Chapter 7

Social Exclusion in the New *Breadline Britain* Survey

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With the setting up of the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) in December 1997, the question of social exclusion has become central to the social policies of the new Labour government. The SEU itself is initially concerned with truancy and school exclusions and their contribution to crime and with reducing the numbers of rough sleepers. It is also concerned with, for example, the exclusion of sections of the population from access to financial services such as banks. Exclusion is seen to afflict areas, rather than simply individuals. The guiding principle of the SEU is that the multi-dimensional problems of poverty and social exclusion (presumed to be connected but not identical) require co-ordinated policy initiatives. The remit of the unit also includes developing indicators of success in combating social exclusion. Over the coming years, establishing appropriate measures of social exclusion and monitoring their movement will be a key issue in social policy. If *Breadline Britain* is to address questions of poverty and disadvantage in this new context, it needs to relate them explicitly to the question of social exclusion.

The problems of operationalising social exclusion begin with the lack of a clear consensus as to its meaning. The term originated in France in the 1970s but, although it is now widely used within and beyond the European Union, there is no universally accepted definition either theoretically or operationally. There are a variety of overlapping national discourses about social exclusion and, often competing, versions within individual countries (SOSTRIS, 1997; Room, 1995). In Britain, it is possible to detect three competing discourses (Levitas, 1998; Silver, 1994). (See also Chapter 1 of this volume for definitions).

The first of these (RED) is a redistributive discourse developed in critical social policy over the last twenty years which emphasises the way in which poverty inhibits or prevents social participation or the exercise of full citizenship (Townsend, 1979; Lister, 1990, 1997; Walker and Walker, 1997). The term 'social exclusion' may be preferred to 'poverty' because it refers to a process rather than a state and because it captures the multi-dimensional character of social disadvantage. If poverty is the *'lack of material resources, especially income, necessary to participate in British society'*, social exclusion *'refers to the dynamic process of being shut out, fully or partially, from any of the social, economic, political and cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society'* (Walker and Walker, 1997). If poverty is principally about the resources to which people (do not) have access, social exclusion is primarily about what they are (not) enabled to do. Within RED, poverty is seen as a key cause of social exclusion, although inequalities and discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnicity, (dis)ability and sexual orientation also contribute. Since poverty and social exclusion are partially (though not totally) analytically distinct, the degree of their connection can be established only through an independent measure of exclusion.

There are, however, two other discourses relating to social exclusion which differ both in their characterisation of social exclusion itself and in their assumptions about causation. While they might not dissent from the definition above, the emphasis is not upon the relationship between poverty and social exclusion. In SID (or the social integrationist discourse), the emphasis is on social inclusion or integration through paid work. The emphasis on work in the 1998 Budget statement places it firmly within SID, while the same discourse can also be found in EU policy documents and elsewhere. The key indicator of inclusion/exclusion in this discourse is labour market attachment. SID narrows the focus to one dimension of exclusion, while glossing over the ways in which paid work may fail to prevent exclusion (by being, for example, poorly paid) or even cause it where long or asocial hours or the nature of the work itself block other forms of social participation. Moreover, in focusing on paid work, SID neglects the role of unpaid work.

The third discourse, MUD (moral underclass discourse) emphasises moral and cultural causes of poverty and is much concerned with the issue of dependency. The key indicator for MUD is that of the number or proportion of working-aged households with no-one in work (and this seems certain to be one of the indicators chosen by the SEU) because they are dependent on benefits. Others, notably Demos 1997/8, are pursuing the question of social exclusion through analysis of social networks and social capital.

A comprehensive measure of social exclusion and its causes is beyond the scope of a survey which must retain continuity with its earlier versions and which is primarily about poverty. However, many of the processes now described as social exclusion are implicitly or explicitly recognised in the *Breadline Britain* approach to poverty. Following the broad definition emerging from RED, it is clear that much of the existing information gathered in the *Breadline Britain* survey touches on social exclusion. Some questions can be expanded and others added to give at least a minimal indication of participation in social, economic, cultural and political systems. Moreover, much of the information on labour market attachment and workless households is already gathered in the *Breadline Britain* survey, facilitating a comparison between the three perspectives.

It is difficult to justify a specification of the nature and types of participation deemed necessary for 'inclusion' at any given time and place, just as it is for the level and quality of material resources deemed minimally sufficient. A further merit of incorporating social exclusion into the *Breadline Britain* survey is that it simultaneously offers an opportunity to establish what forms of participation are (un)available to individuals and families and how much consensus there is about the importance of different dimensions of exclusion. The shuffleboard questions may also be developed to explore the contribution of different factors to social exclusion, by looking at the role of poverty, participation in paid and unpaid work - and relating these to the greater sensitivity to questions of gender being developed in the new survey.

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