Editorial

Challenging conventional perceptions

Welcome to the first issue of the fourth volume of the *Journal of Social Inclusion*.

Social inclusion is a popular but complex concept used by many, but consensus has not been reached about the meaning of the term, nor what it may mean for particular groups of people. Social inclusion could be considered as a means to understanding and responding to disadvantage (Perkins, 2010). This disadvantage can take many forms, including marginalization, discrimination, segregation and abandonment (Daly & Silver, 2008). However, how this disadvantage is addressed is of ongoing debate in the literature (Bigby, 2012).

Perhaps one way of defining what an inclusive society may look like is to examine and challenge the conventional perceptions of mainstream society about those people that are typically excluded. This implies that the journey to social inclusion is not unidirectional and does not imply assimilation of those who are marginalised into mainstream culture. Rather, it involves mainstream culture seeing itself through other's eyes (Milner & Kelly, 2009). This edition of the Journal offers some insight into this process thanks to the valuable contribution of the many authors and writers.

In this edition there are three important articles concerning the social inclusion of people with a disability. This is particularly timely in the Australian context, as there are some major practice and policy reforms under way for people with a disability through the launch of the National Disability Insurance Scheme or Disability Care Australia. Social inclusion for people with a disability has also risen in importance as Australia and many other nations have become signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). This convention embraces the diversity of human experience and advocates for the full inclusion and participation of people with a disability in society. Whether these reforms result in better lives for people with a disability is still yet to be seen. This edition of Journal of Social Inclusion addresses some of the complexities facing the everyday lives of people with a disability.

Wedgewood, Smith, Shuttleworth and Llewellyn’s article uses a single case study of Lynette, a woman with a severe visual impairment in order to explore the impact of inclusive and exclusive lived experiences on Lynette’s identity development, by using a life history interview (drawn from a larger research project), as she transitioned to adulthood. The authors also highlight how life history research can enrich and expand our concept of those with impairments beyond simple measures traditionally used to explore these areas. The life history method goes beyond universalizing the experiences of those living with an impairment as static and negative as often depicted in conventional mainstream media. Lynette’s story challenges mainstream disabilism through its contextualized and nuanced analysis of her everyday experience.

The article by Meininger focuses on descriptions of ‘heterotopia’ or ‘other spaces’ as conceptualized by Michel Foucault in relation to developments in systems of care for, and support of persons with intellectual disabilities. Meininger states, that despite policy developments and changes over the last four decades in care and support of persons with intellectual disabilities, these groups of individuals still spend their time in sheltered and segregated settings with limited choice in where to live and with whom. Meininger attributes this to a failure of those in power to “deconstruct the mental representations of deviance” surrounding people with intellectual disability. Finally, Meininger argues that new interpretations of heterotopia require the political, civil and personal willingness and commitment of individuals in order to establish and foster inclusive spaces of encounter for those with intellectual disabilities.

Remington-Gurney’s article demonstrates how people without disability to take an important role in social inclusion. Remington-Gurney explores Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and the critical role that the communicating partner has when interacting with those who have difficulty with spoken language. Instead of focussing on deficits in the language of the person with a disability, the author uses transcription analysis for three recorded interviews and proposes that more proficient and inclusive discourses could be attained if communication partners had enhanced training with scaffolding techniques. This in turn would result in methods of AAC progressing from a linear model of communication to a more transactional model leading to greater opportunities for social influence, social identity, heightened awareness, shared reality and more positive social inclusion outcomes for those who have difficulty with spoken language.

The remaining two articles approach the concept of social inclusion with other social groups. In particular, these social groups may not be readily perceived by the majority as being disadvantaged. Graham, Hill, Shelly and Taket's paper explores the limited research examining women's reasons for childlessness in Australia. Within Australian society, motherhood is still the prevailing and presumed position for women in their adult life. The authors argue that due to normative western pronatalist ideology and discourses, women who do not have children challenge this social norm. These women may face issues of stigma and social exclusion in their relations with others. This exploratory study was able to identify that women's reasons for not having children were more about choice and circumstance with only a small percentage reporting involuntary childlessness. These reasons diverged from the typical stereotype of childless women as being perceived as disliking children and being more career focused. The researchers concluded by suggesting future research needs to investigate the impact resulting from these stigmas and, the resulting consequences that this form of social exclusion has had on childless women's health and wellbeing.

Another group of people which may be excluded from social support are birth parents who place their child up for adoption. The last article by Gair and Moloney broadens readers' notions of 'missing' children to include children missing through adoption. The authors attest that the trauma and loss experienced by birth parents can be better understood through the 'missing person' lens. This narrative study draws on the personal experience of the 2nd author and the past research of the 1st author in an attempt to highlight the social exclusion and ambiguous loss experienced by this overlooked group of individuals. The authors suggest that this lack of understanding has resulted in birth parents having to be confronted with a system of institutionalized attitudes and practices that have rendered them silent and invisible while having to live with the grief and torment of not knowing if they will ever see that child again. The authors argue that families who have suffered loss through adoption also experience social exclusion and are in need of support and a more empathic understanding of their grief.

This edition of Journal of Social Inclusion demonstrates how the concept of social inclusion is of relevance to many in our society. Certainly, people with disabilities continue to engage in struggles to be fully participating members of society. Their social exclusion may be blatantly obvious in terms of direct discriminatory policies and practices, yet they can also be quite subtle in terms of day to day interactions with others. Social exclusion is also not confined to economic and material deprivation, and therefore some social groups may experience a poverty of a relational nature, such as women who are childless, or birth parents whose children are missing through adoption. The authors in this edition have shown how the study of social inclusion can broaden conventional perceptions of what is an inclusive society.

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