

The concept of social exclusion does not have one single definition and different institutions will interpret it in differing ways depending on their function or perspective. The Department of International Development states that

“Social exclusion is a process and a state that prevents individuals or groups from full participation in social, economic and political life and from asserting their rights. It derives from exclusionary relationships based on power” (Beall, Piron. 2005).

This definition can be used in the context of this assignment as it relates to both the causes and the impact of social exclusion upon marginalised individuals which has driven the debate and led to action for social inclusion. The discussion throughout this assignment will be on how disabled persons’ right to social inclusion has often been a one-sided debate in which disabled activists have driven the discourse leading to social policy and legislation. There will also be discussion on whether such legislation has been effective in achieving the goal of social inclusion or if there is a need for further action to ensure the equality in opportunities that would allow for inclusion in society. The focus will be on employment, considering barriers to employment that are faced by disabled people and whether the current debate on working from home can remove potential barriers.

It is suggested that social exclusion can be viewed from the perspectives or lens of three different paradigms, and that each paradigm relates to a different political ideology: the solidarity paradigm in which exclusion is a breakdown in the relationship between an individual and society, the specialisation paradigm where exclusion from society is based upon discrimination, the monopoly paradigm in which exclusion is a consequence of the formation of monopolies and the correlating ideologies of republicanism, liberalism and social democracy. As there is a lack of a single definition for social exclusion it should be viewed through each perspective- the social, the political and the economic in order to understand the multidimensional aspects of the issue (Silver, 1994).

Disabled people can be seen to be socially excluded in respect of both factors within the above definition: as by their state or identity and as by a process, in which they are blocked from full participation in society through marginalisation (Beall, Piron, 2005). As is described in the above paragraph, there is a multidimensionality wherein several factors can both contribute to social exclusion and can also be seen to be the consequences of. The value of understanding the concept of social exclusion can allow for focus beyond that of economic and productivity

to explore the processes and social relationships breakdown and can be used to drive social policy for inclusion (Haan, 1999). This multidimensionality is evident in the impact of being socially excluded in aspects of life such as: poverty and income inequality, education, employment, health inequality, housing and transport as examples. Disability can be seen to be a risk factor that leads to disabled people being more likely to be excluded from attaining equality in these areas due to their identity/state (Bradshaw et al, 2004). The interconnectedness of social exclusion, poverty and disability also can not be ignored. Statistics show that thirty two percent of disabled people are living in poverty, twelve points higher than non-disabled people. These rates have remained generally unchanged as disabled people have seen their income eroded since 2010 as the UK Government implemented a benefit freeze as part of their austerity measures. Another key driver of poverty is low unemployment and as this is an issue that impacts upon disabled people, they can be seen to be excluded from participation in society on multiple factors (JRF, 2022). This is reinforced by findings from a Think Differently report that suggests that disabled people are excluded from employment both by deliberate exclusion from employers and a lack of robustness in policy that promotes equality of opportunities and inclusion (Appleton-Dyer, Field, 2014). Not only can employment lead to a reduction in poverty it can also provide a social identity and role for individuals which can impact on wellbeing, as employment is held up as being synonymous with social inclusion the multiple barriers to employment need to be addressed to achieve such outcomes (Bramley, Bailey, 2018).

The fight for equality of rights in society for disabled people is documented throughout recent history but can be seen to be becoming an organised movement in the 1970s. Activism group The Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS) and The Disability Alliance were instrumental in furthering the rights of disabled people and are best known for arguing against the existing models of disability that was seen within society with their fundamental principles of disability (Shakespeare, 2010). These principles led to the introduction of the social model of disability, which argues that disabled people are not disabled by their impairment but by society, and that such disablement is adjacent to living with an impairment. In the Fundamental Principles of Disability, it is stated that:

“ Disability is a situation, caused by social conditions which requires for its elimination, (a) that no one aspect such as incomes, mobility or institution is treated in isolation, (b) that disabled people should, with the advice and help of others, assume control over their own lives and (c) that professionals, experts and others

who seek to help must be committed to promoting such control by disabled people”
(UPIAS, 1976).

This statement acknowledges the interconnectivity of factors that cause disabled people to be excluded from participating in society and reinforces the need to look at the totality of the issue. The social model was successful at changing the narrative around disability and shifting the focus from the medical model and charity models of disability which focused on an individual's impairment (Oliver, 2004). While there are criticisms that the social model does not allow for individualism and that sometimes a single issue focus is necessary this is refuted; that it is not that the social model is no longer relevant but that it has been misused and misunderstood. Although disability should be addressed as a social and not individual issue, that is not to say that disabled people should not follow any individual solutions in their own lives and that no actions need be confined within the narrow lens of one model (Finkelstein, 2007). This view is reinforced by the suggestion that as a practical tool towards inclusion and that it is the language used that has become outdated and has led to the misunderstanding of the language used within the model; that pretentious terminology excludes non academics and acts as barrier to inclusion and that many disabled people may not identify with the terminology used. It is suggested, instead, that there is too much focus on discussing the model rather than focusing on enacting meaningful action to implement change for disabled people (Lacovou, 2020).

Criticisms aside, the social model of disability can be seen to be one of the drivers of changing social policy that affects disabled people. In recent years, viewpoints that were previously unheard have become more mainstream, gaining social, political and cultural prominence. Models for self-advocacy such as the social model, although being distinct movements all share the overarching principles of inclusion and rights-based approaches (Beresford, 2016). The move towards a more inclusive and approach can be seen post-Thatcherism, after the emphasis on privatisation saw funding cuts to public sectors. The Major years (1990-1997) saw the introduction of disability living allowance replacing existing disability benefits and in work benefits extended to disabled people in employment. The New Labour years saw radical reforms at modernising the welfare state under the social justice agenda of inclusivity (Evans, Lewis. 2009) There are, however, criticisms that New Labour policy, while it acknowledged existing barriers to employment as both environmental and social, was designed as a means to move disabled people into work and off benefits due to their neo-liberal focus on economy rather than from the perspective of disability rights (Owen, Parker-Harris.2012). Regardless of the motivations, the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) (Gov.UK. 2023)

protected disabled people from being discriminated against on the basis of their disability. This was succeeded by the Equality Act (2010) (Gov.UK, 2023) in which disability became a protected characteristic. The act strengthens the previous anti-discrimination legislation and places a duty on public services and institutions, work places and wider society to make any reasonable adjustments where a disabled person is placed at a greater disadvantage than a non-disabled person in order to redress inequality of opportunity. The act covers not only physical features (environmental) but also practices which place disabled people at a significant disadvantage (Gov.UK, 2023).

The number of disabled people in paid employment has not, however, changed significantly since introduction of disability discrimination legislation. In 2020 the number of disabled people in paid employment was fifty two percent (Research Briefing, 2021) which is up from forty seven percent in 1995. It has been suggested that anti-discrimination legislation does not go far enough and there is a need for positive discrimination duty for employers (Woodhams, Corby. 2007). Accepting the lack of impact from anti-discrimination legislation on employment opportunities for disabled people suggest that despite appearing to adopt the social model of disability there is still a limited understanding of barriers that are faced. Of those in work, it is seen that disabled people are less likely to be in full time employment and are more likely to be in low paid and low skilled jobs. There is a need to address the skills and qualifications gap between disabled people and non-disabled people that is a consequence of exclusion from equal opportunities to education, training and resources, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of exclusion (Hall, Wilton, 2011). This is further supported by the exclusion of disabled voices from policy development; the low representation of disabled people in development institutions reinforces the high representation of the same group experiencing exclusion (Yeo, Moore. 2003). One suggestion is the need to recognise that low employment of disabled people is both a cause of and a symptom of exclusion. Until the issue of exclusion from resources is addressed then it will not be possible to close the skills and qualification gap and to achieve the desired outcome of inclusion. Therefore, disability rights should be a mainstreamed aspect in all policy (OECD, 2022). This is supported by research for the UK and devolved Governments from the Equality and Human Rights Committee in which is discussed the need for a greater evidence base of disabled voices and experiences on issues that act as barriers to inclusion and targeted legislation and policy to address issues (EHRC, 2017) The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also recognises the need for action and policy to strengthen the rights of disabled people as it raised concerns over access to resources,

access to justice (legal aid in cases of employment discrimination) and measures to reduce poverty in the face of social cuts to spending and has urged the UK Government to act upon this (OHCHR, 2017).

Within the arena of employment, one example of a reasonable adjustment can be seen in the recent debate surrounding working from home. During the Covid 19 pandemic many employees were forced to transition to home working rather than office based, and although the pandemic is over it is argued by some that working from home is now preferred, especially amongst disabled employees. A survey for TUC found that ninety percent of disabled workers want to continue working from home for reasons such as improved mental health and a reduction in fatigue or tiredness. It is suggested that working from home be considered reasonable adjustment that employers have a duty to make (TUC, 2021). Other research shows disabled people can have poorer outcomes in employment such as with mental health and work/life balance which working from home could significantly reduce; that working from home could reduce both physical barriers to work that disabled people experience but also social barriers to work although the opposing view to this is that if visibility of disabled people in work reduces then there could be the result of cultural barriers remaining unchanged (Hoque, bacon. 2021). There is currently, however, a gap in research of disabled people's experiences, which is an issue as this is a topic being discussed currently by government and policy makers. Of the available evidence, there are clear benefits to disabled people in the working from home model or hybrid working as it offers more autonomy and control, although greater support from employers and government is needed in offering the necessary essential support to allow this model. It is recommended that the Department for Business should make it a duty that where possible hybrid working is an option in the job description, and that the Government commit to greater investment in the Access to Work scheme to offer funding to achieve essential support. It is also recommended that employers consult with disabled staff to develop inclusive practice that will support greater inclusivity. Supporting working from home and hybrid models could support disabled people into work and help close the employment gap (Taylor et al, 2022). To this aim, the Welsh Government has announced its ambition to for remote working, aiming to achieve a thirty percent target of remote workers as a means of making work more accessible for disabled workers, among other reasons. It is not, however, currently legislated for and businesses are not required to participate in this but the Senedd aims to reach the target by promoting the initiative and from advising businesses on the benefits of working from home (Gov.Wales, 2022).

The discourse surrounding the right to inclusion for disabled people can almost be seen to be one sided as, of course, nobody would argue against such a goal, however, it can be seen that the current position falls short of achieving its aims. While the UK government has adopted the approach of the social model of disability and this can be useful to understand the relationship between disability, institutions and policy, it is also important to recognise where the relationship is not working (Hartley, 2018). The impact of the social model within the UK can be evidenced by the implementation of legislation and social policy, it is argued that there may now be a need for a new and updated model of disability to reflect the changes in society since its introduction. In post – Brexit Britain there is uncertainty of the future of the Human Rights Act (1998) and a worry of an erosion of hard-won rights for disabled people suggesting a need for a push towards a human rights model of inclusion set out in legislative form to ensure such rights are not rescinded (Berghs et al, 2014). The link between disability and poverty is accepted and it is understandable how it is believed that merely addressing one will create inclusion in the disabled population, and yet the evidence of a skills gap often means employment in low control and high demand jobs. Supporting disabled people into employment can certainly aid in achieving inclusion, however, the drivers of social exclusion need to be looked at in totality to ensure that all aspects are addressed, and the end goal is equality and not merely economic (Watson et al, 2019). The social model of disability once changed the way that disability was seen and discussed and is a useful tool to help insight and understanding of the barriers faced and experiences of disabled people, although there are suggestions that the model has been misunderstood. Social inclusion and the drivers of exclusion need to be looked at holistically in order to apply the model and to allow a greater focus on the improvement of services and access to equal opportunities in education, housing and employment. Although there is a definite improvement in access to equality for disabled people there is need for greater involvement of disabled people in development and delivery of service to ensure representation for disabled people, and a clear view on how policy is to become enacted or there is a risk of policy and the support for social inclusion becoming empty rhetoric (Barnes, 2007).

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