

Social inclusion as recognition?

My purpose here is not to advocate for recognition paradigm as a superior way of defining/defending SI.

My purpose is just reflective: given tradition of thought and conceptual tools I'm mobilising in my research, together with many others, what implicit notion of SI are we actually propounding?

In order to answer this question, I'd like to try and define more precisely what we're after when we seek to define concept of SI.

1. Preliminary considerations

What should we expect from a "concept of social inclusion"? what features should an operational concept of social inclusion include? What should it provide us with?

- a. The feature that immediately comes to mind is *descriptive validity*.

The name of our centre identifies a particular social phenomenon, "social inclusion", as a *fact of social life*. There is something performative about this: to say that we research about "social inclusion" is to say that *there is* such a thing as social inclusion. Since the concept is not an everyday concept, to name ourselves centre for RSI is to make a claim about social life.

We should therefore be able to say what SI consists in, point to areas of society, in particular Australian society, where there is evidence of SI.

At the theoretical level, this implies some effort of *social theory* or *social ontology*. We can't establish what SI is as a fact of social life without some assumptions about social life as a whole and other areas and institutions of social life.

In other words, the concept of social inclusion, like any concept in social sciences, cannot be defined without clarifying other assumptions about social life: the nature of the social bond, some idea about socialisation, some idea about mechanisms of social reproduction.

- b. *Normative clarity*

Clearly the notion of SI is more than just a neutral descriptive term. CRSI name clearly rings differently to Centre on Corporate Law or Centre on Family, etc. There is a strong underlying normative layer: idea that SI is good, or a good. It is worth researching about SI because somehow it is important.

Important to whom and in what way? These are obviously the crunch questions.

Work of normative clarification required on two levels:

- i- Most fundamental level: is SI good in and of itself, as a concept?

On some accounts of social life and politics (for instance accounts that operate in reference to currently fashionable French theorists like Badiou or Rancière, but also from a Foucaultian perspective), SI is a highly dubious concept: suspicion that under its intuitively nice sounding cloak, it plays in the hand of disciplining or normalising forces.

- ii- If concept is generally accepted: some accounts of SI (for instance SI as assimilation) are dubious against the backdrop of many accounts of social life with normative intent (for instance for any account of social life that sees positive normative value in acceptance of difference, tolerance, etc), and therefore require that we clearly discriminate between different concepts of SI;
and secondly, once we have a concept that seems sufficiently operational, that we remain clear about its intrinsic limitations (both descriptive and normative).

This work of normative clarification between concepts of SI cannot be done without reference to first set of ontological, descriptive considerations. Implies talking about social structures, social mechanisms and social agents/subjects, but *this time* from a normative point of view.

Why does it matter to individuals and groups to be socially included, and in what ways? Is it about justice, well-being, flourishing? In what ways does SI contribute to any of those?

c. *Critical acumen*

Clearly, the implied normativity of the concept of SI motivates a strong *critical impulse*. Idea here is that SI is a good thing, at least at some level and in some account of SI, *that* it is lacking for some groups and individuals, *and* that this lack is serious, something to be addressed by policy and politics.

A key mistake we want to avoid making is confusing the levels: rejecting the concept as a descriptive and a normative tool on the basis that empirically it is not realised in the society we study.

Very often, the rejection of SI as a concept is based on the empirical evidence of a lack of SI. In such cases, the empirical evidence of lack of SI in fact implicitly uses a normative notion of SI to establish the very evidence that is supposed to debunk the concept of SI.

How does notion of recognition help to understand SI on the three levels noted?

2. Social inclusion as recognition: social theory/social ontology level

Two layers:

- a. recognition as a fundamental explanatory factor of all social life, let's say *anthropological* dimension of recognition. Fundamental notion of "individuation through socialisation": basic idea that the individual human subject structurally relies on peers and institutions to develop all of its cognitive, moral and affective capacities. Essential intersubjective dependency of the human subject by contrast with other animals.

Recognition as ontological concept adds normative twist to this basic idea: these relations of dependency are about positive affirmation of identity features by other members of the group from some preeminent socially defined perspective (obviously changing across time and societies).
- b. As a result, normative social theory, at the ontological level: society not *just* made up of power relations or functional systems or institutional structures. At the core of society are values and norms defining fundamental modes of recognition, which ensure socialisation and individuation.

What does SI mean from recognition perspective at that level?

SI here (as a descriptive term of social ontology) means two things, depending on emphasis:

- From subject's perspective: positive affirmation of socially significant features which allow for development of personal identity within that society's framework
- From society's perspective: socialisation of individuals, reproduction of society through maintenance of core symbolic/cultural/moral fabric

3. Normative level

First question: Is concept of SI worth keeping? From perspective of recognition approach, undoubtedly yes. No doubt that concept is worth keeping, as it provides crucial descriptive acuteness.

Second question, the core issue: SI is important for whom and in what ways?

SI as the condition for the development of individual capacities. In traditional philosophical terms, SI as a condition of flourishing.

The justice aspect of SI relates to and is dependent upon the idea of flourishing: lack of SI prevents individuals belonging to certain groups from fully realising their capacities, and *that*, is unjust. So the underlying normative significance of SI is not encapsulated in a distributive concept of justice, unless one is happy to talk about recognition and SI as a good that can be distributed.

4. Critical level

Where the recognition paradigm is the most useful, because of where it comes from (Critical Theory tradition, set up right from the start with critical impulse in mind).

A number of interesting possibilities opened by interpretation of SI as recognition:

- a. Analysis of *social pathologies* as pathologies of recognition. Recognition model links directly the *conditions* of individual well-being and the social structure. This allows for the analysis of individual and group pathologies (psychological problems; expression of discontent, including violence) as symptoms of lack of SI. Here recognition gives concept of SI *diagnostic value*.

Sounds intuitively right: we want to study SI because we sense that when it is lacking or deficient, some social groups suffer. Another way of talking about discrimination, but emphasising the impact on individuals; not just denial of rights but also harm to their identity which impacts on their very well-being.

- b. *interpretation* of discrimination, exclusion, etc., and their effects on individuals belonging to certain groups can be linked to extant interpretations of specific norms and values. This way of looking at gaps in SI can help identify causes of exclusion more precisely, in societal attitudes and dominant cultural interpretations of key social practices. In simple terms, SI understood as recognition can help define “as what” some group is not included, or not appropriately included.

As we have often noted, this is the key question: what is at issue is usually not to be or not to be included, but to be included “as”.

Either a group is not counted as fulfilling the requirements to be included “as” (Aboriginals and citizenship prior to 1967); or the “as” as what a group is recognised is offensive to that group.

- c. Precisely because the origin of the sense of injustice and socially caused ill-being can be traced to dominant interpretations of specific norms and values, avenue to redress injustice and ill-being is clearly open. Theory of recognition is in fact a theory about the “struggle for recognition”, aiming to describe, as Honneth says, “the moral grammar of social movements”. Recognition model can help articulate a dynamic, practical sense of social inclusion, as programme of policy proposals and political action: SI in this or that particular area would require transformations in the understanding of this or that key societal ideal, principle, legal framework, and so on.

- d. In the Australian context, the added difficulty is that there are strongly divergent cultural systems of reference, such that it seems difficult at first to simply talk about a clash of interpretations around commonly held societal ideals. For instance, work question is framed differently in Anglo and Aboriginal culture (see Lorraine Gibson’s research). The problem seems at first to be a lot more radical than just clash over interpretation of the protestant work ethic (to ask whose work counts for what). From this perspective, recognition model can be accused of giving a version of SI that may be suited for European Nation-States, where fundamental societal aims are fairly homogeneous (although Rom question shows that this is not necessarily the case), but not for post-colonial societies struggling to integrate their indigenous peoples, with great divergence between cultural frames of reference.

But in fact, this issue and the objection it throws up can be turned around into a possible fruitful aspect of recognition view of SI. Recognition model gives a view of SI as structurally entailing tension and dissension over the interpretation of the key parameters of inclusion (included as what?). Nothing in theory should stop us from thinking of the struggle as a struggle that can be fought over the very parameters of inclusion, rather than just the interpretation of who fulfils or not some taken for granted parameters.