A Critique of the Concept of Social Exclusion and its Utility for Australian Social Housing Policy

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Abstract

The paper reviews the usefulness of the concept of social exclusion for Australian social housing policy. We draw on recent theoretical and empirical research from Europe and the UK to develop a critique of the concept of social exclusion. It is argued that any assessment of social exclusion needs to distinguish between its utility as an academic explanatory concept and its political deployment to justify new forms of policy intervention. Policy targeting anti-social behaviour through increasingly more punitive means, for instance, is often justified on the basis that it ameliorates the problems of social exclusion experienced by tenants residing in public housing estates. We conclude that, in spite of the limitations of social exclusion as an analytical concept, for political and pragmatic reasons it is likely to become an important component of the emerging Australian housing policy agenda.

Introduction

This paper is based on the findings of a review undertaken for the Australian Housing Urban Research Institute (AHURI) that addresses the relevance of the concept of social exclusion for Australian social housing policy. The review was premised on the assumption that, because social exclusion is emerging as an important theme in Australian housing policy, it is worthy of greater exploration. In particular, the term social exclusion is frequently used to augment policy around the future of Australian public housing estates that are characterised by problematic housing, and concentrations of residents experiencing poverty, low incomes and high unemployment and crime rates (see, for instance, New South Wales Department of Housing, AHURI & Department of Family and Community Services 1999; Randolph & Judd 2000). In South Australia, the idea of addressing social exclusion was recently put into practice through the establishment of a Social Inclusion Unit by the incoming Rann Labor Government in 2002, with the stated priority areas of addressing homelessness and increasing education retention rates (Australian Labor Party 2002).

Nonetheless, despite this use of social exclusion in policy development, there is limited systematic analysis in Australia of the various meanings ascribed to social exclusion, the problems associated with the concept, or assessment of its applicability, specifically within the Australian context (Arthurson 2002). Conversely, the concept of social exclusion is well established in the UK and other parts of Europe, with a substantial analytical and critical literature available, which assesses its usefulness as a framework...
through which to view the issues of poverty and inequality. Thus, it is constructive to synthesise the lessons of the UK and European literature, in order to assess the value of social exclusion before it becomes firmly established in Australia. This task formed the basis of the current review.

In general terms, social exclusion is understood to denote a set of factors and processes that accentuate material and social deprivation. However, from the outset, a key point highlighted by this review was that any assessment of social exclusion needed to distinguish between its utility as an academic explanatory concept, to understand poverty and disadvantage, and its political deployment to justify new forms of policy intervention. Often a clear distinction between the two aspects is not discernible within the literature. Wherever possible, these two aspects are separated out within this paper but this distinction is not always clear-cut. The first part of the paper explores the way social exclusion is used by academics and how it is linked to housing. In the second section, its political deployment is examined. The final section draws together the findings to assess the utility of adopting social exclusion in the context of Australian social housing policy.

Academic Use of Social Exclusion

In considering the concept of social exclusion, academic discussions have sought to understand:

1. the societal spheres or dimensions where social exclusion arises; and
2. the range of causes and processes that lead to social deprivation and poverty and, in particular, the interrelationship between individual volition (agency) and wider social processes (structure).

These factors and their relationship to housing, where it is discernible, are discussed in turn.

The Different Societal Dimensions of Social Exclusion

In attempting to assess the value of social exclusion, some commentators (see for instance Madanipour 1998; de Haan 1999; Vobruba 2000) argue that the concept’s usefulness lies in its emphasis on the different dimensions or realms of everyday life where inequalities arise. They also emphasise the importance of making links across these dimensions.

Sommerville (1998), for instance, identifies three dimensions of social exclusion: the economic, political and moral. Madanipour (1998) emphasises similar dimensions, incorporating the economic, political and cultural arenas. De Haan (1999) refers to exclusion in the economic, political and social spheres. Within the different realms (see Table 1) questions about exclusion and social integration range from concerns about access to social networks and supports, to enabling access to resources, democratic decision making and common cultural practices. As Madanipour (1998: 80) points out, most of these forms of access are spatially discernible, in that space forms a site where different forms of access are made possible, limited or denied. Within the literature
spatial concentration of disadvantage is considered a key aspect of social exclusion and this is where some of the major links between social exclusion and housing are made.

Table 1: Societal Spheres in which Social Exclusion is Manifest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Societal realm</th>
<th>How social exclusion is manifested</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>• Lack of citizenship rights:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o no right to minimum wage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o prevents access to housing, education, health and other services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>• Lack of access to labour markets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Unemployed prevented from accessing resources and activities, readily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>available to others in society, particularly consumption, activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and savings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal/political</td>
<td>• Lack of access to democratic decision making in society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Not voting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Not involved in community organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Includes problems accessing structures and processes that enable and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>facilitate effective community participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural/moral</td>
<td>• Exclusion from common cultural practices within society, traditionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>associated with religion, language and nationality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• New notions of inequality in contemporary society:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o ‘community effects’ and network poverty, causing lack of access to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>role models and informal contacts providing useful pathways to jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o symbolic economy (i.e. real estate development and other business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>services) develops cultural products (e.g. housing design) that can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>exclude particular groups of people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Arthurson 2002.

Area Decline and Excluded Communities

Power (2000: 1), for instance, argues that ‘social exclusion is almost entirely an urban problem ... cities concentrate and intensify social problems’. From this perspective, clusters of poverty and disadvantaged places are implicated in social exclusion as they limit people’s opportunities, and lead to area stigma, competition for jobs and higher levels of conflict and dissatisfaction. Certainly, in the UK and Europe, as in Australia, much of the visible contemporary concentrations of disadvantage are apparent on social housing estates that were built after the Second World War to provide a decent standard of living for working-class families. The communities reflect the impacts of economic restructuring and associated job losses, along with tighter targeting of social housing, with many residents now subsisting on social assistance, with low incomes, unemployment, high crime rates and family breakdowns common.

Thus, while the concept of social exclusion does not suggest that the socially excluded will be found in a particular housing tenure, it is often assumed that those in social housing are most at risk because the focus of much visible government policy is social housing estates. However, Byrne (1999: 116) argues that owner-occupiers do not
necessarily live in the better parts of cities. Home ownership is such a dominant tenure that it encompasses a wide variety of housing. Lee and Murie’s (1997) UK-based work adds to this debate, finding that, although there is a tendency for households with the least resources to gravitate towards the social housing sector, disadvantaged households are also found in private rental and owner-occupied markets. Based on these findings, Lee and Murie argue that polices aimed at addressing social exclusion should not focus exclusively on social housing estates within inner city areas. Indeed, in some areas of the UK owner-occupiers and private renters have higher levels of deprivation than neighbouring social housing estates.

Hulse and Burke (2000), in one of the few Australian articles about housing and social exclusion, reinforce the importance of applying social exclusion beyond social housing estates. They examine the characteristics of social exclusion in the private rental sector in Australia, Canada and the US. The major argument pursued is that the consequences of social exclusion are greater for low-income tenants in private rental than for those in social housing. Specifically, social housing tenants receive a number of benefits that are not available in low-income private rental tenure, including access to affordable housing, support to maintain a tenancy and security of tenure, all of which to some extent ameliorate social exclusion. For these reasons, at least in relation to housing tenure, Hulse and Burke conclude that social exclusion is greater and more complex for low-income earners in private rental than for social housing tenants. Nonetheless, a strong link is often made in a descriptive sense between the notion of social exclusion and social housing estates in the UK (Marsh & Mullins 1998) and Australia (Arthurson 2002).

Many commentators argue that when social exclusion is applied in this way, to depict groups and localities as disadvantaged, it is not being deployed to facilitate understanding of the processes that lead to decline, but as a description of outcomes and this limits its usefulness (see, for instance, Barry 1998; Burchardt, Le Grand & Piachaud 1999: 3; Byrne 1999; Wheelan 1999). Likewise, Ratcliffe (1998: 816) comments that at worst it labels, stereotypes and stigmatises minorities as part of an ‘excluded’ underclass. In view of this, he argues that there is a danger that social exclusion could merely become a descriptive slogan rather than an analytical tool. The dilemma for him is that, whilst social exclusion might be useful in drawing attention to questions of inequality in policy circles, in sociological debates it has obscured rather than clarified issues and is really only a descriptive label. Another useful contribution to this debate is the work of Allen, Cars and Madanipour (1998). They argue that, in any consideration of the terminology of social exclusion, it is helpful to distinguish between:

- social exclusion used as a description of an empirical phenomenon; and
- the use of the term in reference to a set of ideas about social phenomena and the processes that cause them.

Using Allen, Cars and Madanipour’s distinction, it seems the concept has merit if it helps to show how different social processes interact but it is not always a particularly useful term for labelling empirical phenomena without a deeper consideration of the issues involved. Therefore, it is important that writers using ‘social exclusion’ as an explanatory concept are explicit about how they deploy the term.
In a policy sense, the interdisciplinary nature of social exclusion is used to legitimise new approaches to government service delivery that claim to deliver far more complex and holistic policy solutions than in the past, through ‘partnership’ and ‘joined-up’ government. Whether this leads to novel policy responses in practice is contentious. Taylor (1998), for instance, while arguing that social exclusion offers an alternative foundation to poverty for developing novel and comprehensive strategies, says that for it to become reality requires major change to professional, economic and political cultures. Critics of the UK government’s social exclusion strategy, such as Levitas (1998) and Bowring (2000), argue that the emphasis on joined-up government makes accountability harder to enforce, as it is difficult to trace specific policies and their effects.

Recent research findings that the social exclusion policies of European governments are having only minimal impact on addressing inequality have precipitated a debate within academia about the capacity of area-based policy interventions. Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachaud’s (2002) work highlights that local income is the most significant factor contributing to social exclusion, although the causal relationship between low income and its effect on other attributes is difficult to specify with any precision. Byrne (1999: 79), in his study of social exclusion, also highlights income inequality as the most significant causal factor. As he writes ‘income inequality matters in any consideration of social exclusion because income is both the basis of social participation through consumption and a reflection of the power of people in their economic roles’. Overall, the studies suggest that, while housing plays a role in social exclusion, addressing income inequality through tax breaks, income redistribution and work incentives is one of the most effective ways of addressing inequality and exclusion.

**The Range of Causes and Processes Leading to Social Exclusion**

Within the literature, the dominant view is that the concept of social exclusion has more analytical purchase than the notion of poverty. In addition to highlighting the societal dimensions where inequality arises, social exclusion incorporates a broad range of causes of social inequalities beyond the material disadvantage denoted by poverty (Anderson & Sim 2000a). The factors linked to social exclusion range from universalistic forms of inequality, including exclusion within a system of social processes, for instance, through racial harassment or denial of basic citizenship rights (Ratcliffe 1998), to exclusion described in more specific terms. The latter includes lack of adequate housing and education, poor health, homelessness, disability, unemployment, low income, non-participation in the regular activities of society, resource-poor social networks and lack of access to informal contacts linking to jobs or appropriate role models (Forrest & Kearns 1999; Geddes & Urry 2000). Related aspects are lack of access to services such as banks and credit facilities, which curtails participation in the exchange relations of society (Bowring 2000: 310).

At first consideration, this broad focus on a multiplicity of causes and effects of inequality appears advantageous. However, it poses numerous conceptual and analytical difficulties, which academics have grappled with in debates about the concept. Some of the problems identified include that it is so broad in its scope that just about anyone or anything can become or be considered socially excluded (Saunders & Tsumori 2002: 32). Compared to poverty, which associates inequality with lack of material resources, social exclusion is a more imprecise concept and this lack of precision renders the exact
meaning intangible (Byrne 1999; Atkinson & Davoudi 2000: 235). Madanipour, Cars and Allen (1998) argue that the effects of this imprecision are that social exclusion is used carelessly and interchangeably with other concepts, including poverty and social segregation. Likewise, Marsh and Mullins (1998: 5) argue that, once you break the link between poverty and deprivation, there is a danger that all households might be depicted as enduring some degree of social exclusion and this limits its analytical use.

Another benefit claimed for social exclusion is that it places greater emphasis than the traditional poverty literature on the role that relational processes play in deprivation (Room 1995). Relational processes include societal links, social participation, and interrelated issues such as the disadvantages of impoverished social networks, which can disrupt social bonds and lead to social isolation or lack of social integration. From this viewpoint, unemployment, for instance, results not only in less income, but loss of relationships in the workplace and this is part of the causal process of social exclusion. Consequently, contemporary research utilising the concept of social exclusion is considered a counterbalance to past research on social problems that focused largely on structural explanations of inequality, drawing on the economy, the state and redistributive issues including lack of resources, and mostly ignoring social interactions and dynamics.

A serious charge made against the proponents of the concept is the claim that social exclusion says nothing more about the processes underlying inequality than has already been articulated in the description of poverty outlined by Peter Townsend in his seminal work *Poverty in the United Kingdom* published in 1979. This work also made the key connection between relational factors and material deprivation. For Townsend (1979: 31), poverty was defined as ‘being excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities’. This definition is remarkably similar to contemporary definitions of social exclusion.

Nonetheless, proponents note that the relational processes of social exclusion may also include questions about the role of individual agency, or action, and individual capability in combating or adding to inequality (Silver 1994; Sen 2000). This question of the extent to which individuals who live in poverty are culpable for their predicament and the degree to which structural factors affect individual capacity is contested in all areas of social policy analysis. Social exclusion is seen as one of the concepts that bridge the divide between agency and structuralist interpretations by emphasising the ways in which individual action shapes and in turn is shaped by social processes. As an explanatory concept, it is therefore generally deemed useful in making these connections explicit. Sen (2000), for instance, argues that the concept of social exclusion reinforces the need for poverty to be understood as capability deprivation and people not being able to reach their full potential within society.

The counter argument, as expressed by Australian researchers Saunders and Tsumori (2002: 32), is that the concept of social exclusion underestimates the role of agency by depicting the disadvantaged as victims. Hence, unlike poverty, social exclusion implies causation and that something happens to someone, removing the fault for his/her predicament to others. These opposing arguments point to the different ideological foundations that can be incorporated within the concept of social exclusion. We return
to this point shortly in the section on political deployment but consider first how housing is implicated in the causes and processes of social exclusion.

**Housing and Social Exclusion**

Given the multitude of factors and interrelationships implicated in causing social exclusion, it would be expected that any academic discussion of the concept would consider the role of housing. Housing is the main item of the family budget and without state assistance many low-income families could not access decent and affordable housing. However, the role of housing is not always discernible in the literature on social exclusion. In general, academic studies that explore the relationship between housing and social exclusion take two divergent analyses, focusing on:

- first, the extent to which the housing system contributes to or ameliorates social exclusion; and
- second, the consequences of exclusion from housing.

In the first set of studies, housing itself is acknowledged as a key factor contributing to social inequality. Therefore, from this viewpoint, any analysis seeking to understand the relationship between inequality and social exclusion must acknowledge the role of housing in shaping outcomes. Lee and Murie (1997:12), for instance, argue that during the postwar years the role of social housing was to decrease housing shortages and raise standards in order to increase social cohesion and reduce social divisions. Social housing played a key role in maintaining affordability of rent and energy costs and providing security of tenure. They argue that the role of housing in maintaining affordability and reducing social divisions has been undermined through policies adopted in the UK since 1996. These policies are likely to further erode the availability of social housing stock with limited new building, sales and stock transfers to other tenures in order to gain funds to upgrade existing social housing. Pawson and Kintrea (2002) add to this debate, exploring the way that housing allocation policies form part of the processes of social exclusion. The policies segregate the most disadvantaged in poor areas, deny access to some groups and perpetuate the concentration of impoverishment within the social housing sector. They conclude that this situation is unlikely to change ‘as long as social housing remains a housing sector of last resort’ (Pawson & Kintrea 2002: 644).

Another proponent of the view that housing contributes to social exclusion is Forrest (2000). He contends that the components identified as comprising social exclusion, including poor health and opportunities for securing employment, are intertwined with housing. In short, housing both reinforces and is in turn shaped by other factors such as unemployment and poor educational opportunities. Similarly, Somerville (1998: 772) argues that social exclusion through housing occurs where housing processes deny certain ethnic groups control over their lives and reduce access to wider citizenship rights.

The second series of discussions is about the social consequences of exclusion from housing. Based on their assessment of two UK housing estates, one predominantly a Bangladeshi community and the other mainly white, Cameron and Field (2000) point to the importance of separating out arguments based on exclusion through housing from those based on exclusion from housing. The latter focus is on the detrimental effects
of lack of access for the disadvantaged to adequate and affordable housing. However, even in this body of academic literature, the role housing plays in the processes of social exclusion is complex. They found that the Bangladeshi community experienced exclusion from housing because their estate had high demand and low turnover and their housing options were constrained by low income and fear of crime. Nonetheless, the community was highly integrated into the local labour markets and had strong community integration. Conversely, the adjacent white community had greater housing choice and the housing was of a better physical quality. However, the community was excluded from the labour market and wider society. The implication is that it is possible to be well housed but socially excluded and poorly housed but socially integrated. Hence, the relationship between social exclusion and housing is complex and varies across estates and communities.

Anderson and Sim (2000a: 21) reiterate Cameron and Field’s arguments about exclusion from housing. They argue that initial debates that linked residualisation of social housing to social exclusion in the UK ignored the experience of those who could not gain access to this tenure. Yet, decent, secure, affordable, quality housing provides a basis for social integration and is linked to labour market engagement. For these reasons, Anderson and Sim (2000b: 227) conclude that social exclusion ‘may not actually be the ideal term to describe the patterns of inequality and disadvantage in the housing system or other dimensions of welfare’. It might be better to refer to the social consequences of exclusion from housing. Ratcliffe (1998: 815) raises a similar issue, arguing that the key question is how housing availability is shared out. The focus should thus be “exclusion” from what, and by what/whom?’

**Political Deployment of Social Exclusion**

The point made earlier about the divergent viewpoints about the cause and effect of social exclusion highlights Silver’s (1994) finding that social exclusion is grounded in conflicting social science paradigms and political ideologies, enabling it to be deployed in different ways. Levitas’ (1998) work in particular reinforces this point, showing how social exclusion is deployed in at least three different ways in contemporary British politics and social policy. She identifies:

- a ‘redistributionist discourse’, which emphasises poverty and the lack of full citizenship as the main causal factors of inequality;
- the ‘moral underclass discourse’, which highlights individual morality and the behaviour of people living in poverty as the principal cause of exclusion; and
- a ‘social integrationist discourse’, which extols the importance of employment as a means to combat social exclusion.

Levitas’ typologies illustrate that the grounding of the concept of social exclusion in competing ideologies renders the term amenable to appropriation by different political parties. For centre left political organisations, such as the UK Labour Party and French Socialist Party, social exclusion serves as a useful rhetorical device to demonstrate a commitment to addressing social disadvantage. For conservative political parties, the term has the attraction of not foregrounding structural poverty. From a political
perspective, the issue is not so much, therefore, whether the concept of social exclusion is analytically rigorous but rather whether its deployment can convince the wider public that government policies are effective. Some commentators (for example, Berghman 1995; Levitas 1998; Marsh & Mullins 1998; Anderson and Sim 2000a) argue that it is the vagueness of the term that encouraged politicians within the European Community to adopt it as a mainstream policy issue in the late 1980s. In short, it enabled politicians to use the concept strategically, to convey public commitment to addressing poverty, without detailing precisely what it meant in substance. Whilst Levitas’ (1998) analysis of social exclusion and social policy concentrates on issues of unemployment, poverty and welfare benefits her framework also offers a means of highlighting how different discourses of social exclusion influence housing policy.

**Discourses of Social Exclusion and Housing Policy**

A cursory examination of the literature shows that the three different discourses Levitas identifies also inform policies enacted by social housing agencies. Table 2 summarises the major features of these discourses and their association with housing policy.

The ‘moral underclass discourse’ has significant influence on contemporary UK housing practice. For example, housing management strategies are increasingly making use of sanctions and other forms of punitive deterrents to prevent anti-social behaviour (Haworth & Manzi 1999). Other texts have sought to illustrate how social housing provision can reinforce welfare dependency (Saunders 1990; Murray 1994). Perhaps the best example is the claim by the UK conservative press that young teenage girls become pregnant in order to secure a social housing tenancy (Jacobs, Kemeny & Manzi 2003). Another aspect of the moral underclass discourse is the view that social housing tenants and homeless people share characteristics that set them aside from home owners in their propensity to engage in social pathologies that include drugs, crime and teenage pregnancies (Watt & Jacobs 2000). The emphasis on tenant participation policies now being pursued by housing agencies is also traced to a notion that social housing tenants should be ‘active’ and responsible citizens (see Raco & Imrie 2000).

Within the UK housing profession, the ‘redistributive discourse’ is especially influential, as it emphasises the negative impact of poor quality housing and homelessness for long-term wellbeing and health. Many of the publications and reports reflecting this discourse call for more resources to be set aside for social housing and subsidies for low-income renters in the private market.

The third discourse, which Levitas terms ‘social integrationist’, has only limited influence within UK housing policy. The best example of the types of programs and policies reflecting this discourse (see Table 2) is Foyers, the French model that seeks to integrate employment and training for youth with provision of secure housing (Anderson & Quilgars 1995). Another example is the ‘Housing Plus’ initiatives undertaken by UK housing associations (Kemp & Fordham 1997). These schemes attempt to incorporate housing provision with community initiatives to enhance neighbourhood cohesion.

These sorts of discourses also exist in Australian social housing policy, although to date there is little exploration of their use especially in relation to social exclusion. For instance, social integrationist arguments are evident in regeneration policy where links are made between housing and employment. Specifically, these arguments
advocate using jobs created through physical upgrading to housing and the surrounding environment to employ local tenants. Arthurson (forthcoming) explores the dominant debates that emerged about housing and inequality in two major reports that investigated future options for East Fairfield (Villawood) public housing estate in New South Wales prior to its demolition. Arthurson’s study reveals that the dominant debate at East Fairfield estate drew extensively on a ‘moral underclass’ discourse that implicated public housing tenure as a major cause of inequality. She argues that this debate provided the rationale for adopting demolition as the definitive solution and limited the potential for more innovative government action.

In summary, whilst it is generally recognised that politicians and policy makers successfully utilise the terminology of social exclusion, there is debate by academics as to whether the concept enhances understanding of poverty and inequality. In particular, questions remain about its analytical rigour and conceptual clarity.

Table 2: Major Policy Debates about Housing and Social Exclusion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Debate</th>
<th>How social exclusion is broadly conceptualised</th>
<th>Links to housing policy</th>
<th>Types of policies and programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Underclass</strong></td>
<td>• Characterises the moral/behavioural delinquency of the disadvantaged themselves as principal cause of exclusion</td>
<td>• Stresses adverse impacts of state intervention in providing social housing</td>
<td>• Privatisation and headleasing of social housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Social housing portrayed as cause of problems – linked to welfare dependency and distinctive problematic tenant behaviour</td>
<td>• Private rental assistance/benefit schemes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Adopts sanctions to prevent inappropriate behaviour</td>
<td>• Policies to change social mix in estate regeneration and allocation of housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Tenant evictions for anti-social behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Redistributive social democratic</strong></td>
<td>Concerned with addressing poverty; recognises it as primary cause of inequality</td>
<td>• Recognises central importance for low-income tenants of accessing good quality, affordable housing</td>
<td>• Government financial investment strategies in social housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Critical of ability of private market to deliver appropriate housing for low-income tenants</td>
<td>• Open access to social housing</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Advocates direct public ownership, administration and provision of social housing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social integrationist</strong></td>
<td>Concentrates on achieving social inclusion through paid work</td>
<td>Emphasis on role housing plays in accessing/retaining paid employment and social cohesion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Utility of Social Exclusion for Australian Debates and Housing Policy

Clearly, many social science researchers question the analytical clarity and conceptual value of social exclusion as a framework for exploring poverty and inequality and their relationship to housing. Some of the major problems identified include: the diversity of meanings ascribed to the term; its grounding in competing ideological perspectives; and that it is often used in conflicting ways and interchangeably with other terms including poverty and social cohesion.

In addition, many of the studies labelled as social exclusion are similar to earlier multidimensional studies of poverty. That is, poverty studies looking at material poverty are now relabeled as exclusion in the economic sphere. Likewise, issues of access to health, housing and education are now considered as exclusion from citizenship rights. What this does is relabel old debates under the new terminology of social exclusion without necessarily adding new information or value to the debates, in particular about how housing is implicated in the processes of social exclusion.

Despite these misgivings, an important characteristic identified in academic debates is the ability of the concept of social exclusion to focus attention on the role that both individual agency and structural factors play in determining poverty and inequality. This highlights an age-old debate in the social sciences about consideration of the issue of human agency or action within the context of broader social processes and structures, which can limit or enhance opportunities.

The specific literature on social exclusion and housing is still developing and attempting to clarify the issues around the role of housing in adding to or ameliorating inequality. As Marsh and Mullins (1998: 750) suggest, fundamental issues remain about the analysis of housing and social exclusion. They summarise some of the major questions as follows:

1. Are housing policy and the housing system always active elements in the processes of social exclusion?
2. If not, in what circumstances does housing play an important role; and
3. What is the scope for housing policy to combat social exclusion when the roots of exclusion are often elsewhere?

In attempting to address these questions, there would be value in building on the current review in an empirical sense, through drawing together the contemporary evidence base on the role of the Australian housing system in shaping and reinforcing or ameliorating inequality.

The European literature that makes the key distinction between ‘exclusion through housing’ and ‘exclusion from housing’ has particular resonance for Australian debates about housing and inequality. In Australia, at least, in estate regeneration policy there is a greater focus on how social housing excludes than consideration of the social and economic consequences of exclusion from housing through reduced numbers of housing stock due to the processes of regeneration (see for instance, Arthursen 2001; 2002). From this point of view, in drawing the distinction between the two processes, the policy imperative is to focus not just on the problems of residualisation, for instance, which are immediately obvious, but to also take into account the social and economic
consequences for low-income tenants of not gaining access to or maintaining access to social housing and the benefits it provides in terms of affordability and security of tenure.

Despite misgivings about the utility of social exclusion as an explanatory concept, most UK social policy academics have chosen to engage in policy debate in an attempt to exert influence on government strategy. The risk for those academics who choose to discard the concept of social exclusion in the quest for analytical rigour is that their scope to influence the policy agenda will be forfeited. Furthermore, in the European context social exclusion is an integral part of the language of practitioners, so a reluctance to engage in their debates on the basis that the concept is too vague, while enabling the academic writer to profess conceptual integrity, will inevitably mean that the opportunity to influence policy will go amiss. This is an important point because in Australia there is no real imperative as yet to embrace the term, albeit the South Australian government has set up a Social Inclusion Unit and the New South Wales Department of Housing links social housing estates with social exclusion in their estate regeneration policies. In this instance, academics have an opportunity to critique and analyse the concept of social exclusion and contribute to an emerging policy agenda that will help to determine whether social exclusion becomes entrenched in government social policies.

The Policy Implications

As the review highlights, the large variation in the types of social groups portrayed as socially excluded and the multitude of causes attributed to social exclusion makes it difficult to target policy interventions; just about anyone or anything can be considered socially excluded. However, if we ignore academic theoretical concerns about the concept of social exclusion then its political use may be progressive if it draws attention to inequalities and helps to place the topic on the policy agenda. Nonetheless, merely applying the label of social exclusion to areas of concentrated disadvantage, such as social housing estates, to highlight that indicators of poverty exist is insufficient. The literature demonstrates that using social exclusion in this way is labelling the symptoms, rather than using social exclusion as a tool to understand the processes of decline. This adds nothing to policy debates about housing and inequality and can add to the stigma of these localities. Such an approach is problematic and could lead to policy interventions that focus on addressing the effects rather than the underlying causes of inequality.

Another issue raised within this review is the competing discourses about housing and disadvantage that can be accommodated by adopting the term social exclusion. Social exclusion is politically convenient because its lack of analytical clarity enables it to be used flexibly and this use is not necessarily progressive. There is scope here to further our understanding of Australian housing policy through conducting additional in-depth research that draws out the key elements of housing programs and policies and explores their relationships to the three discourses of social exclusion within the framework adapted from Levitas (1998).

The promise of social exclusion seems to be in taking account of the integrated nature of the causes of inequality and the different societal spheres where exclusion arises. Consequently, there is an expectation that social exclusion policies will assist in formulating innovative ‘joined-up thinking’ policy on some social housing estates across housing and labour markets, transport, health and education. However, the studies
identify a number of key problems with the ‘joined-up thinking’ associated with social exclusion. In summary they are:

- how to keep sight of inadequacies and inequalities or benefits within the housing system;
- the difficulties in distinguishing and addressing the broader social and economic factors that contribute to poor housing; and
- issues of how to evaluate the different elements of the ‘joined-up policies’.

If social exclusion becomes an important part of the social policy agenda in Australia then policy analysts and researchers will need to gauge ways of evaluating pertinent policy initiatives.

Finally, the literature shows that it would be a mistake to equate spatial inequality and social exclusion solely with social housing rather than other forms of tenure. The UK government’s attempts to address social exclusion tend to focus on social housing, neglecting an understanding of the incidence of social exclusion in other tenures. Social housing estates do not have a monopoly on housing high concentrations of socioeconomically impoverished residents, although the contrary is often accepted as conventional wisdom.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, although the term social exclusion has political utility, as an academic concept it provides little advantage compared to other widely used concepts, such as poverty, other than to emphasise relational factors that shape material and cultural deprivation. In terms of housing policy itself, social exclusion is inadequate when merely used to describe pockets of poverty and disadvantage rather than to present a set of ideas about social phenomena and the processes leading to disadvantage. Social exclusion’s potential appears to be at the level of policy implementation. In stressing the interconnected aspects of deprivation, the concept of social exclusion can be used to endorse policies that seek to adopt a multi-agency or ‘joined-up’ government approach, for instance, on housing estates. However, even this use is not straightforward, as the review highlights. Specifically, housing interventions become conflated with other policies that are implemented to address social exclusion, which makes policies difficult to evaluate. The task of extricating cause and effect is of course the reason why social exclusion policies are so difficult to evaluate. Nonetheless, in spite of its limitations as an analytical concept, for political and pragmatic reasons social exclusion is likely to become an important component of the emerging Australian housing policy agenda.

**References**


