Individual Choice and Social Exclusion

Julian Le Grand

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Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion
London School of Economics
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE
CASE enquiries – tel: 020 7955 6679

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Editorial Note

Julian Le Grand is the Richard Titmuss Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics and a co-director of the ESRC Research Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion.

Abstract

Why is social exclusion a problem? What about 'voluntary' social exclusion – when an individual chooses to exclude him or herself from the wider society? Brain Barry has addressed these questions in a recent CASE book, arguing that social exclusion, voluntary or involuntary, offends against social justice and social solidarity. This paper contends that Barry's arguments are weak for voluntary social exclusion and argues that, perhaps surprisingly, a better case can be made for treating voluntary social exclusion as a problem on welfarist grounds.

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Introduction

Why is social exclusion a problem? Why should we care about an individual 'who does not participate in key activities of the society in which he or she lives' – one definition of the socially excluded (Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachaud, 2002, p.30)? Does our concern arise from some kind of simple utilitarian or welfarist calculus: the excluded are miserable, and therefore we need to include them in society so as raise their welfare and thereby promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number? But what if the socially excluded are not in fact miserable? After all, not everyone necessarily wishes to participate in the 'key activities of society', whatever these may be. In particular, what if an individual or a group of individuals have voluntarily chosen to exclude themselves? What of the recluse who prefers solitude to human company, the religious sect that values its exclusivity, the young men on a run down public housing estate who prefer to join a criminal gang rather than go to university? At the other end of the social scale, what of the rich who lock themselves away in gated communities? All of these individuals and groups may not be participating in the key activities of society; but do they all constitute a social problem? If so, is it the same kind of social problem as those who are socially excluded for reasons beyond their control, and what kind of problem is that?

Brian Barry has addressed some of these questions in a recent contribution to a CASE study of social exclusion (Barry, 2002). There he related social exclusion to the issues of justice and democracy. But the questions are also of even more general concern. The problem of the relationship between choice, poverty and social exclusion has bedevilled academic political and popular debate on the issue for (literally) millennia. As far back as the Roman Empire politicians and policy-makers have wanted to distinguish between the 'undeserving poor' (those poor from choice) from the 'deserving' poor (those who are poor through no fault of their own). With the current resurgence of belief in individual agency and responsibility (Deacon and Mann, 1999), the political interest in attaching notions of responsibilities to rights, and the contributions of Amartya Sen (1994, 1995) and others emphasising the importance of the distribution of 'capabilities' rather than actual incomes, the debate concerning the importance of choice and its relationship to distributional outcomes has re-ignited.

So in this paper I want to pursue the general question as to the relationship between individual choice and social exclusion, and in doing so to shed light on the question as to why social exclusion is a problem worthy of concern. I begin with Barry's arguments as to why social exclusion is wrong from the points of view of justice and democracy, and relate these to the question of choice. I conclude that, whatever their merits as arguments for labelling involuntary

social exclusion as a problem, they do not provide a strong case for treating voluntary social exclusion as one. I then demonstrate that, perhaps surprisingly, a better case can be made on welfarist grounds for viewing some forms of voluntary social exclusion as a proper subject of social concern, especially that with long-term implications for individuals' futures. There is a brief concluding section.

Exclusion, Democracy and Justice

Brian Barry begins his discussion of why social exclusion is undesirable with a definition of social exclusion originally put forward by the present author, as follows: 'An individual is socially excluded if (a) he or she is geographically resident in a society, (b) he or she cannot participate in the normal activities of citizens in that society, and (c) he or she would like to so participate, but is prevented from doing so by factors beyond his or her control' (Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachaud, 1999, p.229). Under this interpretation, voluntary social exclusion is excluded (so to speak), because of condition (c). Barry accepts this definition; but he also points out that it is important to distinguish conceptually between voluntary and involuntary social exclusion, and draws out the implications for both types of social exclusion in his subsequent argument.

Barry puts forward two reasons why social exclusion is wrong. The first is because exclusion dilutes social solidarity – defined by Barry as a sense of fellow feeling that extends beyond people with whom one is in personal contact. Social exclusionary processes do this because they prevent the excluded from sharing in the commonality of experience that is the foundation of social solidarity. And this in turn is a bad thing, partly because social solidarity is 'intrinsically valuable', and partly because an absence of social solidarity creates a problem for democratic politics. It is intrinsically valuable because 'human lives tend to go better in a society whose members share some kind of existence'.[1] It affects democratic politics, because in democratic societies, majority interests dominate. In a society without social solidarity, there is no reason to suppose those interests will coincide with those of the socially excluded; indeed, depending on the reason for the exclusion, the interests of the majority and the excluded are likely to diverge. Hence democratic procedures will result in majorities having both the means and – due to the absence of solidarity - the inclination to oppress socially excluded minorities.

[1] Barry (2002, p.24). Actually, this sounds more like a consequentialist justification for social solidarity (and a utilitarian one at that) than an 'intrinsic' one; but let that pass.

However, in Barry's view, social exclusion is not only wrong because it violates social solidarity and thereby harms democracy. It is also unjust. The injustice arises because social exclusion can create inequality of opportunity, especially with respect to education and work. Obviously, the poverty associated with most forms of social exclusion creates educational barriers: hunger and malnutrition, crowded conditions at home, family pressures to go out and earn money, all make it difficult for children in poor families to make the most of their educational opportunities. But also the social homogeneity of socially excluded communities creates educational problems of its own. So, for instance, children going to local schools with a large number of pupils from socially deprived neighbourhoods will, other things being equal, perform less well than if they had attended schools with a critical mass of middle class pupils.

The problem is not only one of education. To live in social isolation or to live in a socially isolated group cuts the individual concerned off from the networks that are often key to obtaining jobs. Barry quotes William Julius Wilson on inner city isolation, which 'makes it much difficult for those who are looking for jobs to be tied into the job network':[2] a phenomenon that, as Barry points out, is not confined to the inner city. Further, the lack of job opportunities itself depresses educational aspirations, thus contributing further to inequalities in educational opportunity.

Barry also argues that a further aspect of injustice created by social exclusion concerns political opportunities and hence the workings of democracy. As with education, the deprivation associated with social exclusion can impede people's ability to engage in political activities. And, as with jobs, the absence of contacts with social networks significantly impedes both their knowledge of, and their participation in, politics outside election times. All of this damages democracy.

This emphasis on social justice as equality of opportunity is very welcome to those of us who have argued for some time that social injustice or inequity was best interpreted in terms of inequalities in opportunities or choice sets.[3] However, its use in the context of the justification for treating social exclusion as a problem does itself create a difficulty for voluntary social exclusion for it implies that those who voluntarily exclude themselves are not a social problem. Thus the individual who makes a conscious, properly informed decision not to go to university or to take up a training opportunity, and in consequence ends up unemployed and living on a rundown public housing estate, may be socially

[2] Wilson (1987, p.60), quoted in Barry (2002, p.20).

[3] Le Grand (1984, 1991), Arneson (1989), Cohen (1989).

excluded. But his or her exclusion is not socially problematic because, as a consequence of his or her own choices, it is not unjust.

Barry is aware of this issue, and indeed draws attention to it (Barry, 2002, p.23). He argues that it does not apply to the second pillar of his justificatory edifice: the appeal to social solidarity. For solidarity is clearly violated by social exclusion; whether the exclusion is voluntary or involuntary is irrelevant. However, it has to be said that, even here, the possibility of individual choice presents a problem. For if some individuals have voluntarily decided to exclude themselves from society, any move to include them is going to be against their expressed will. Hence such moves are likely to involve a measure of coercion; and that is unlikely to foster feelings in the people concerned of social solidarity.

So the possibility that individuals may choose to exclude themselves from normal society creates problems for Barry's two justifications for the overall undesirability of social exclusion. Voluntary social exclusion is not unjust or inequitable, because it arises from choice. And, although voluntary exclusion may indeed violate social solidarity, any attempt to correct the situation is likely to create resentment and thereby dilute solidarity yet further.

Choice and Welfare

So if Barry's arguments for the undesirability of social exclusion based on the concerns of social justice and social solidarity do not apply to voluntary exclusion, can any justification for regarding exclusion by choice as problematic be found elsewhere? One possibility is a 'welfarist' one: that is, the impact of social exclusion on the welfare of individuals. Now it might at first seem curious to consider welfarism as a possible source of such justification; for individuals who choose to exclude themselves are presumably doing it because they want to. Hence their welfare is raised by voluntary social exclusion; and so it would appear that such exclusion cannot be a problem from a welfarist perspective.

However, there are a number of situations where these arguments might not hold, and indeed where the opposite case could be made. The most obvious of these is what we might term 'externalities': when the act of voluntary social exclusion, although increasing the chooser's own welfare, damages other people's welfare. An example would be young men joining a gang that engaged in crime, vandalism or other anti-social activities. Another might be the wealthy locking themselves away in gated estates, thereby physically depriving others of what could be communal facilities and creating resentment in the rest of the

community. Indeed Barry's appeal to the 'intrinsic' value of social solidarity could also be justified on externality grounds: if social solidarity contributes to everyone's welfare, then for some people to opt out diminishes that welfare.

It is worth noting that those rather closer to the actual experience of social exclusion than most academics can share this view that exclusion has an externality effect. An in-depth study of the views of thirty residents of poor public housing estates found that these residents felt that any person experiencing exclusion (whether they have had a hand in it or not) also caused wider society a problem in terms of the threat such divisions pose to social solidarity. While the group distinguished between the voluntary withdrawal by better off individuals and the voluntary social exclusion of people facing disadvantage, such as through benefit fraud or criminal activity, they were critical of both types of divisive outcome (Richardson and Le Grand, 2002).

So there is a welfarist case for regarding even voluntary social exclusion as undesirable because of the externality effect. But there are also cases where voluntary acts may not necessarily increase the welfare of the individual making the choice him or herself. Barry himself deals with one case where we might observe an apparently voluntary act of self-exclusion but nonetheless regard it as neither furthering the individual's own welfare nor, of more concern to his argument, social justice. This is when the opportunity or choice set is small or when the alternatives it contains are pretty meagre. If an individual only has two unpalatable choices ('your money or your life') then if he or she chooses one of them (such as giving up the money), it would be odd to judge the outcome as promoting individual welfare or even a just one simply because it was the product of a choice. Likewise, if a young black man from a public housing estate encounters hostility and discrimination whenever he ventures into white society, and decides to withdraw from that society and its institutions by, for instance, refusing an opportunity to go to university, it would be hard to describe this as welfare-enhancing or as socially just, simply on the grounds that he had chosen to do it. Rather it is in the limited size and quality of the choice set open to him that the problem lies. Social exclusion that is the result of decisions made over limited opportunities limits welfare and is also unjust – and therefore socially undesirable. In these situations, simply increasing the choice set of the individual concerned is likely to reduce social exclusion, increase individual welfare, promote social justice, and, through rendering the opportunities open to all society's members more similar, likely to increase social solidarity.

Similar arguments apply when decisions are made with poor information. If the university that offered the young man a place was in fact a haven of non-discrimination but he did not know this, then again it would be hard to describe

his situation as welfare-promoting or just. Or, to take a broader case, if some individuals chose not to go to university because they did not know about the likely extra income that they could earn over their lifetimes if they went, then again it is hard to hold them responsible for their decisions. Acts of 'voluntary' social exclusion that result from choice sets that are either small or accompanied by poor information cannot be justified by reference either to social welfare or to social justice.

The public housing residents whose views on social exclusion were explored in the study mentioned above agreed with this view. For instance, those who chose to join a youth gang:

> 'may not be happy [really] they are bolstering each other – it's mutual support for hardships'

Therefore such participation cannot be considered an equivalent alternative for participation in mainstream society (Richardson and Le Grand, 2002, p. 500).

More difficult cases arise when properly informed individuals with reasonably sized choice sets make voluntary decisions. Are there reasons for, in some circumstances, not accepting that the individual concerned is happier as a result of those decisions? Is it possible that, even if properly informed individuals judge themselves to be happier living outside the wider society, both they and society would actually be better off if they were brought inside?

Bill New (1999) has identified four possible cases where we might make such a judgement.[4] The first is where there is a technical inability to complete the necessary mental tasks. This inability could arise because the quantity of information is simply too great, relative to mental capacity, or because the technological or causal connections are too difficult to make, again relative to capacity. This appears to be a special problem with respect to long-term decision-making. For this involves assessing the probabilities of benefit or harm from alternative courses of action. And experimental evidence suggests that individuals often find it difficult to make rational decisions where weighing up probabilities are concerned (Tversky and Kahneman 1982).

[4] For a critique of New, see Calcott (2000). For further discussion of individual failure in different contexts, see Le Grand (2003), Chs. 5 and 6.

A second source of individual failure identified by New is weakness of the will. This is where individuals know what they prefer in the long term but still make short-term decisions that are not in their long-term interest. Addiction, and more generally substance misuse, could be considered an example of this.[5]

A third source of individual failure is emotional decision-making. Becoming attached to certain choices allows emotions to distort decisions. This might arise because of a strong attachment to a particular outcome even though one knows that it is very unlikely to occur; or the decision may be made in a period of stress, such as that following bereavement.

The fourth problem raised by New concerns the relationship between preferences and experience. Preferences over a set of decisions might be different if the individual had actual experience (as distinct from abstract knowledge or information) of the outcomes of the decision concerned from that if he or she had no such experience. But some experiences are largely or wholly impossible to repeat. Thus the decision whether to go to university or not might be different if it were possible for the individual concerned actually to have the experience of having been to university before the decision was taken; but this is not a feasible option. At first sight, this resembles the poor information concern discussed above. But it is not quite the same; for, unlike in the cases considered in that context, no system can supply the relevant information prior to the decision being taken.

How do these potential 'individual failures' (so-called so as to distinguish them from market or other types of system failure) affect the voluntary decision to self-exclude? This will clearly depend upon the situation and the individuals concerned. However, there is an important generalisation that can be made. This is that these 'failures' are more likely to apply to be a problem when major decisions with long-term implications are concerned, than when more minor decisions that only have short-term consequences are involved. In part this is simply a matter of scale: the potential damage done by a mistake in making a big decision that affects one's whole future (such as whether or not to go to university) is obviously greater than that from a mistake involving a smaller short-term decision (such as whether to go to an isolated retreat for a week). But also some of the individual failures above are more likely to involve long-term

[5] The phenomenon of addiction obviously presents problems for any analysis of the status of individual choice. Again the public housing residents have interesting views on this: they argued that initially the people concerned could be said to be excluding themselves partly out of choice, but after they become addicted, the exclusion/problems they face are more beyond their control (Richardson and Le Grand, 2002, p.502).

decision-making. So, for instance, technical incapacity is more problematic when long-term decision-making involving the weighing up of probabilities is concerned; and weakness of the will frequently manifests itself as a way of prioritising of short-term interests over long-term ones.

Failures in major long-term decision-making may result from another problem: that of myopia. Individuals may make wrong decisions about self-exclusion, because they are too short-sighted to take proper account of the future. Myopia is a common phenomenon. Individuals' time horizons are limited. They do not always consider the long-term; they plan only on the basis of current events, or on their predictions of the very immediate future. In a word, they are myopic.

Now, although this sounds like another form of individual failure, it is actually somewhat different. Here some of the arguments of Derek Parfit (1984) concerning the nature of personal identity have relevance. Parfit's arguments about identity run something like this. We normally invoke the concept of personal identity to link a person in one time period with the 'same' person in another, later period. But what does the concept of personal identity actually mean? It presumably does not mean what a possible literal interpretation of the words in the phrase personal identity would mean: that is, the person in the first time period is identical in every respect to the person in the second. The person will have aged physically; external factors (such as income or family status) may have changed; tastes may have changed; aspects of personality may have changed. The extent and magnitude of these changes may be small if the distance between the time periods is small, but they are likely to increase with that distance: compare the physique, income, personal relations, and personality of an eight year-old with that of the 'same' person eighty years later.

So if it does not mean actual identity, what does personal identity mean? Parfit's answer is a reductionist one: that is, the 'fact' of personal identity can be reduced to some other facts that can be described without using the concept of personal identity. These facts, according to Parfit, are links of a psychological kind, principally those of intention and memory. For instance, a twenty year old will have memories of her nineteen year old self; and certain features of her current existence will depend on the intentions and actions of that nineteen year old. These links are, according to Parfit, what makes the twenty and nineteen year old the 'same' person. Similar phenomena would link the eight and eighty-eight year old mentioned above; but here the phenomena (and therefore the links) would be much attenuated. Hence any argument that was based on the continuity of the self would be much weaker for the eighty year gap than for the one year gap.

What are the implications of this for the myopia argument? Simply that a certain degree of myopia may not be an 'individual failure'. If people are related to their future selves by links that become progressively attenuated the more distant the future, then it seems quite rational to give those future selves less weight than their present selves. There is no individual failure in the sense of irrational decision-making.

But this in turn means that there is a justification for treating long-term decision-making as a social problem. For there is a group of people who have no say in such decisions but who are affected by those who make them: there is an externality. An individual's future self is a person who is directly affected by that individual's current decisions in the market place. A 65 year old may be poor because of myopic decisions taken by her 25 year old self. Hence the 25 year old is imposing costs on the 65 year old through her decisions; but the 65 year has no say in those decisions. There is an externality.

An individual's future self is, of course, someone with whom her current self is linked. But the link is not as strong as that to her present self. Hence, in taking those current decisions she will not give appropriate weight to the interests of her future self, in a similar fashion as if her future self was actually a different person. More specifically, because she is not giving her future self the same weight as that future self would if the latter were present at the point of decision, she will undertake actions relating to the balance of interests between present and future self that are not 'optimal' from the point of view of aggregate welfare.

Conclusion

What are the implications of all of this for voluntary social exclusion and the extent to which this is a social problem? It suggests two things. First, voluntary social exclusion may be a problem if we believe there to be a significant degree of externality and/or of individual failure in making the relevant decisions. Second, the problem is more likely to occur with respect to decisions involving voluntary social exclusion that have implications for the long-term future of the individual concerned. For it is here that both individual failure and the myopia externality are more likely.

Of course, one cannot deduce from this directly that government intervention is necessarily required to correct this problem. For there is no guarantee that such intervention will make things better. So, for instance, governments elected by myopic individuals may behave just as myopically as the individuals themselves. As so often in public policy, we are searching for the least worst

alternative; and finding that alternative requires empirical as well as philosophical investigation. That will have to be the subject of another paper.

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