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Research Article

Understanding social exclusion: the views of the UK public

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Abstract
Despite considerable policy interest, we know little about how the public understand and respond to the concept of social exclusion. Involving the public in such debates is important in establishing the political acceptability of social scientific concepts and in ensuring that operational definitions and measures faithfully reflect lived experiences. This paper draws on qualitative development work preparatory to the *2012 UK Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey* in examining public understandings of what it means to experience social exclusion in the UK today. Our findings demonstrate the feasibility and desirability of including the public in policy debates in this area.

Keywords
multidimensional disadvantage; social exclusion; poverty;

1. Understanding social exclusion

In recent decades, considerable attention has focused on social exclusion and its measurement. In the UK, the language of social exclusion featured strongly in New Labour's policy agenda, and tackling social exclusion remains a fundamental EU social policy objective. Indeed, the conceptual vocabulary of social exclusion remains closely associated with growing policy concerns around quality of life, well-being, and life satisfaction and happiness both in the UK (e.g. ONS, 2016; NEF, 2009; Donovan & Halpern, 2002), and internationally (e.g. Eurostat, 2015; OECD, 2011; Layard, 2011; Stiglitz et al, 2009). Moreover, despite fundamental differences in perspectives on the causes of social exclusion and appropriate policy responses, a degree of consensus *is* nonetheless evident on its conceptual definition in UK academic and policy research.

Firstly, social exclusion refers to a process of being 'shut out' from social, economic, cultural, and political systems, and an enforced inability to participate in widely accepted social norms. Secondly, social exclusion is typically viewed as a dynamic process rather than as a static condition. Thirdly, social exclusion is a relationship, and not a material condition, characterized by powerlessness, denial of rights, and diminished citizenship (e.g. Burchardt et al., 1999, 2002; Duffy, 1995; Gordon et al., 2000; Lister, 2004; Oppenheim, 1998; Room, 1995; Silver, 1997; Walker & Walker, 1997). The negative personal impacts of exclusion are therefore key structural barriers to progress on the well-being agenda that has become increasingly influential in international policy thinking. Since

Since the election of the UK Coalition (now Conservative) Government in 2010, social exclusion has been de-prioritised as a direct focus of UK policy-making though it remains highly relevant to wider stated policy objectives on well-being, social mobility and quality of life. Tackling social exclusion remains a central plank of EU policy making, as reflected in the *Europe 2020* strategy and associated targets. This policy response to social exclusion has been widely and effectively questioned in academic research due to its overemphasis on economic considerations and 'inclusion' through paid work rather than responding to a more multidimensional understanding of social exclusion and its wider effects, e.g. on social relations, wellbeing, and quality of life (Copeland & Daly, 2012; Mandipour et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the empirical investigation of social exclusion remains an active agenda across Europe in diverse research settings including in understanding processes of neighbourhood exclusion (Weck & Lobato, 2015), child and youth marginalisation (Thompson et al., 2014; Plenty & Jonsson, 2017), sexual exploitation (Balfour, 2014), mental health (Boardman, 2011), digital exclusion (Martin et al., 2016) and many others. Moreover, the de-prioritisation of social exclusion as a focus for policy action in the UK contrasts with growing recognition in applied global poverty and development research of the multidimensional and relational nature of social disadvantage (e.g. Khan, 2012; Fischer, 2011; Popay et al., 2008; Saith, 2007).

Nevertheless, the challenges involved in operationalising and measuring social exclusion remain substantial. Despite broad agreement on abstract conceptualisation, consensus on specific indicators and their interrelationship remains elusive. Despite important first steps in the development of cross-national indicators (e.g. Atkinson & Marlier, 2010; Stiglitz et al., 2009), the potential of survey microdata remains largely unfulfilled. A number of empirical approaches have been proposed drawing upon existing datasets such as the UK British

Household Panel Survey (Burchardt et al., 1999, 2002; Barnes, 2005; Taylor et al., 2002), and bespoke studies such as the 1999 Poverty and Social Exclusion survey (Levitas, 2006). However, these early applications of the concept were often crude because of the limitations of existing surveys, under-developed theoretical foundations, and limited empirical validation. Subsequent work sought to address these problems with a view to operationalising social exclusion in the 2012 PSE-UK study. In reviewing of existing studies in this area, Levitas et al. (2007: 9) offer a working definition which informed subsequent UK Cabinet Office analysis:

> Social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole.

This definition informs our exploration here of public perspectives on social exclusion.

However, as Levitas and colleagues acknowledge, in practice, the abstract character of competing conceptual definitions often limits their practical utility. The qualitative work reported here therefore to inform subsequent survey measurement of social exclusion in the 2012 PSE-UK by examining public perspectives on this topic. In doing so, it seeks to ascertain using exploratory methods those items, activities and opportunities considered necessary by the UK public for people to be able to fully participate in society. Participants suggestions (as detailed in Table 1 (below), were then considered by the wider project team and most were incorporated within the PSE-UK mainstage survey (as shown in Table 1), and in subsequent operationalisation of the BSEM framework (e.g. Bailey et al., 2018). As described more fully below, addressing this agenda also involves wider consideration of public understandings and responses to the concept of social exclusion itself, what it means for people to be able to 'fully participate' in UK society today, and public perceptions of the triggers, drivers and risk factors associated with social exclusion - as well as its underpinning causes. Despite extensive commentary, academic debates in this area have rarely been informed by research on public perceptions on these issues, and in this paper, we therefore seek to begin to fill this gap by highlighting ways in which public understandings can inform academic and policy debates on the definition and measurement of social exclusion.

2. Public perceptions of social exclusion

Recent decades have seen growing recognition of the importance of involving poor citizens in research on poverty and exclusion using participatory methods (e.g. Beresford et al., 1999; Lister, 2002, 2007). These studies have considerably advanced understanding of the experience of poverty and its consequences from the perspectives of the 'real experts', people experiencing poverty. In contrast, comparable evidence on perceptions of social exclusion has been much more limited. Numerous qualitative studies document different aspects of the experience of multiple disadvantage for various populations at both individual and neighbourhood levels (see Pemberton et al., 2013 for a review). Nevertheless, this body of evidence is fragmented, lacks a clear conceptual focus on social exclusion as opposed to discrete instances or symptoms of marginalisation (e.g. homelessness, substance misuse, domestic abuse, social isolation, etc.). Much of this work has documented the experience of exclusion on the basis of researchers' operational definitions and perspectives (explicit or otherwise), rather than interrogating public perceptions of social exclusion.

A few studies have begun to chart this terrain from the perspective of people experiencing multiple disadvantage. Based on focus group discussions with residents and other stakeholders in 'deprived' neighbourhoods, Richardson and Le Grand (2002) reveal that participants tended to define social exclusion in terms of an inability to fully participate in the kinds of activities which are considered 'normal' (or at least widely approved) within the wider society. However, Flaherty's 2008 study reveals considerable ambivalence towards the concept of social exclusion amongst study participants identifying as experiencing poverty and exclusion. Participants were frequently bemused at being viewed as '*outside of the society of which they subjectively felt within*' (Flaherty, 2008:129). Whilst many participants experienced social exclusion, Flaherty argues that this was not a 'lived concept' with participants' own definitions emphasising disparate processes of extreme disadvantage (e.g. the homelessness, sexual exploitation, substance misuse) rather than more ubiquitous forms of everyday marginalisation.

Based on deliberative, focus group methods, the research reported here seeks to build on this emerging evidence. In contrast with the above studies which focus specifically on perceptions of social exclusion amongst populations experiencing marginalisation, the findings reported here examine the views of the UK public as a whole including both low-income and non-low income participants. In doing so we consider how participants understand the nature and causes of social exclusion, as well as its symptoms and consequences. For example, what (if anything) does the language of social exclusion mean to them? Do researchers' definitions and understandings accord with public perspectives? How, if at all, should the latter inform survey measurement?

3. Research methods

In this paper we draw on qualitative development work preparatory to the 2012 PSE-UK survey, comprising 14 focus group interviews involving 114 participants in five cities across all four nations comprising the UK. Separate groups were conducted with low-income, non-low income, and mixed-income samples, and groups were also stratified by household type, and minority ethnic status. Prior to attending these discussions, participants were asked to complete a recruitment survey collecting basic socio-demographic information, and a short open-format questionnaire on the living standards and social exclusion in the UK today intended to facilitate participants' engagement with these issues.

In all the groups, views were sought based on an initial exploratory discussion and through more structured subsequent tasks. We began by asking participants to comment on what it means to be able to fully participate in society, what if anything the term 'social exclusion' meant to them, and in what ways it might differ from poverty. Participants were then asked to consider a range of hypothetical scenarios or 'vignettes' intended to illuminate participants' decision-making and judgements. These vignettes encompassed different aspects of social exclusion including paid work, housing, social isolation, crime, and troubled personal histories (see Appendix). These vignettes were useful in comparing participants' responses to stimulus material, in highlighting tacit assumptions and perspectives, and in probing definitional boundaries and thresholds (i.e. how much is enough).

Research was conducted in two overlapping phases. Using brainstorming methods, in the Phase 1 (conducted separately for low and non-low income groups) participants were asked to suggest the kinds of disadvantages which make it difficult for people '*to fully participate in society and to enjoy the lifestyle, choices and opportunities available to most people in the UK today*'. Drawing on these and other items, Phase 2 participants were then asked to deliberate on and classify items as 'essential', 'desirable' or 'luxuries' using card sort methods. Our intention here was to assess the extent to which a public consensus exists on the resources, activities and assets needed to avoid exclusion. Our expectation was that a wider consensus may exist where Phase 2 groups independently classify items and activities in ways consistent with findings from the more exploratory, Phase 1 groups. Nine 'exploratory' FDG interviews were undertaken using brainstorming methods (with XX participants) in Phase 1 of this project, and five 'confirmatory' FDG interviews (with XX participants) comprised Phase 2 of this work. The profile of all FDGs including participant characteristics and location is given in the Appendix.

4. Participant Understandings of Social Exclusion

Our discussions with participants revealed mixed comprehension and familiarity with the concept of social exclusion. Some participants recognised social exclusion to be part of the political lexicon of contemporary debates. Other responses indicated that social exclusion remains very much an abstract idea rather than a lived reality (in contrast experiences of poverty). Nevertheless, participant accounts reveal an awareness of the crux of the matter, a sense of being 'shut out' from norms of consumption, participation and quality of life. Whilst evidence on the structure of disadvantage remains sketchy, participants' accounts lend credence to a focus on social exclusion in exploring the interaction between material resources and societal participation and their impacts in shaping well-being and quality of life. Whilst these accounts reflect the multifaceted nature of exclusion, they also describe social exclusion and inclusion as qualitatively different states: there is no evidence here for a continuum of exclusion in the public consciousness.

Participants' accounts emphasised the centrality of exclusion from social relations, and how societal participation is constrained by a lack of resources (public and private). This was reflected in a focus on poor social and communication skills as a driver of social disconnection, and in wider concerns with being 'left out' or 'shut out' from social networks and norms of participation. Central to these accounts was a sense of psychological 'belonging' (and contributing) to some wider imagined community of place or purpose. A sense of contributing to society is understood broadly to include caring and volunteering, and not simply inclusion through paid work:

> *CPF RM: It means not fitting in really isn't it? If people don't fit in you feel socially excluded*
> *BRS1 RF: I think it's kind of a feeling that you are useful in society as well…like even if you're looking after children or if you're at work or if you're volunteering in certain things. It doesn't mean you have to have a high powered job…just feeling that you're part of something*

Whilst many participants interpreted social exclusion quite literally to refer to isolation from personal networks and support, other responses conveyed wider narratives of misrecognition and injustices arising from class-based structural inequalities.

> *BRS2: Social exclusion is almost like a class thing. You've got like working class people and upper-class people, that's like social exclusion as well isn't it? Exclusive things like.*

LDN1: [You] use your education, financial background, your heritage, depending what education, qualifications, the kind of job you do, the kind of, the way you live.
LDN1: Like [to] exclude other people if they're not within our own class or they're not into what we are into or if they don't dress the way we dress or have the same faith, religion or something, we do it without actually knowing that this is what we're doing.

Participant's accounts also emphasised discrimination as a key driver of exclusion and the multiple disadvantages that people face not only because of discriminatory practices and misrecognition quite aside from constrained material resources. Other accounts drew upon public representations of racialized disadvantage and the 'underclass' including area-based stigma and its connections with neighbourhood deprivation. Whilst a sense of community and of belonging were often integral to participants' accounts, being labelled with the stigma of belonging to the 'wrong' neighbourhood was also viewed as curtailing choices and opportunities:

NI2: I think about minority groups when I think about social exclusion, so maybe people that English isn't their first language especially, like the black communities…And then I would think about it as well in terms of social exclusion in terms of ghetto, kind of ghettoised areas
NI3: Sometimes it can be as simple as the area, the neighbourhood that you live in. It could have a stigma attached to it and 'oh they're from there, they're that kind of person'.

Whilst participants' accounts emphasised the overlapping nature of vulnerability to poverty and social exclusion, participants also drew a conceptual distinction between social exclusion and poverty. Social exclusion was typically viewed as incorporating a broader range of social disadvantages than income-based understandings of poverty.

BRS2: [It's] nothing to do necessarily with how much money you have. You can be excluded from activities because through race or through gender or if you're disabled…You have lots of money but you could be like a lonely old woman stuck in her flat with like no family or anything

5. Participant Perspectives on Social Exclusion Indicators

Views were also sought on the kinds of disadvantages which make it difficult for people to fully participate in society. However, in practice groups actively and without prompting reinterpreted the task by focusing on positive indicators of *inclusion* in the UK today. The items suggested by participants in the nine Phase One mostly commanded broad agreement and are summarised in Table 1 (*below*). We present participants' suggestions across each of the ten BSEM themes, indicating where subsequent survey data collection provides full or partial topic coverage on this theme. Table 1 therefore provides a summary of the degree of overlap in topic coverage across quantitative and qualitative data collection in the 2012 PSE-UK project. Overall, the 2012 PSE-UK survey provides good topic coverage across most of the themes and suggestions identified by FDG participants. However, some of the soft or more subjective suggestions (e.g. relating to shared 'values', 'healthy' spiritual life, or sense of 'belonging') can be difficult and/or time consuming to operationalize in a survey context. In general (and acknowledging overlaps in classification across BSEM themes), these suggestions emphasise the importance of good quality, accessible services in sustaining communities. In addition to material resources, social networks and contact are also emphasised in participants' suggestions, along with the importance of livelihood – though the quality of paid work is emphasised here as much as being in work.

Participants make no clear distinction here between predictors or 'risk markers', and indicators of exclusion. Moreover, these accounts reflect a concern both with individual-level measures

of exclusion, and access to collective resources, provision and entitlements. In this sense at least, participants' perspectives reflected an understanding of social exclusion as arising from the maldistribution of resources and opportunities, and not simply as a characteristic of 'the excluded' themselves - but as we shall see attributions of responsibility here are complex.

- TO ADD (how informed quant work?)

Table 1: Participant views on items and activities needed to avoid exclusion by 2012 PSE-UK BSEM theme

Material and economic resources	Social resources	Political and civic participation
● Freedom from poverty	○ Confidence and self-esteem	Shared values, cultures and identities
● Adequate income level	● Good social networks	● Feeling able to influence decision-making
● Being able to save and manage debt	Living close to family/friends	● Having a say in your local area
● Having a bank account	● Strong social support from familiy/friends	● Being involved in your local community
● Good info on finances & debt	● Someone to turn to in a crisis	● UK citizenship status
Sensible state pension provision	● Avoiding loneliness and isolation	● Political action (incl voting)
● Not living on social benefits		
● Owning your own home	**Economic participation**	**Health and wellbeing**
	● Being in paid work	● Good physical and mental health
Access to services	● Having good career opportunities	● Freedom from limiting illness
● Good access to emergency & GP services	● Avoiding long/unsocial hours	Healthy spiritual life
○ Affordable dental care	● Avoiding high stress work	
● Adult homecare services for elderly & disabled	○ Freedom from harassment at work	**Living environment**
● Access to shops, cafes and pubs	● Having an occupational pension	Good neighbours
● Local schools, libraries & adult education	○ Manageable caring responsibilities	○ Good assisted accommodation for elderly
○ Playgrounds, breakfast & after-school clubs		● Safe parks & public spaces
Children's & youth centres	**Culture, education & skills**	Sense of belonging and community spirit
● Leisure/sports facilities	● Good educational attainment	
● Local banking & post office services	● Qualifications, skills and work experience	**Crime, harm and criminalisation**
Regular rubbish collection	Access to lifelong learning opportunities	Community crime partnership
● Places of worship	● Good English language & communication skills	○ Living in a low crime area
● Accessible community spaces		● Being able to insure your home
● Good, regular, affordable public transport	**Social participation**	Feeling safe outside and at night
Well resourced community groups	● Being able to afford social activities	● Freedom from discrimination, harassment & bullying
Good info on community services		● Freedom from domestic abuse
Mobile phone & broadband network		Sufficient visible policing
		Good criminal justice system
		● Having no criminal convictions

NOTE: ● Full topic coverage in 2012 PSE-UK survey; ○ Partial topic coverage in 2012 PSE-UK survey; [blank] no coverage. For further details on 2012 PSE-UK survey operationalisation of BSEM see Bailey et al., 2018.

5.1 The Good Society

Thematic analysis revealed few signs that understandings of social exclusion differed substantially between low income and non-low income groups in the Phase One groups. Lively discussions of the (assumed) structural and individual causes of social exclusion revealed important differences between individual participants, but these were not obviously aligned with participants' material circumstances. Robust comparison is not possible in the absence of representative samples and standardised instruments, but consistent themes included the over-riding importance of sufficient income, good physical and mental health, strong social networks, and social participation in avoiding exclusion.

Nevertheless, issues relating to stigma and discrimination seem more salient in the accounts of low income groups. This was referred to in different ways, including in relation to cultural exclusion and the segregation of minority groups, the area stigma experienced by poor neighbourhoods, and class prejudice directed at working class people. Whilst popular discourses around 'welfare scroungers' are internalised by many participants to varying degrees, many low-income participants rejected the pervasive 'povertyism' (Killeen, 2007) of dominant narratives and the stigmatisation of social disadvantage that this reflects:

> *NI2: Sometimes it can be as simple as the area, the neighbourhood that you live in. It could have a stigma attached to it and 'Oh, they're from there, they're that kind of person'*
> *NI3: You could be excluded by class. Even though we're not supposed to have a class system, there still is a class system. So somebody from an estate with a bad reputation could be socially excluded in terms of jobs. Somebody sees that they're from that particular area, they won't employ them*

Understandings of social exclusion were intertwined with wider perceptions of what constitutes 'the good life' in our society today, both with regard to material living standards and the opportunities and choices they afford, and in terms of social and psychological well-being and personal happiness. Here at least, there was considerable agreement about what social *inclusion* means in the UK today. Many discussions thus focused on the characteristics of an imagined 'inclusive' society, and it seemed easier and less contentious for participants to focus on positive indicators of social inclusion than more diverse indicators of exclusion. In doing so, participants' expressed widely shared agreement on key features of the (imagined) 'good life'. This extended well beyond living standards and social statuses to encompass a more nuanced set of priorities around shared (and perhaps idealised) understandings of psychological well-being (e.g. confidence, self-esteem, spiritual health), and the quality of family and community life (e.g. strong family ties, sense of belonging, community spirit).

> *LDN1: There are two sides to happiness; one is the physical side and one is the emotional side. The physical side is the food, shelter and clothing. The emotional side is your family, your friends, your circle, your spirituality, your holidays, your friends...to live in comfort is the balance of two*
> *BRS1: People are not as happy when they feel that society doesn't treat them fairly, when they feel that they are alone…It then does have a knock-on effect on the mental wellbeing of an individual, on the physical wellbeing of an individual, and then has an effect on the rest of us around it, because it creates that inequality in society.*
> *BRS1: If you've got the same opportunities and choices as those around you, then you can argue that is a fair society, and that creates a better society and a happier society.*

These shared understandings were often posed in sharp relief to lived experiences of more dysfunctional communities and, especially for older participants, narratives of a perceived long-

term decline in community social capital in the face of individualization, consumerism and economic change:

> *BRS3: I don't think people mix like they used to. Like when we were brought up families, your neighbour was always your auntie, whereas now you don't tend to know your neighbours so much because they're all working, so you don't get to meet people like you did.*
>
> *BRS3: Many years ago there wasn't any social exclusion because we all lived on the same level, work locally and went to the same schools, and we had no outside influences. Now there's so many choices that somehow everyone is going to be socially excluded, whatever your aspirations, whatever you want to be, you know, somebody's going to do something better, and you're going to feel deprived. They're going to feel jealous and envious, or somebody's going to feel superior*

5.2 Ontological Insecurity

Participant's suggestions were often reflected fundamental concerns for security and stability encompassing not only physical security (e.g. feeling safe, freedom from violence) but financial and residential security, emotional security and support, and freedom from wider social harms including harassment and discrimination. 'Security' here referred to constancy and stability in people's lives and social relations, including the perceived control individuals exercised over important aspects of their lives. This is most evident in relation to the immediate and pressing psychological impacts of financial hardship for social well-being and functioning:

> *CDF2: You want structure and stability in the home as well, so that you're not constantly worrying about where the next penny's going to come from so…You want to be able to just live and enjoy life*
>
> *NI1: It's very stressful because you're continually…trying to balance everything all the time and watching the prices of things all the time, and that is a constant stress*
>
> *NI1: There's an awful lot of stress associated with the thought of being poor and not having enough money whether you need it right now or not, there's always that thing in the back of your head where you're worrying about the next thing that comes along, and that definitely has an effect on your home life*

The longer-term sense of threat that this creates for people experiencing housing insecurity and in the context of household debt and the devaluation of pensions post 2008 is clear:

> *NI1: You're only one pay cheque away from losing your house, and again I speak with experience, that's what happened to us and we're now renting.*
>
> *NI2: If you're in rented accommodation which I am, you never know from month to month, from the end of the year, whether the landlord is going to say to you, you know, we need you to move out and to go and find somewhere else*

6. Vignettes of Exclusion: Understanding the nature and causes of social exclusion

6.1 Vignette 1: Work, inclusion and social networks

In the eyes of participants, Brian's situation was symptomatic of the UK's long-term industrial decline and the worsening economic prospects. Participants reflected on the confluence of personal biography (redundancy, relationship break-up) and structural drivers in this account(industrial decline). Participants' accounts referred to the impact of long, unsocial working hours for low pay in preventing Brian from maintaining social networks. The adverse psychological impacts of exclusion were noted, including impacts on personal identity and self-esteem which might in turn undermine sociability. A lack of opportunities for retraining and reskilling, including as a result of ageism, was emphasised in participants' accounts, again reflecting the structural drivers of vulnerability for older workers like Brian. Working long unsocial hours for poor pay resulting in social withdrawal was widely seen as Brian's main problem.

Views on personal responsibility in Brian's situation differed, with some participants viewing his position as resulting from bad choices he had made. However, in the main participants were sympathetic to Brian's situation, especially referencing notions of deservingness associated with the 'work ethic' which this case was viewed as invoking. For these participants, social exclusion was mainly a product of circumstances and necessity rather than personal choices. Indeed, Brian was perceived to be meeting his obligations as a citizen in terms of economic 'independence' through paid work but as nevertheless excluded from many of the perceived benefits that economic 'inclusion' is expected to confer:

> *LDN3: I'd say this is a person who's fulfilling his responsibility in life against trying circumstances which sometimes we all have to do. So good for him I'd say, he's meeting his responsibilities…he's not a burden on the country, he's got two jobs*

In this last quote, we might usefully contrast the apparent approval for Brian who was widely viewed as discharging his responsibilities as a citizen with the emphasis on personal choices in responses to the vignettes below. Brian is viewed as excluded by structural processes largely beyond his control in contrast with the individualisation of Jimmy and Jo's experiences as personal failings. Contrasting responses to these vignettes seem to reflect important normative differences in participants' accounts of personal responsibility with Jimmy and Jo being viewed as at least partly complicit in their own exclusion – in effect, as choosing to self-exclude. In contrast, Brian is viewed through the lens of good citizenship as enacted through paid work as a signifier of moral inclusion, if not of social inclusion.

6.2 Vignette 2: Complex histories

Jimmy's case revealed the complex and sometimes pejorative judgements participants made in assessing personal agency. Whilst all groups viewed this vignette as exemplifying 'deep' exclusion, some participants focused upon personal culpability. Whilst recognising troubled personal histories as contributory factors, several insisted that Jimmy had 'made his own choices'. The perceived availability of specialist support services is deployed here to shift focus from societal to personal problems. It is assumed that such specialist services are available, adequate and effective 'cures' for social problems - and that Jimmy therefore has chosen not to seek help:

> *BRS2: I know it's a bit judgemental really...but I think there are places out there that don't cost anything and they'll sort you out. But you've got to want to do it. If someone stays in that sort of lifestyle for years and years and years then if they're given the chance time and time again to get out of that situation...and they choose not to, then I would just leave them alone and let them get on with it*
>
> *BRS2: There's help out there for people that's been abused and if he chose not to take it, chose to go down the alcohol and drug route, then he's excluded himself*

Other accounts emphasised the cumulative and path-dependent nature of exposure to social risks in creating 'spirals' or 'circles' of disadvantage which constrain subsequent choices. Many participants thus recognised the power of addiction and dependency, as well as the ensuing adverse impacts of a criminal history and homelessness on subsequent prospects:

> *BRS2: You're in a no win situation because someone who's heroin dependent or anything like that, hasn't got a job, hasn't got any funds to buy that sort of thing, and the only way they can keep their habit is by nicking something. And they get themselves stuck in that circle until someone comes and rescues them*
>
> *GLS1: It was a choice thing, he chose to drink alcohol, he chose to take drugs, therefore the choice was his at the start, he could have said no. Most people take heroin always go back for more because*

of the kick that they get from it. And therefore once you're into it, it's much more difficult to...get out

6.3 Vignette 3: Agency and Choice

Discussion of Jo's situation raised similar issues around the normative assumptions embedded within social exclusion discourses including in relation to the social construction of 'the excluded' as a policy problem. Participants did not always subscribe to dominant narratives identifying paid work as central to wider inclusion in society, and thus did not necessarily view their situation as one characterised by exclusion. One participant thus noted the way policy prescriptions tend to prioritise inclusion through paid work, and in ways which differ from people's own evaluation of their circumstances:

CDF3: It depends what your circle of friends, what they do. I've got a friend who's never worked, she's my age…she's never worked in her life, she's never wanted to work and she hasn't, she's on the dole. She's got three kids which she's brought up, and she lives in a council house in one of the roughest areas in Swansea, but she's not excluded because she plays darts with all the people from her area, she's in the darts team. She goes out and does things like that - because she doesn't work she goes out in the daytime and meets them all for coffee in a local cafe and things like that

It is important therefore that debates about social exclusion are informed by public perceptions of what it means to be excluded, and specifically of how individuals' experience of disadvantage are framed within the context of exclusion from society, in order to avoid further reinforcing the discursive marginalisation of disadvantaged groups as 'other'.

This social labelling of 'the excluded' reflects enduring and pervasive social distinctions concerning the 'deserving' and 'undeserving'. Discussion of Jo's circumstances stimulated wider discussion about the assumed deservingness (or otherwise) of people experiencing social exclusion. Participants expressed contrasting views on the role of agency and choice in explaining exclusion and these views informed judgements concerning social entitlements:

BRS3: It's all right if it's brought on themselves where they're either drinking all their money or smoking it all or wasting it all, and perhaps don't even bother to earn it in the first place. I'm hard I just think they deserve what they get. But the person that's had a job and has tried really hard and then loses it through no fault of their own, or maybe take it through no fault of his own, that's the one I have sympathy for, who needs help, not the ones who are fit and able but can't be bothered to work.

GLS1: People on the streets or whatever - and I appreciate it's almost kind of wrong to say it - but there's an element of choice in it, be it drugs and alcohol or whatever else. It's almost kind of up to them

Although views differed, some participants certainly expressed strong opinions on an apparent 'culture of poverty' and supposed intergenerational cultural transmission of disadvantage arising from poor lifestyle choices. Participants' accounts thus echoed wider longstanding moral distinctions between the honest and hardworking (deserving) and the feckless, lazy and/or dishonest (undeserving) which continue to pervade public debates in this area in the UK today (e.g. Baumberg et al., 2012; Dorey, 2010).

7. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper has explored public responses to the concept of social exclusion and the kinds of items and activities viewed by the public as necessary for people to fully participate in UK society today. Our findings demonstrate the feasibility and desirability of including the public in policy debates around the meaning of social inclusion and its measurement which have

important implications for research practice in the UK and internationally. Whilst the language of social exclusion has been widely adopted by policymakers in the UK and elsewhere, it is not a term enjoying widespread currency amongst the wider UK public. Researchers and policymakers therefore need to exercise care in communicating this concept if we are to avoid the pejorative labelling of 'the excluded', and a wider discursive marginalisation of the social processes which underpin disadvantage.

Focusing on what it means to be fully included in society in terms other than participation through paid work is a useful starting point here in reorienting debates away from deficit models of 'the excluded' and towards a greater emphasis on the characteristics of inclusive societies. These data certainly suggest a high degree of consistency in public views on the core elements of social inclusion which might provide a sound basis for policy action. Indeed, in our interactions with participants a discussion of what constitutes the 'good society' was often more productive than conversations around material necessities which tended to get bogged down in the minutiae of specific items. It may therefore be that focusing on the social determinants of inclusion at the individual and societal levels offers a more fruitful avenue for further research in ways which could influence more progressive policy agendas.

Certainly, the wider conceptual vocabulary associated with social exclusion is highly amenable to public debate and deliberation, not least with regard to the connections between command over material resources and social well-being, participation, and quality of life. Our research confirms that public understandings extend far beyond distributional concerns associated with economic inequalities to include relational inequalities in access to opportunities, lifestyles and wellbeing. Our discussions revealed the multifaceted nature of exclusionary processes encompassing diverse and at times disparate drivers of multiple disadvantage (e.g. low income, poor access to services, social isolation, geographical peripherality, poor health, fear of violence, etc.). Indeed, it is precisely the disparate nature of these processes which frustrates attempts at rigorous conceptualisation and measurement here.

Whilst consensus on the nature of social exclusion may be limited, widespread consensus was evident on what it means to be fully included in society. These determinants of social inclusion include good access to local services, durable social networks, the availability of social support, economic activity (including caring) that is rewarding or socially valued, personal competence and basic skills, good physical and mental health, freedom from abuse, fear, and discrimination, and strong community ties of reciprocity and trust. Whilst in a UK context a specific focus on exclusion has to some extent been supplanted by related concerns around well-being, connectedness, and quality of life these issues remain high upon the policy agenda of governments and better understanding of public responses on these questions is therefore essential in shaping evidence on these topics – and, it is to be hoped, concerted policy action.

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10.1 Appendix: Selected social exclusion vignettes

Vignette 1 (Brian). Brian is a 50 year old divorcee. Since finishing his apprenticeship, Brian worked most of his life as a sheet metal worker. Five years ago he was made redundant, and since then he has found it difficult to find work using his skills. He currently works two jobs, as a cleaner at a local hotel and as a barman in the local pub to make ends meet. He lives alone in a rented flat and rarely sees friends and family due to long working hours. His main social contacts are with people he works with. He is interested in sport and enjoyed following his local football team, although he now rarely attends matches due to the cost.

Vignette 2 (Jimmy). Jimmy is 21 years old. Since the age of 12, Jimmy has regularly consumed alcohol and recreational drugs. In his late teens, he became heroin dependent. In order to maintain his habit, he became involved in shoplifting and burglary. At the age of 17 he was convicted of his first offence and spent six months in a young offender's institution. Since then Jimmy has been sentenced repeatedly for offences relating to his drug dependency. Jimmy has found it difficult to maintain regular paid work with few qualifications and a criminal conviction. He currently lives in a hostel.

Vignette 3 (Jo). Jo is 28 years old. She is a single parent and has two children aged 2 and 5. She has not been in paid work since the birth of her first child. Social security payments and maintenance payments from her former partner are her only sources of income. She is unable to work due to the lack of affordable childcare, as her parents no longer live in the area. She feels isolated as she rarely has the opportunity to go out without her children. She lives in a flat on a local council housing estate in a small town. There are a few local shops but few safe play areas for children.

10.2 Appendix: Summary profile of focus groups

ID	Group Profile	N	Phase	Location
BRS1	**Working age, no dep. children: non-low income.** Older owner-occupiers living in detached homes, mixed sex group	8	1	Bristol
BRS2	**Working age, no dep. children: non-low income.** Mixed age group owner-occupiers, predominantly male	9	1	Bristol
BRS3	**Pensioners: low income.** Owner occupiers living in mixed dwelling types, predominantly female	9	2	Bristol
CDF1	**Pensioners: low income.** Owner occupiers living in mixed dwelling types, predominantly female	8	1	Cardiff
CDF2	**Couples with dep. children: non-low income**. Younger owner occupiers living in mixed dwelling types, mixed sex group	9	1	Cardiff
CDF3	**Single parents: non-low income.** Mixed aged group renters living in semi-detached homes, predominantly female	9	1	Cardiff
LDN1	**Ethnic minority: mixed income.** Mixed age group renters living in mixed dwelling types, mixed sex group	9	1	London
LDN2	**Ethnic minority: low income.** Mixed age group LA/HA renters living in terraced houses and flats, mixed sex group	8	1	London
LDN3	**Ethnic minority: non-low income.** Younger mixed tenure group living in varied dwelling types, mixed sex group	8	2	London
GLS1	**Working age, no dep. children: mixed income.** Younger mixed tenure group, all male group	3*	2	Glasgow
GLS2	**Single parents: low income.** Younger private renters living in mixed dwelling types, predominantly female	6*	1	Glasgow
NI1	**Couples with dep. children: mixed income.** Younger private renters living in semis and terraced dwellings, mixed sex group	9	1	Belfast
NI2	**Single parents: low income.** Mixed age group renters living in mixed dwelling types, predominantly female	9	2	Belfast
NI3	**Couples with dep. children: mixed income.** Mixed age group owner occupiers living in semis and terraced dwelling, predominantly female	10	2	Belfast

NOTES: Phase 1: exploratory FDGs (brainstorming); Phase 2: confirmatory FDGs (card sort). * Participant recruitment was affected by extreme weather conditions. As a result, it was necessary to cancel one further group with pensioners in Glasgow

380