classifications and domination (Grenfell 2007, p.184). His concept of 'symbolic violence' is becoming more significant in contemporary globalised societies. He asserts that hierarchies and systems of dominance are so commonplace, that our ways of

knowing about the social world, our epistemological stance, are interpreted in ways that legitimise these systems, to reproduce and protect dominant interests, thus inflicting suffering and exclusion on certain parts of the population (Grenfell 2008, p.184**)**. The "myth of globalization" as Bourdieu states, is the hold a small number of dominant nations exert over the financial markets, and by extension manipulate exchange and interest rates. This worldwide "field" exerts a structural constraint on lesser countries and reduces the autonomy of the national markets, as the dominant few can occupy a position that largely defines the rules of the game (Bourdieu 1998, p.38). The consequence of "policing costs" which individualizes everything, in a sense, is the weak conditional form of social exclusion. It is viewed as a condition rather than an oppressive and unequal process, and this is how exclusion is visualized in the construction of social policies (Byrne 2005, p.61). This visualization will be explored in the next section of this paper.

Weak and Strong conceptualizations of Social Exclusion

The weak conceptualization of social exclusion is constructed along a horizontal model of social inequality, which locates the majority along a continuum, with an acceptance that capitalist's societies inevitably create inequalities. The rich are made invisible along this continuum, and the norm is to try and stay within a circle of acceptable conditions, while excluding others who are not within that circle (Byrne 2005, p.57). This weak conceptualization is underpinned by the premise that government can mitigate the conflicts created by dominant groups and interests contributing to capitalism's ongoing structure and render society more inclusive (Fairclough cited in Byrne 2005, p.57). This contrasts with the vertical conception, which sees hierarchies of social stratification in which dominant groups are affluent and powerful and have significantly greater ability to use democratic process for their own needs, while others are excluded, marginalized and poor (Steinert cited in Byrne 2002, p.57).

Social exclusion is an act and not a condition. It the act of being shut off from society with agents and structures in place that facilitate, create and reproduce exclusion, exclusionary mechanisms, ideologies, techniques and processes (Bourdieu 1998). In this context the hegemonic position of the ideology of Neoliberalism and the related emphasis on individualism make it possible to blame the victim for his misfortune and to preach "the gospel of self-help" (Bourdieu 1998, p.7). As such established patterns of power and privilege and the politics that support it, which is premised on one's position in society, the access to, and amount of cultural capital that one possesses is problematic. Social existence is constructed around difference, where difference ultimately implies hierarchy, and sets off a cycle of misrecognition and recognition, distinction and pretension, exclusion and inclusion (Bourdieu et al. 1991). Government policy that simply channels 'state charity', to correct the effects of unequal distribution of resources in simple financial terms, turns groups of people into 'the disadvantaged' or 'the deserving poor' in official discourse and such groups are only recognized when they create problems for society (Bourdieu 2006, p.184). This discourse can be traced back to the nineteenth century when one looks at the epistemology of class and how it moves in its definition between economic and moral classification. Skeggs (in her analysis of how class emerged as a classification in society) shows how some social groups are inscribed and positioned as having no moral value and are fixed with these cultural characteristics. The poor (and other groups such as working class women) have little "exchange value" in market and economic terms of productivity. Accordingly, she argues that class is made in the interests of those with power that generates these perspectives in the first place (Skeggs 2004).

Walker and Walker (1997) suggest that social exclusion is "the dynamic process of being shut out, fully or partially, from any of the social, economic, political or cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society.

Social exclusion may therefore be seen as the denial (or non- realization) of the civil, political and social rights of citizenship" (Walker and Walker 1997 cited in Byrne 2005, p.2). Sen's (1995) "capability approach" is a vertical approach to poverty and social exclusion. He compliments the established multi-dimensional definition of social exclusion and poverty, by using two key terms to delineate his concept. Here the focus is on people at a micro-level, and it looks at the how we understand living as 'being and doing' in the world. It is chiefly concerned with how people can achieve a better quality of life, with a focus on agency, and their perceptions of what constitutes a better standard of living. His key ideas are 'functioning's and 'capabilities' as an approach to evaluating social advantage and disadvantage. Functioning's represent parts of the state of a person, how he or she manages to do or be something in life and what capabilities are available to achieve valuable functioning's. This is significant in that it looks at how social exclusion is operationalised within people's lives; it understands how people view their own personal welfare and quality of life, and how they negotiate their everyday existence. It is a positive approach, which focuses on agency and the kind of life people want to achieve, which is a guiding principal to a better quality of life. This is particularly important when one looks at one of the key areas of social exclusion viz. poverty, and how being poor can impact upon full participation, and social and cultural integration into society. However, Townsend cautions on this concept, and questions how these capabilities are selected and in what sense are they absolute (Townsend 1993, p.135). Capabilities are socially created, and have to be measured against some empirical measurement, particularly when we develop policy needs for the lives of the poor and socially excluded (Townsend 1993, p.136).

Poverty and Social Exclusion

Poverty and the lack of income and resources to participate fully in society, is one of the key indicators of social exclusion. It has been argued that social exclusion is the new buzzword for poverty. The poor are conceptualized as those who cannot, or will not work, people with fewer skills, less schooling, lower motivation and aspirations. The experience of being classified and positioned in society as poor informs their subjectivity, and how access, resources and legitimization contribute to class formation (Skeggs 1997, p.8). How we experience our lives and our assumptions about the social world raise ontological issues. They are shaped by the social and the individual, and how social facts become internalized and shape our embodied experience of our journey (Grenfell 2008, p.53). The poor shape their *habitus* through the internalization of beliefs, values and cultural understandings, in terms of their shared structure with others of the same social class, gender, ethnicity etc. Thus their *habitus* is established through a culture of poverty and blame, which infers that the poor have lifestyles that differ from the rest of society, and that these characteristics perpetuate their life of poverty (Grenfell 2008, p.53) Studies that focus primarily on measurement, although producing empirical evidence, facts and figures, have problems defining how poverty is operationalised within societies. The subjective experience of poverty for individuals, and families, is not easily measurable with the "relative deprivation"[2] threshold. Steinert and Pilgrim (2003) argue that:

> "*Social exclusion can thus be understood as the continuous and gradual exclusion from full participation in the social, including material and symbolic, resources produced, supplied and exploited in society for making a living, organizing a life and taking part in the development of a*

[2] Relative Poverty is measured in the EU which is normally measured by using relative income poverty lines, working out average equivalised households in the country, i.e. people falling behind the 60% median income are said to be at risk of poverty.

> *(hopefully better) future*" (Steinert and Pilgrim cited in Millar 2007, p.4).

Set against such a concept, we can develop more comprehensive measures and elements, to explore the more multidimensional aspects of poverty, and associated social exclusion that is experienced by certain groups. Empirical research incorporating some of these definitions of social exclusions and the role of relational features in the experience of poverty would facilitate a broader framework of analysis (Lister 2004, p.90). Lister points out that in the PSE[3] Survey a large majority "identified social customs, obligations and activities …as among the top necessities of life" (Lister 2004, p.34). Thus the narrow economically and deprivation based view of poverty, could be broadened to include the non- material aspects of social division and poverty, and to place greater emphasis on political and cultural forms of exclusion (Madanipour cited in Lister 2004, p.93).

Primary Research Findings

The primary research conducted by the author as part of an undergraduate degree programme, was based upon the lived experience of a group of asylum-seeking mothers living in an Irish Direct Provision centre. The participants were aged between 19 and 33 years and had been waiting for refugee status for up to two years. Many of the respondents had lived through traumatic events in their prior lives. The research focused on their experiences under Direct Provision in Ireland.

The Irish Government introduced its policy of Direct Provision and Dispersal in 2000 and has continued with this policy to date. Under its terms, asylum-seekers have no say in where they live and are granted welfare of €19.10 per adult per week in addition to their basic accommodation and meals (Lentin and McVeigh

[3] UK Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey carried out in 1999

2006). One of the largest Direct Provision centres is in Mosney Co. Meath which houses 700 asylum-seekers, some there as long as seven years waiting on their application to either be turned down or to be successful[4]. At the end of March 2005 there were 7,280 asylum-seekers in 68 Direct Provision centres of whom 1,678 (21%) have been in these centres for over 2 years. Twenty per cent of those were under the age of four years (Dept of Justice Equality and Law Reform 2008).

I adopted a qualitative approach to this research because of the need to provide a more descriptive, rich and illuminating insight into the lives of asylum-seekers. Qualitative researchers enter into the natural field of the people whom they study, have face-to-face contact and it is always an intervention (Quinn Patton 1989). Hypotheses and theory are generated during the course of conducting research as the meaning emerges from the data. This process is inductive, and interpretive, in which the more complex social realities are explored. Approaching this research using qualitative methods offered the possibility to explore a phenomenon about which little is known yet it also gave new perspectives on things we already knew about. I utilised in-depth qualitative interviews to explore the reasons why asylum-seekers felt they are socially excluded. Using a qualitative approach gave these groups of individuals a "voice" and hopefully empowered them. All of the participants were given pseudonyms.

The marginalisation and exclusion of these asylum-seekers from Irish society became obvious at the early stages of my research, as their stories were ones of isolation, loneliness, depression and a sense of powerlessness. Living in Direct

[4] The film *Seaview* that premiered in the Berlin Film Festival in February 2008 highlights the plight of asylum-seekers living in a Direct Provision centre in Ireland and illustrates the realities of that existence. This film documents asylum-seekers waiting for up to seven years for their status to be recognised.

Provision centres had contributed to a further sense of insecurity among these participants, firstly with regard to their status, and secondly to their lives in general, as many had left families including children, and were waiting for their lives to "progress" and assume some normality**.** Fatima left Nigeria due to the practice of female circumcision, a ritual that is compulsory in many areas of Nigeria for females from the age of three. "You cannot escape it, they hunt you down until they find you, we had to leave in the middle of the night, it was very frightening". She has four daughters; one of them already circumcised but vowed she "did not want this to happen to her other children". Alice left Nigeria as she was threatened at gunpoint while pregnant with her second child, as her husband was involved in politics. Their stories are not believed, and it seemed to be particularly difficult to find acceptable proof in the cases of Nigerian women I interviewed.

> "*Everybody (all Nigerians) is a liar, and our reports cannot be verified as the people who would verify them are the people who are orchestrating these things. I come from a country where power is everything, my husband used to be a politician; it is a very dirty business back home. I was threatened at gunpoint, and we knew where it came from but we can't make reports (angry tone) because the people that we are reporting to are the people that are doing it".* (Alice)

Concerns were raised by the research participants about their living conditions, lack of freedom and the feeling of powerlessness to do things for themselves. Long periods in reception centres, with little level of activity can lead to boredom, isolation, frustration and depression. Additionally the participants spoke critically about the level of nutrition available to them and to their children, and in some instances they felt the need to supplement their children's nutrition by purchasing food that they liked from their weekly payment of €19.10.

> "*With the little money that they are paying us you have get your pampers, get baby food, they stop giving your baby*

> *formula after your baby get to 1 year, they should have other special food for older children, my child does not like the food here so I have to save money and buy her food*". (Ali)

The research participants experienced a feeling of being trapped which they verbalised as "what could you do, where can you go". They also found it difficult to relate to other people, which made them detached from society, and prevented them from establishing ties with the locals, which increased their detachment from Irish society. While others were "learning how to cope" and "managing their situation as best as they could" during this phase in their lives, their sense of exile reinforced the loneliness and isolation, and feelings of being excluded.

It is necessary to recognise women's diversity, and how female asylum-seekers adopt different strategies to help them address the problems that they now face, and to implement change in their lives with initiative and fortitude. Asylum-seekers are perceived as a homogeneous group of people whose rights are "protected" and yet restricted in the country of asylum. As a consequence, they are seldom treated as individuals with individual life histories, problems, and feelings. Thus we see that their sense of social exclusion is engendered and perpetuated by the structures in place, in this case the policies of the Irish state. The term asylum seekers is a 'racialised' term; it implies conflict, economic cost and recalls negative characteristics of underprivileged groups, their presence being a threat to social cohesion with links to racial conflict, and difference to the homogenous Irish (Haynes 2006). The label denotes a homogenous group, they are denied representation, and viewed with suspicion, rendering asylum seekers nameless, faceless and invisible. The policies of Direct Provision and Dispersal are a form of institutionalised racism as they treat non-Irish nationals in need of welfare differently to the native Irish (Moran 1999, p.280).

Asylum-seekers thus suffer marginalisation and exclusion from Irish society as a result of the policy of Direct Provision (Fanning 2002). Fraser's model of social justice is premised from the standpoint of social equality, in which she sees social injustice firstly rooted in the social structures of society through exploitation and economic marginalisation and deprivation. Secondly she notes that injustice is also seen in the cultural symbolic sense, which includes cultural domination, non-recognition of certain cultural groups and disrespect (Fraser, 2000). Fanning addresses how "contemporary responses to refugees and asylum-seekers in Ireland have been shaped by a legacy of exclusionary practices and racism". (Fanning 2002, p.87) He explores how asylum-seekers accommodated under the direct provision[5] scheme were subject to a state–fostered exclusion from Irish society, and how children experienced severe material deprivation (ibid p.87). Unlike established ethnic minorities, asylum-seekers are particularly disempowered, and part of those groups in society that are socially excluded, as they do not have any political rights (Bloch and Schuster 2005). Research illuminates Ireland's rather opportunistic approach to its immigration policies, particularly the policy of Direct Provision (Kuhling and Keohane 2007). Even when asylum applications are successful, refugees entering the host country's labour market are already at a serious disadvantage – even more disadvantaged than when they arrived because of sustained exclusion, resulting in deskilling in many cases. Thus we see how the very structure of the Direct Provision programme results in social exclusion.

Conclusion

This paper explored what constitutes social exclusion and provided core debates from the literature on how social exclusion is operationalised within society. It

[5] Direct Provision is the allowance given to asylum-seekers. In addition to basic accommodation and meals an asylum-seekers receives €19.10 per adult and €9.60 per child per week. These allowances have not been increased since they were introduced in 2000.

explored how the Neoliberal view and advancing globalization further challenges the concept of exclusion. The weak version of the term sees the excluded as marked by personal deficits. Conversely, the strong conceptualization of the term sees the excluded as constructed around difference, where difference ultimately implies a hierarchy of "them" and "us", where the dominant social group maintains and legitimizes its privileged position. Sen's "capability" concept was examined as a way of expanding the term social exclusion, and its merits and weaknesses were considered. Poverty and lack of income were shown as key areas of social exclusion, and how the poor shape their *habitus* through the internalization of beliefs, values and cultural understandings, in terms of their shared structure with others of the same social class. Drawing on my own primary research into the daily lives of female asylum seekers in Ireland, I concluded that the very structure and nature of the Irish Direct Provision policy, is exclusionary and marginalizes one of the least powerful and disadvantaged groups in Irish society.

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