

Chapter two

Concepts and definitions of social exclusion

Conceptualising social exclusion

The main purpose of this project, as outlined in Chapter One, is to explore the scope for the analysis of 'deep exclusion' or multiple disadvantage across a range of existing data sets, and to identify gaps in the knowledge base and potential strategies for filling those gaps.

The first task is to establish what is meant by social exclusion in general and deep exclusion in particular, and thus in broad terms what the relevant dimensions of 'disadvantage' might be. In 1997, the SEU defined social exclusion as:

... a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown.

This definition encapsulates multiple disadvantage, but is also quite vague in that it does not specify 'what can happen'.

Within two years, the UK government had established an annual audit of 'poverty and social exclusion', the *Opportunity for All* reports, beginning in 1999, although this also does not offer a very specific definition. It adds to the SEU formulation that:

Social exclusion occurs where different factors combine to trap individuals and areas in a spiral of disadvantage. (DSS, 1999, p 23)

Poverty is seen as multi-dimensional:

Lack of income, access to good-quality health, education and housing, and the quality of the local environment all affect people's well-being. Our view of poverty covers all these aspects. (DSS, 1999, p 23)

And

Poverty ... [exists] when people are denied opportunities to work, to learn, to live healthy and secure lives, and to live out their retirement years in security. (DSS, 1999, p 23)

Alongside the *Opportunity for All* reports, the NPI, in conjunction with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), from 1998 produced its own annual series *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion*. The NPI has developed an extensive website (www.npi.org.uk) that goes substantially beyond the report issued annually as hard copy, and is an invaluable resource (the indicators are discussed below). There is, however, very little definitional discussion in either virtual or hard copy versions. The 2005 report includes no definition (Palmer et al, 2005). The website, drawing on the definition in the first report (Howarth et al, 1998) says:

While the number of people on low income, measured in various different ways, are naturally treated as an important aspect of poverty and social exclusion, this report stretches well beyond that. The notion of poverty that has guided the development of this report is where people lack many of the opportunities that are available to the average citizen. Low income and limited expenditure, especially on essentials, will be indicative of this, but the report also includes many indicators of things that researchers have been found to be disproportionately associated with low income, for example, certain forms of ill-health and restricted access to services. This broad concept of poverty coincides with the emerging concept of social exclusion. Its great practical value is that it widens the focus to include factors that may be thought to cause severe and chronic disadvantage. In the context of this report, this means that indicators connected with long term lack of paid work, or poor educational qualifications, can be included alongside more readily understood aspects of poverty. (NPI, 2006)

In 1989, the European Commission was asked by the Council of Ministers to examine policies to combat social exclusion. In 2000, the Lisbon Summit put poverty and social exclusion at the heart of EU social policy. Specific criteria were set out at Nice in 2001, together with a requirement that each member state produce a biennial national action plan on social inclusion (NAPincl). The Nice objectives, which include a specific reference to addressing vulnerable groups at particular risk of exclusion, are as follows:

- Facilitating participation in employment and access by all to resources, rights, goods and services
- Preventing the risks of exclusion

- Helping the most vulnerable
- Mobilising all relevant bodies in overcoming exclusion.

‘Helping the most vulnerable’ might be seen as an early pre-occupation of the SEU: its early reports focused on particular groups – rough sleepers, those truanting from or excluded from school, pregnant teenagers, young people not in education, or training. A large part of its work subsequently focused on neighbourhood disadvantage. In 2004, alongside continuing work on specific groups such as looked-after children, prisoners and those suffering poor mental health, the emphasis shifted to a programme of work on *Breaking the Cycle* and preventing social exclusion, including a substantial amount of commissioned work on *The drivers of social exclusion* (Bradshaw et al, 2004). In May 2006 the issue of social exclusion was given Cabinet-level priority with the appointment of a Minister for Social Exclusion. This, however, was followed with the announcement in June 2006 of the closure of the SEU itself, with its work being transferred to a smaller task force in the Cabinet Office responsible for trying to persuade Whitehall departments to focus on the most severely excluded. The Social Exclusion Task Force (SETF) avoids the terminology of the Treasury, whose Children and Young People’s Policy Review (launched in conjunction with the Department for Education and Skills and informing the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review) includes ‘the stock of families already regarded as high cost, high harm’ and those ‘at high risk of moving into this situation’ (HM Treasury 2006; see also Feinstein and Sabates 2006). For SETF, references to ‘disadvantage and harm’ (SETF 2006:5) are accompanied by prioritisation of ‘specific hard-to-reach groups, including children in care, people with mental health problems and teenagers at risk of pregnancy’ (SETF, 2006, p. 95), and an emphasis on early intervention. However, there are also references to ‘problem families’ (Cabinet Office 2006), and a strong emphasis in the report on the responsibility of the excluded themselves: Thus ‘In this Action Plan we have focused on some of the most excluded groups, such as children in care or adults leading chaotic lives – groups that have generally failed to fulfil their potential and accept the responsibilities that most of us take for granted’ (SETF 2006:10).

It is notable that all the approaches outlined above tend to use ‘poverty and social exclusion’ as an inseparable dyad. However, there are definitions in the UK, European and global literature that address social exclusion as distinct from poverty, as shown in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1: Definitions of social exclusion or inclusion

1	... a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown. (SEU, 1997)
2	Social exclusion occurs where different factors combine to trap individuals and areas in a spiral of disadvantage. (DSS, 1999, p 23)
3	Social exclusion is a process, which causes individuals or groups, who are geographically resident in a society, not to participate in the normal activities of citizens in that society. (Scottish Executive, nd)
4	The notion of poverty that has guided the development of this report is where people lack many of the opportunities that are available to the average citizen.... This broad concept of poverty coincides with the emerging concept of social exclusion. (NPI, Howarth et al, 1998)
5	The processes by which individuals and their communities become polarised, socially differentiated and unequal. (ESRC, 2004)
6	The dynamic process of being shut out from any of the social, economic, political and cultural systems which determine the social integration of a person in society. (Walker and Walker, 1997, p 8)
7	A lack or denial of access to the kinds of social relations, social customs and activities in which the great majority of people in British society engage. In current usage, social exclusion is often regarded as a 'process' rather than a 'state' and this helps in being constructively precise in deciding its relationship to poverty. (Gordon et al, 2000, p 73)
8	An individual is socially excluded if (a) he or she is geographically resident in a society but (b) for reasons beyond his or her control, he or she cannot participate in the normal activities of citizens in that society, and (c) he or she would like to so participate. (Burchardt et al, 2002, pp 30, 32)
9	Inadequate social participation, lack of social integration and lack of power. (Room, 1995)
10	Social exclusion is a broader concept than poverty, encompassing not only low material means but the inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life and in some characterisations alienation and distance from mainstream society. (Duffy, 1995)
11	(Social Inclusion) The development of capacity and opportunity to play a full role, not only in economic terms, but also in social, psychological and political terms. (EU Employment and Social Affairs Directorate)
12	An accumulation of confluent processes with successive ruptures arising from the heart of the economy, politics and society, which gradually distances and places persons, groups, communities and territories in a position of inferiority in relation to centres of power, resources and prevailing values. (Estivill, 2003, p 19)

Several points about these definitions have a bearing on the present project.

First, they are pitched at two different levels. They refer to structures, processes and characteristics of the society as a whole, as well as to the experience of individuals situated within these. This is particularly true of the ESRC reference to 'polarisation' (definition 5) and Estivill's reference to ruptures arising from the heart of economy, politics and society (definition 12). These, as well as references to power (definitions 9, 12) and inequality (definition 5), point to the structural causes and contexts of the individual experience of exclusion. The structural character of social exclusion, relating it to wider economic processes and inequalities, has been a feature of much academic writing (Brown and Crompton, 1994; Byrne, 1999, 2005; Levitas, 1998, 2005). Some writers have not only noted the contribution

of polarisation and inequality to the growth of social exclusion (see Rowntree, 1995), but have drawn attention to what Barry calls an ‘upper threshold’ of social exclusion, permitting self-exclusion by the rich (Hutton, 1996; Barry, 2002). Such forms of closure may be of particular importance in the context of rising inequality and falling social mobility (Aldridge, 2001, 2004).

Second, although the definitions may be clear and precise, their level of abstraction means they are not *empirically* precise. While they help to conceptualise social exclusion, this is not the same as providing an operational definition that is amenable to measurement. Operational definitions are always a compromise between conceptual precision and clarity and what is theoretically and practically measurable. Consequently, many reports on aspects of social exclusion open by grappling with the variation in definitions, and the difficulty of operationalising these. For example, several refer to disconnection from economic processes, but do not specify what this means in practice. This is often taken to mean non-participation in, or exclusion from, the labour market, perhaps partly because of macro-economic policies that involve increasing labour force participation rates. Other sources include participation in unpaid or caring work. Some contemporary literature regards consumption, which can also be construed as an economic process, as crucial to identity formation and self-respect (Bauman, 1998; Bowring, 2000).

Third, several of the definitions refer to exclusion from activities that are ‘normal’ or available to the ‘average citizen’, or to the majority of citizens. While this appears to be an empirical question, it is also a normative one. The selection of which activities ‘matter’ involves a judgement, and one that may change over time, as expectations and opportunities change.

Fourth, the definitions raise questions of both choice and capability. They refer to being ‘shut out’ (definition 6) or ‘denied access’ (definition 7). Less strongly, some refer to an inability to participate when the individual would like to do so (definition 5). The question is whether those who ‘choose’ not to participate can be treated as socially excluded. The question of choice is discussed further below in relation to the PSE Survey. But among other things, it raises the question of capability. Definition 11 (for social inclusion) refers to the development of the *capacity* to participate. The issues here are similar to the distinction in political theory between positive and negative freedom. Negative freedom means there is no external force preventing an individual from acting in a given way (such as, for example, voting). Positive

freedom includes also the capacity and resources required to exercise that freedom including resources such as education, information and transport, as well as material resources such as income.

Fifth, the Nice criteria specifically distinguish risks from access to goods, resources, services and employment (implicitly therefore constitutive of exclusion). Labour market inactivity may be seen as constitutive of social exclusion (at least for working-age adults). Alternatively, it may be seen as a risk factor, increasing the probability of poverty and social exclusion. It may, of course, be both. In exploring or constructing indicators, the distinction between outcome measures and risk factors is important (see Barnes, 2005). An analysis that usefully deploys this distinction in analysing social exclusion among older people is Barnes et al (2006). However, it is characteristic of the process of social exclusion that many outcomes also constitute risk factors, so the distinction is not absolute.

A useful report from the Department for Transport (DfT) points to a range of factors that can be summarised as risks, relations and resources, but also endorses the emphasis in the literature on some different aspects of social exclusion from those outlined above – questions of status, recognition and self-esteem, as well as expectations and power:

Oppenheim (1998) suggests that it is necessary to focus on social exclusion rather than poverty for a number of reasons. Social exclusion is multi-causal, relational, and it includes less tangible aspects than poverty such as the loss of status, power, self-esteem and expectations.... We might also add here that another important aspect of exclusion is political exclusion and the inability to influence decision making, which can be affected by a lack of resources, including time, telephones, transport and articulacy. (DfT, nd, p 10)

The reference to recognition and self-esteem here is particularly interesting. 'Respect' has become part of the vocabulary of New Labour in relation to efforts to tackle anti-social behaviour: it is generally oriented to cultivating greater respect for others and for social norms *from* those perceived as problem groups. The academic literature in the social sciences has also been increasingly concerned with respect and recognition, but from a rather different perspective: the failure to respect those who are socially excluded by virtue of poverty or stigmatised statuses such as ethnicity (Honneth and Anderson, 1996; Sennett, 1998, 2004; Fraser et al, 2003). Questions of respect and recognition have been argued to be central to poverty (Lister, 2004) and to relations of social class more generally (Sayer, 2005). This can

be related to the EU definition (definition 11) that refers to playing a full part in society in psychological terms, and the NPI (definition 4) reference to access to opportunities, which can be interpreted as including the opportunity for social confirmation of personal worth. In this context, some of the language of recent government reports on those experiencing social exclusion is significant: there are several potentially stigmatising references to people with 'chaotic lives' (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2006).

Other work has also addressed the question of social exclusion in terms of the quality of life of older people (Barnes et al, 2006). This is conceptually helpful, since quality of life is the background concern of much of the work on social exclusion. Exclusion on one or more dimensions has a severe negative impact on quality of life. The centrality of this has been somewhat obscured by an over-emphasis on paid work, so that in 1998 the NPI identified "a lack of clarity about what social exclusion might mean" for older people "because neither inclusion within education and training nor inclusion within paid work will be central to overcoming any problem" (Howarth et al, 1998, p 14).

Some theorists contend that persistence over time is an integral aspect of social exclusion (Room, 1995; Barnes, 2005). It is probably true that the persistence of poverty, deprivation and multiple disadvantage exacerbates their negative impact, especially on future life chances. However, the question of what is taken to be 'persistence' is problematic. The relationships between the dimensions and domains of social exclusion are complex. The very interactional processes recognised in the project of multivariate analysis imply that many, if not all, these dimensions are simultaneously exclusionary outcomes *and* causal factors for other dimensions of exclusion, although the strength and direction of causality will vary. The consequences of different forms of disadvantage, for different lengths of time, at different points in the life cycle, are likely to vary considerably. For example, five years in poverty between the ages of seven and twelve may have more significant consequences than the same period between 27 and 32. Housing deprivation in early life has been shown to have an impact on health (Marsh et al, 1999). In the present state of knowledge, judgements about the importance of persistence can only be arbitrary. For example, Barnes' (2005) secondary analysis of the BHPS defined persistent long-term disadvantage as disadvantage in at least seven out of nine years, but there is not theoretical or empirical justification for this choice of threshold. Empirical investigation of the effects of persistent exclusion on different dimensions is important, and further research is needed here, but building arbitrary measures of persistence into a *definition* of social exclusion inhibits rather than facilitates such investigation.

A composite working definition of social exclusion that encapsulates many of the factors reflected in the literature is:

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 does not address the structural issues of inequality, polarisation, social mobility and social closure noted above. A definition is a purposive construction, and this is designed to facilitate the exploration of the experience or effects of exclusion at the individual and/or household level. In the context of the present study, structural characteristics are best seen as drivers of social exclusion, rather than constitutive of it. A review of the literature on the drivers of social exclusion conducted for the SEU in 2004 identified three areas of macro-drivers. “Poverty, inequality and social exclusion”, it argues, “are driven upwards and downwards by three major contextual factors: demographic, labour market and social policy” (Bradshaw et al, 2004, p 9). The demographic factors operating in the past to increase levels of social exclusion have been “large youth cohorts, ageing and increased dependency ratios, and family change, particularly the increase in lone parent families”. The impact of these is currently less, but there are additional trends of inward migration, single living and cohabitation that may possibly lead to increased levels of social exclusion. Labour market factors have included unemployment, ‘flexibility’ and greater insecurity in the labour market, the dispersion of earnings and the concentration of work. Social policy changes in the 1980s and 1990s also, they argue, led to increased levels of social exclusion: uprating benefits in line with prices rather than earnings; abolition and cuts to some benefits; a shift from direct to indirect taxation and a consequently more regressive system; cuts in service expenditure, especially on housing, or increases that were insufficient to meet increased need. However, they point out that if social policy can be a macro-driver of social exclusion, it is also capable of reducing it (Bradshaw et al, 2004, pp 13, 100).

Deep exclusion

Multi-dimensionality is key to the idea of ‘deep exclusion’. This term was introduced into the conceptual field by David Miliband, who argued in March 2005 that “social exclusion exists

in wide, deep and concentrated forms, and it is important not to confuse them” (Miliband, 2006, p 3). ‘Wide exclusion’ refers to those deprived on a single indicator. ‘Deep exclusion’ refers to those who are excluded on multiple counts, while ‘concentrated exclusion’ refers to the concentration of problems in particular geographical areas. “Here we get closer to a more recognisable definition of social exclusion reflecting the most disadvantaged in society” (Miliband, 2006, p 7). Miliband suggested that the SEU and other government departments need to set minimum standards across different stages of the life course – for children, working-age adults and older people. A large minority would be below one or more of the basic minimum standards. (Indeed, it is even possible that a majority of the population could be considered socially excluded on at least one count.)

In the same speech Miliband emphasised the multi-dimensionality of social exclusion in general: “the focus on social exclusion signalled that there was more than one dimension to inequality” – assets, skills, social networks and housing, as well as income (Miliband, 2006, p 4). He identified four distinctive features of government thinking in terms of social exclusion:

- it is relative and relational
- it is multi-dimensional
- the extension of state help must be accompanied by an extension of personal responsibility
- it is embedded in power relations that constrain and define the capabilities and choices of individuals.

If the third of these points is a political claim, the first, second and fourth evidently reflect both the original SEU definition and aspects of the alternative definitions outlined above.

Many of the attempts to define social exclusion distinguish it from poverty precisely on the basis of its multi-dimensional, relational and dynamic character. Poverty, by contrast, is portrayed as a distributive concept, concerned with resources, or in some cases, simply low income. There may be some confusion generated by the habitual use of low income as a simple *indicator* of poverty, which does not necessarily imply a conceptual identity. The distinction between poverty and social exclusion is less easy to sustain in the context of some of the literature on poverty. The Copenhagen World Summit for Social Development, to which the UK is signatory, defines poverty in ways that incorporate social exclusion:

Lack of income and productive resources to ensure sustainable livelihoods; hunger and malnutrition; ill-health; limited or lack of access to services; increased morbidity from illness; homelessness and inadequate housing; unsafe environments and social discrimination and exclusion. It is also characterised by lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social and cultural life. (UN, 1995)

The most recent literature on poverty emphasises the relational questions of recognition and respect (Lister, 2004). There is a growing body of work on the development of capacities and capabilities, building on the work of Amartya Sen (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993; Sen, 1995, 2001).

To some extent these differences are semantic, since all are concerned with multiple disadvantage. However, in some cases definitions of and policy approaches to poverty and social exclusion embed questions of causality. Levitas (1998, 2005) identifies three different orientations to social exclusion in British public policy, implying different models of causality and different policy interventions. In the redistributive (RED) model, lack of material resources is presumed to be the root cause:

Individuals, families and groups can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least are widely encouraged and approved, in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities. (Townsend, 1979, p 32)

The dominant model both in the EU and in the UK has been a social integrationist approach (SID), in which employment is central. Notably, access to employment precedes access to resources in the first Nice criterion. In this model, paid work is seen as important not just as the most effective route out of material poverty but as an integrating factor in its own right. Bhalla and Lapeyre (1997) suggest that there are three main categories of the social aspects of social exclusion: access to social services (such as health and education); access to the labour market (precariousness of employment, as distinct from low pay); and the opportunity for social participation. But they stress the importance of the precariousness of the labour market and unemployment in relation to economic and social respects. The third model identified by Levitas is a moral underclass discourse (MUD) that focuses on the behavioural and attitudinal

characteristics of the excluded and their imputed deficiencies. Silver (1994) also argues that there are three dominant approaches to social exclusion, linked to different models of the welfare state. The importance of these arguments is both that different people may understand quite different things by the term 'social exclusion', and impute quite different causal processes, and causal relationships between factors need to be established empirically, not embedded in definitions.

The question of whether 'deep exclusion' is a distinct phenomenon from social exclusion more generally, or produced by different 'drivers' is, in the light of the existing definitions of social exclusion, very unclear. This applies to the macro-drivers identified by Bradshaw and colleagues. Bradshaw et al (2004) make two further points that are crucial to the scope of the current project. One is the importance of distinguishing between *macro-drivers* that increase the overall levels of social exclusion, or particular aspects of it such as homelessness, and the causes or correlates of individual vulnerability to social exclusion. Where individuals are concerned, it is also useful to distinguish between *risk factors* and *triggers*. Risk factors signal increased vulnerability of a category of individuals, while triggers have a direct causal impact. Triggers are in fact only specifically identified by Bradshaw et al in relation to homelessness, where leaving local authority care or prison are critical.

Bradshaw et al also make the point that establishing causation in social sciences research is particularly difficult:

The aim is to establish drivers. We understand drivers to mean the factors that cause or generate social exclusion. In social science, it is extremely difficult to establish cause. An association, relationship or correlation is often the best that can be demonstrated. Even then there are problems in demonstrating the direction of relationship between the driver and social exclusion, or whether it is the driver itself or a factor associated with the driver that produces the exclusion. (Bradshaw et al, 2004, p 6)

The drivers of social exclusion concentrated on "serious degrees of deprivation" (Bradshaw et al, 2004, p 9). It argued that social exclusion could either be approached through its impact on particular vulnerable groups, or through the lens of different domains. Following the latter strategy, it took as its main domains those set out in the SEU tender document for that project. The domains are thus not theoretically generated or justified, but follow conventional divisions that partially coincide with policy areas. The domains explored were income,

employment, education, health, housing, neighbourhoods (including transport, social capital and neighbourhood deprivation) and crime.

Because of the multi-faceted and interactive process of social exclusion, the drivers of social exclusion that are identified by Bradshaw et al partly coincide with the domains themselves: low income, unemployment, education, ill-health (including substance misuse, child accidental death and mental health problems), housing (especially homelessness), transport problems, crime and fear of crime. Although our current project is primarily concerned with 'deep' exclusion, it is notable that in relation to 'concentrated' exclusion, Bradshaw et al concluded from the literature that neighbourhood effects were often overstated, and that "neighbourhood factors were less important than individual characteristics" (Bradshaw et al, 2004, p 107). Poverty was identified as a key factor in most other dimensions of exclusion.

The work on *The drivers of social exclusion*, together with an investigation of the concept itself, calls into question the existence of a distinctive phenomenon of deep exclusion. If social exclusion itself is about multiple disadvantage, deep exclusion is simply the most severe manifestation of an already severe process. Rather than treating deep exclusion as a qualitatively distinct phenomenon, it is perhaps more accurate to recognise that just as there are very marked difference of access to goods, services resources, power, recognition and so on among the socially included, so the socially excluded vary in the severity of their condition: deep exclusion is a matter of degree.

A working definition of deep exclusion might therefore be:

Deep exclusion refers to exclusion across more than one domain or dimension of disadvantage, resulting in severe negative consequences for quality of life, well-being and future life chances.

Deep exclusion thus emphasises the issue of multiple and severe disadvantage. Miliband's (2006) examples of multiple deprivation are:

- struggling with basic skills *and* long-term unemployed
- a child in poverty, in poor housing, with a parent suffering mental illness
- homeless, on drugs, without skills, and without family.

These, and especially the last example, echo the concerns encapsulated in the SEU's original description of social exclusion, as well as being wholly consistent with the United Nations (UN) definition of overall poverty.

The dimensions Miliband referred to included:

- 10.1 million working-age adults without an NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) Level 2 qualification
- 3.8 million working-age people in workless households
- 3.2 million children who live in non-decent housing
- 2.2 million older people living in relative low-income households
- 464,000 19-year-olds with no Level 2 qualifications
- 194,000 16- to 18-year-olds not in education, employment or training
- 2.2 million children in absolute poverty
- 3.5 children in relative poverty
- 5.2 million people struggling with basic literacy and numeracy
- homeless people
- housebound elderly.

One widely cited social policy expert cites seven dimensions to social exclusion itself (Percy-Smith, 2000:9):

- economic (for example, long-term unemployment, workless households, income poverty)
- social (for example, homelessness, crime, disaffected youth)
- political (for example, disempowerment, lack of political rights, alienation from/lack of confidence in political processes)
- neighbourhood (for example, decaying housing stock, environmental degradation)
- individual (for example, mental and physical ill-health, educational under-achievement)
- spatial (for example, concentration/marginalisation of vulnerable groups).
- group (concentration of the above characteristics in particular groups: elderly, disabled, ethnic minorities).

Thus although the distinction between wide and deep exclusion makes intuitive sense at a descriptive level, it does depend very much on how many dimensions are identified, and what they are. For example, low income and material deprivation may be treated as separate dimensions, or used to generate a compound indicator of poverty as in the PSE Survey (see Chapter Four). One partial solution to this is to think in terms of a hierarchy of domains, topics and indicators, rather than 'dimensions', and accept that there may be a variety of appropriate or possible indicators within a given domain or for a specified topic. This is particularly important when contemplating the use of existing data sets, where the task is to assess whether there is data that could be used as a proxy indicator for the topics under scrutiny.

We are still faced with the question of what these domains might be, and which topics might be identified as most important within each of these domains. The next chapter, therefore, considers the indicator sets that have so far been used to measure or monitor social exclusion, in order to assess their adequacy, before returning to the identification of topics within individual domains.

What is socially regarded as 'appropriate' participation, and the obstacles to it, varies across the life course. The domains may differ in the weight of their significance for different life stages. For example, while economic participation is not irrelevant to children (who may be in part-time paid work or acting as unpaid carers), it is clearly not (in the UK) of the same significance as it is for adults. Indeed, substantial economic participation by a child might be seen as a mark of social exclusion rather than inclusion. The importance of economic participation in relation to older people is more open to empirical investigation and public debate, especially in the context of proposals to increase the state pension age. Many, of course, participate in the sense of having substantial caring responsibilities, which again can be exclusionary rather than inclusionary. Even given the relevance of the domains and even the topics across the life course, the appropriate indicators will vary for different stages of the life course.