

**INTERPRETATIONS OF “PLACE’ IN
PLACE-BASED SOCIAL POLICY**

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NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

This paper starts from the viewpoint that social research and policy interventions should always make clear their assumptions and conceptual underpinnings. Assumptions and conceptual underpinnings not only influence the design of research and policy approaches, they also frame the understandings of social environments and people's lives into which intervention may be proposed.

Accordingly, the paper asks how different views of the concept of place might help to frame ways of enhancing inclusion (reducing disadvantage) in local living. Taking up an interest in place requires one to consider that 'being', for humans - that reality we are trying to improve by reducing disadvantage – is, in fact, 'being there'.

Place has, of course, been a consideration over many years in Australian social policy that has redistributive aims. Most prominently, this policy-thinking has viewed places as bounded, administrative 'containers' of individuals who might have characteristics deemed to indicate advantage or disadvantage, or has identified locations as advantaged or disadvantaged by the services or infrastructure they have compared to what is available elsewhere. The first of these approaches seeks policy interventions tailored to the people in places having the highest proportions of disadvantaged individuals; the second seeks to upgrade infrastructure in locations which are poorly-served.

More recent conceptualisations of place may provide new avenues for social policy that is concerned to facilitate inclusion. (Inclusion is the focus here - a norm that contributes to the reduction of disadvantage. By inclusion is meant the opportunity to be involved equally with others in activities that occur across the forms of social difference in our society, be these differences of wealth and class, ethnicity, ability, gender, age, or sexuality, and across varied regions and spatial settings). These more recent views see place as produced in the actual practices of people, rather than imposed administratively as in the mapping of census-based spatial units; this 'production' of place is in fact done by encounters between people in the contexts in which they live together. Inclusion is participation in the forms of ongoing encounter that constitute a place. To facilitate inclusion thus requires identifying those encounters that make a place that is positive and welcoming, and seeking to facilitate these encounters through social policy so that they can be participated in by people, across their differences.

The longstanding approaches to place-based social policy thinking – place as container and place as sites of locational (dis)advantage – provide important information about the enabling infrastructure of localities, and their populations as depicted in census and other government data. Understanding that place is the product of practices conducted through encounters between people, however, is also important. Census data can never indicate what people's collective activities are and with whom, using services and infrastructure, as place is made. Accordingly, when interventions are made in places, information on the actual encounters that are important to people's lives in places is needed to ground these interventions and make them effective.



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ABSTRACT

How can the concept of place help to frame ways of facilitating inclusion in local living? I consider this question, first outlining the limited ways in which place has largely been understood in Australian social policy - in policy-thinking that sees place as a container for disadvantage, or in policy-thinking that identifies locations as advantaged or disadvantaged by the infrastructure they have. The paper then discusses more recent conceptualisations of place that may provide new avenues for social policy that is concerned to facilitate inclusion. More recent views of place see it as produced rather than imposed; this 'production' of place is in fact done by encounters between people in the contexts and environments in which they live together. Inclusion is participation in the forms of ongoing encounter that constitute a place. To facilitate inclusion thus requires identifying those encounters or interactions that make a place that is positive and welcoming in a local area, and seeking to facilitate these encounters so that they can be participated in by people, across their differences.

Keywords: place, social policy, inclusion, locational disadvantage, encounter

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This paper asks how the concept of place can be used to extend thinking about creating inclusion in local living. By inclusion is meant the opportunity to be involved equally with others in activities that occur across the forms of social difference in our society, be these differences of wealth and class, ethnicity, ability, gender, age, or sexuality, and across the varied regions and spatial settings of our society. In social policy discussions in Australia to date, place has been used as a way to identify the situated presence of disadvantage in the population, and the related idea of location has been used in policies to ameliorate spatial inequities in infrastructure distribution. The way in which place is understood and operationalised in these kinds of policy-thinking and policy action is limited. Perhaps if a slightly wider view of place were used to inform thinking in social policy then some new approaches to encouraging inclusion might result.

With that possibility in mind, this paper begins by reviewing the two common approaches to place-thinking about localities, in social policy in Australia that has redistributive aims. The first of these approaches sees places as postcodes containing communities of disadvantaged individuals; the second sees places as sites of locational advantage or disadvantage according to their services and infrastructure. (I note of course that if the States within the nation of Australia were considered to be places, then place-based thinking would be seen as prominent in allocations of Commonwealth funds to States; this is thinking of place at a different spatial scale than what is considered in the rest of this paper). The paper goes on to consider how the nature and formation of place is viewed in contemporary social science and how that might have helpful implications for future policy discussions.

Place as a container of concentrated disadvantage in the population

Public policy in Australia in general has viewed places as territorial containers of populations, infrastructures or ‘problems’. Places are thus units which may help in the process of making government spending more efficient and more focused, for example if the aim is to target disadvantaged populations or locations with the potential to be competitive economically (see a broad review in Fincher, 2005). Conceptually, this view of places as convenient physical containers of particular people or certain activities is in contrast to the view that all processes and policies have a spatiality that contributes to the production of places in societies and economies, and to the social and economic experiences of individuals and communities in different locations.

In Australia, influential ‘place as container’ statements about the importance of place for social well-being, and as underpinning social disadvantage, have come from repeated editions of the report by the



sociologist Tony Vinson entitled ‘Dropping Off the Edge’ (most recently, Vinson and Rawsthorne, 2015). This analysis demonstrates that disadvantaged individuals are disproportionately located in certain postcode areas. The reason that spatial concentrations of disadvantaged people in the population are deemed significant is that some ‘neighbourhoods’ can be sites of sustained ‘material, behavioural, and educational forms of disadvantage’ (2015, p. 6), that may contribute to people living in those locations having poorer life chances and health. Mapping the highest ranked postcode localities (those with the highest concentrations of individuals deemed disadvantaged) is said to reveal a set of disadvantaged ‘communities’ in Australia that need special governmental assistance (though not necessarily a reduction in the percentage of poor people living in these areas that a ‘neighbourhood effects’ or ‘social mix’ approach to policy (see below) might suggest).

The most recent ‘Dropping Off the Edge’ report (Vinson and Rawsthorne, 2015) uses census data to identify postcode areas in which people live who have certain characteristics associated with disadvantage. Its purpose is to present data about Australia, based on 22 selected indicators, that will identify areas of longstanding concentration of people of disadvantage (naming this in the report’s subtitle, as ‘communal disadvantage’). The indicators include measures of population characteristics relating to health, education, social distress, and criminal behaviour, that draw from the World Health Organisation’s general perspective on the social determinants of health, that is, the view that poor social and economic circumstances affect people negatively throughout their lives (2015, p. 24). The report finds that postcode areas of high concentration of disadvantaged people are often found in rural areas or the outer suburbs of major cities. This varies between States, however. For example, more of the highly-disadvantaged postcode areas in Victoria are in major urban areas than is the case in New South Wales, and in South Australia remote areas whose populations are largely Indigenous are the most disadvantaged postcode areas (pp. 67, 70, 80). The report’s authors argue that the data presented make the case for a ‘community-strengthening’ strategy that should be supported by the Commonwealth Government; the report thus sees these postcode areas as ‘communities’. Its authors wish to see policy strategies giving long-term priority to these areas, with a focus on creating collective local responses to the disadvantage reported as well as giving resources to individuals and households.

The benefit of this way of presenting evidence about disadvantage in Australia is that it shows a spatial distribution of individuals so characterised. It draws our attention to the fact that all areas are not the same in their populations, and presumably in what they offer to their populations. It causes us, perhaps, to think about matters like segregation, and barriers to mobility, and other limiting features of context



that might be giving rise to the clusters of disadvantaged individuals present in the measurements. There are limitations of presenting information in this way, however, and to its credit the report does mention some of these. One limitation is that measuring only the characteristics of the population to indicate the nature of a 'place' suggests that the disadvantage of the area may be being caused by its residents. This is a 'blame the victim' kind of reasoning, that overlooks other features of the environment or context of the place, like its economic opportunities and community infrastructure (see acknowledgement of such a critique in the report, pp. 25, 31). For measures of the characteristics of the resident population of an area are not adequate measures of the characteristics of a place. Claims that the (correlated) variables used to measure the characteristics of the population as disadvantaged 'play a significant role in constituting web-like, localised, systems of disadvantage' (Vinson and Rawsthorne, 2015, p. 115) need to be tempered by recognition of the important role that economic and infrastructural context, and policy intervention, may also play, if one is seeking to explain the spatial distribution of disadvantage in the population.

A second drawback of the approach of the 'Dropping Off the Edge' report is its very view of spatiality. The report (and its predecessors) uses small areas (postcodes) derived from the population census and also from Australia Post zones. It sees these bounded areas as the appropriate 'containers' for an assessment of the distribution of disadvantage in Australia. Who is to say, though, whether this scale, of postcodes rather than some other spatial unit, actually reflects the activities of people's daily lives and mobilities (if that is how we see community or place as constituted)? How in this place-as-container perspective is the porosity of local postcode boundaries, as people live within them, accounted for? For we know that individuals resident within a postcode go outside that area for different purposes. Seeing 'places' or 'communities' as bounded in this way has been prevalent in the social scientific literature; one critique of this approach has been made by Gieryn (2000, p. 466), examining the practices of his own discipline of sociology in using census tracts as places. He argues that such areas cannot be assumed to be places, or (we might add) communities:

If the census tract is simply a bundle of analytic variables used to distinguish one neighbourhood from another in terms of its economic or demographic features, then it is not a place.

The Australian social policy analyst Deborah Warr and her colleagues (2017) have recently published a critique of poverty reduction strategies in Victoria, that draw on ideas of community in a similar fashion to the manner in which the 'Dropping Off the Edge' reports use the idea of place. These poverty



reduction strategies have focused on encouraging people of low income to form ‘community’ by being good neighbours; they see residents as having similarities because they are co-located, and see them as logically connected because they have low incomes.

A third limitation of this approach is that it ranks postcodes (places). With rankings, it is often hard for the reader to discern the actual number or percentage of individuals in the populations of the designated places who are disadvantaged according to the criteria being used. A reader may not realise that the majority of the population of a ‘very disadvantaged community’ ranked high in the analysis, in fact are not disadvantaged individuals (and indeed, the reader may not understand the counter to this, that there are a sizeable minority of marginalised individuals in many postcode areas that are ranked as ‘not disadvantaged’). A tendency to ecological fallacy may thus accompany the interpretation of a ranking analysis – I emphasise that this is not the fault of the analysis, but may be an interpretation made by readers if the data are not presented visibly in a non-rankings format.

There is a related and most influential body of work about place and disadvantage coming from urban studies, drawn from the writing of the American sociologist William Julius Wilson (1987) and debates about it. This is the ‘neighbourhood effects’ approach. It presents the view that the life chances of low-income people will be reduced if they are located long-term in proximity to others of low-income like themselves. In the US, this thinking emerged in the context of the longstanding racial segregation of African-American people in certain parts of cities, and in certain kinds of housing in cities; racial segregation is a major factor in their poverty. (Such racial segregation and discrimination is less prominent in European and Australian cities, where neighbourhood effects thinking has, nevertheless, sometimes been applied). In the US, neighbourhood effects thinking has been associated with the policies of physically dismantling certain public housing estates, and of relocating the residents of those estates to more ‘mixed’ residential settings regarded as presenting greater opportunities. In Australia, as indeed in Canada and parts of Europe, there are echoes of neighbourhood effects perspectives in the ‘social mix’ policies of some State public housing authorities which seek to ‘dilute’ concentrations of low-income people in public housing estates by adding privately-owned housing units or buildings to sit alongside public tenancies in those estates (Arthurson, 2002; see Shaw (2012) and others for critical reflections on this practice in Bridge, Butler and Lees, 2012). There are important critiques of such policies and their implementation in the contexts in which they arise. It is also important to state, however, that the spatial segregation of population groups in cities, when this is the product of institutional mechanisms and discrimination in the property market and is of disadvantage to those



population groups, has long been of great concern to researchers and others concerned to promote social justice.

Taking up 'place as container' thinking in Australian social policy, the analysts in a recent Commonwealth Government Department of Social Services (DSS, 2017) report recognise the limitations of viewing disadvantage only as a clustering of individuals, to which a response might merely be to un-cluster them. Seeking to define a guiding framework for place-based approaches to countering disadvantage, the report states that data need to be collected about the 'social and economic assets and services available in a place' and the stakeholders associated with these (2017, p. 28), and that real partnerships between local community members and the three levels of government need to occur as changes are decided upon and their implementation occurs (2017, pp. 21, 27, 31). So, in this governmental view, analysis of the features of localities, and of the governance processes there, needs to be added to any mapping of the characteristics of the population, for a place-based approach for change. It seems evident that the proposed DSS (2017) approach is endeavouring to respond to the call by Vinson and Rawsthorne (2015) for community-strengthening. The approach seems also to be seeking, through partnership and joined-up governance, to bring to bear in local areas changes in processes that are recognised to be sourced outside those local areas. And there is clear interest in listening to stakeholders and residents of local areas, and devolving decision-making and the funding of programs on the ground to them, with non-local levels of government serving as enablers or funders (2017, pp. 35, 36).

The tendency is still there, in the DSS (2017) thinking as reported, to see the local areas identified as having populations of concentrated disadvantage as 'communities' who need to manage their own 'problems', with the assistance of outside governments of course. This begs the questions of (1) whether these identified areas are indeed bounded 'communities' (about which residents have a longstanding sense of place and shared involvement) or are better seen as part of some larger regional or metropolitan area whose communities have people of a range of characteristics within them, not just those of 'disadvantage', (2) whether non-local levels of government will actually allow devolved decision-making to occur about the expenditure of their funds in such local areas, and (3) whether too singular a focus is being placed on processes of listening to locals and understanding their sense of whether these areas of concentrated disadvantage are 'places', when more policy attention could be paid to matters like the decentralisation of new employment opportunities and attempts to overturn disadvantaging economic histories. Recognition of this last point would view places as activity spaces, as



being able to be produced in new ways, rather than as containers binding disadvantaged people together. The DSS (2017) report does, however, move things along beyond the ‘Dropping Off the Edge’ reports, and the statement of this Commonwealth Government agency that devolved decision-making and joined-up governance need to be taken seriously is important. Such an approach is also a means to recognise that the precise contexts of locational disadvantage in regions and areas will differ, as the most disadvantaged localities in the States of Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia showed, and so partnerships with many different government agencies will be required for alleviating the difficulties of different spatial settings.

Accordingly we move now to consider the second place-based approach in Australian social policy, in which disadvantage and advantage in a place are understood as being greatly influenced by the distribution of infrastructure and other opportunities to people resident there. This is more than just recognising that there is a broader, ‘ecological’ context surrounding what is going on in a local area. This kind of place-based thinking calls for seeing how that wider context (including labour market changes, housing market shifts, trends in infrastructure spending) actually occurs *in* the locality as well as more broadly around it. These matters, whose source may be outside the locality, are active presences in the locality. They are important in defining what a place is, what it means to people and how it influences their opportunities.

Locational advantage and locational disadvantage in places

Underpinning a second major approach to places in Australian public policy is the recognition that places (localities, neighbourhoods, regions) can be ‘locationally advantaged’ or ‘locationally disadvantaged’ because of the physical and social infrastructure they have, that offers accessible opportunities to their residents or fails to do so (Fincher and Iveson, 2008, pp. 30-37). Rather than focusing on the characteristics of populations living within bounded local areas, this way of thinking about places focuses directly on the context of those residents’ circumstances and what government policies might do to improve this context. Over past decades this idea has been used by urban planners and urban geographers to designate certain locations as ‘food deserts’ if they lack accessible shops selling affordable and nutritious food, or sites of ‘transport poverty’ if they lack the public transport facilities to make their populations sufficiently mobile. Urban analysts developed the VAMPIRE index, demonstrating which locations in the suburbs of Australian cities were most vulnerable to the combined effects of increasing mortgage stress and petrol prices (Dodson and Sipe, 2006). In the early 1990s, the Hawke Labor Government’s Building Better Cities Program was premised on this kind of thinking. A



highly collaborative program organised under Minister Brian Howe, which was based on agreements between the Commonwealth Government and all the States and Territories, the program focussed on locating capital works in needy urban places so as to improve urban outcomes and social equality.

The question of which scale one chooses at which to identify the distribution of advantage and disadvantage, and the policy responses required to change the distribution at this scale, is of course a crucial matter. Taking a look at the broader regions of Australia, rather than postcodes or even metropolitan areas, Baum, O'Connor and Stimson (2005) examine the spatial distribution of advantage and disadvantage in what they call 'Australia's settlement system'. They choose four levels of spatial aggregation – metropolitan city regions, large towns and associated regions, small towns and associated regions, rural towns and regions (2005, ch 1). Importantly, the variables they use from the census and from government data bases, to capture disadvantage and advantage in these places, are not only of the characteristics of the populations in the areas, but also variables reflecting the economic history of the areas. This analytical strategy allows an emphasis on internal migration, as people move between areas, rather than a concentration only on people statically sited within localities. The kinds of explanation about the production of disadvantage and advantage in places, that the Baum et al. (2005) study prompts, are more comprehensive than those implied in the 'Dropping Off the Edge' reports. This is reflected in the policy prescriptions with which both studies conclude. Vinson and Rawsthorne (2015) argue for community-strengthening work to be focused long-term on the postcode areas they have identified as disadvantaged. Baum et al. (2005, 07-14) argue, instead, for a national strategy combining place prosperity with people prosperity, which attempts to decentralise employment to areas characterised by dependency on welfare and retirement benefits, in an effort to stem internal migration out of these areas somewhat, together with the tailoring of benefits to individuals and families in these places.

Moving back to the scale of the city and its suburbs, the economist Sue Richardson (1998) described two fictional suburban 'worlds', to make it clear how the differential distribution of physical and social infrastructure throughout urban areas affects the lived experiences of people living in those areas. In the first 'world', infrastructure is better in the suburbs of the rich than in the suburbs of the poor, and exacerbates the lived inequality between rich and poor households. In the second world, public infrastructure, in the form of the built environment and social services, assists in reducing the lived inequality between rich and poor households. She says:



In the first, the richest households also live in suburbs which have the highest proportion of public recreational land, the quietest streets with the freshest air, nicely landscaped, cables underground and with convenient shopping and transport; they have the most congenial and safe working environments, with high quality accommodation and no more than standard hours of employment; their houses, which they own without debt, are well-equipped with fine furniture, ornaments, electrical goods and entertainment equipment; they have a holiday house on a beautiful area of coastline and regularly take weekends and holidays to enjoy it. Their children go to spacious, well-equipped schools which offer excellent teaching and a wide curriculum. The poorer households, in contrast, live in suburbs which are dreary, noisy, have no public space or recreational facilities, are festooned with overhead cables, offer only distant shopping malls and provide little transport to get there; their houses, for which they are deeply in debt, are small and run down and have but the bare essentials by way of furniture; they work in noisy, risky and dirty workplaces; the local school is rough, tough and poorly resourced; they work long hours and rarely have a chance to get away for a break.

In the second world, the households with the high incomes live in fine houses as before, but now they work long hours and rarely get a break; the suburbs they live in are indistinguishable from those of the low-income households, the work environment is stressful and spartan; they still own the holiday house but now the coast is crowded and the beach is polluted and they rarely have the time to go there anyway. The low-income households live in suburbs with plenty of open space, recreation facilities, transport, shopping and excellent schools and medical facilities; they work modest hours, their workplaces are safe and pleasant, their houses are well-provided with furniture, electrical goods and entertainment equipment; they have a boat or caravan or some such and time to use it (Richardson, 1998, pp. 225-6).

Now, in this account of two fictional ‘worlds’, there is much to discuss about which is the ‘better’ situation. Which (if either) is the ‘good’ city? Either way, the role of what has been called the public realm (because historically it has been provided by governments or by government funding), that is the built and social facilities that are fundamental to people’s everyday well-being, is very clear. The lives of all members of households are affected by the quality of the specific physical and infrastructural elements surrounding them, in the places in which they live. In seeking to create inclusion, it is important to analyse the way that the mix of social and physical infrastructure in places improves the quality of urban living there, even offsetting inequalities in wages to some degree, and to observe and



collect evidence about how specifically that social and physical infrastructure is used to underpin the forms of inclusion being sought. The importance of transport in the mix of infrastructure underlines the significance of mobility – the opportunity for people in places to get around within those places but also to travel elsewhere to other places. In any attempt to link place to inclusion, the distribution of enabling infrastructure to facilitate interaction between people in a range of locales/places will be significant, rather than a focus solely on what happens within places from the allocation of resources there.

One of the things that Richardson’s account emphasises is that different locations have different mixes of publicly-available facilities. Possibly, residents of those locations have chosen their particular set of facilities over other options. It is equally possible that some locations are more poorly funded and supplied than others, and that marginalised residents have little recourse to move elsewhere. So, any attempt at providing facilities for locations needs to ensure a degree of equality in the infrastructural contributions being made across them, even if the precise forms of facilities vary across places.

In this tradition, a recent suite of major papers has been published by Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI), analysing the nature of housing markets in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane and the contributions of these to people’s locational disadvantage (see Pawson, Hulse and Cheshire, 2015). Important findings are that in the period 2006 – 2011, as measured by the population census, disadvantaged households are increasingly located in outer suburban areas, far from the central cities’ ‘knowledge economy’ and associated gentrification. This is attributed to the failure of government policies to alleviate the manner in which housing markets benefit richer households, and indeed to the directing of governmental housing subsidies disproportionately to wealthier rather than poorer local areas in the three cities. It is attributed as well to the continued centralising of economic activity, rather than the creation of additional economic nodes, within these metropolitan areas. This research by Pawson and colleagues for AHURI has combined census information about the characteristics of the population (as Vinson and Rawsthorne (2015) have done) with a penetrating analysis of urban housing markets, and have aligned the two, using interviews with residents to link housing and disadvantage in specific settings. New work on locational disadvantage and advantage is also being conducted on the complex spending of the NSW government in suburbs of different levels of population disadvantage in Sydney between 1988 and 2015. Wiesel et al. (2018) have examined expenditure on transport, roads, health, education, justice, utilities, amenities, government facilities and community services, concluding that considerably more State Government spending has occurred on moderately disadvantaged suburbs in Sydney than on the most disadvantaged ones.



Wiesel et al. (2018) conclude their paper with the observation that expenditure targeted at disadvantage is not necessarily all that is required to ameliorate that disadvantage. This is a most important point, underpinning the question of creating greater inclusion through a place-based way of thinking about policy and practice. Wiesel et al. (2018) emphasise that expenditure on universal services and facilities provision is also necessary, as indeed the quote above from Richardson (1998) suggests, along with expenditure on what they call encounter, or interactions across difference. It is to the question of place and how it is constituted by people's actions and encounters with others, and in turn how this might produce inclusion in those places, that we will turn in the two next sections of this paper.

Contemporary perspectives on how place is produced

Place is a concept that draws our attention to the grounded manner in which people interact in their everyday lives, in the times and places of their contexts. Their contexts include the institutions that help define their opportunities, but also the organisations of civil society and of everyday commerce with which they engage. Central to contemporary conceptualisations of place is the understanding that place is produced by human actions, individually and collectively, and that the working boundaries around places are also produced by those human actions. Place is not imposed, top-down, with boundaries given, in this current thinking. Furthermore, places are ever-changing because of the manner of their ongoing production and reproduction, rather than being static and set. With this understanding, it is possible to see that producing places can be an act of creating more inclusive settings for daily lives and interactions (or indeed less inclusive settings for such lives and interactions). In urban studies, the idea of place-making asserts this hopeful possibility.

In academic writings, place has three meanings (Castree (2009) citing Agnew, 1987). First, place can be seen as a location on the earth's surface. Now an old-fashioned way of place-thinking, description of differences and similarities between locations has been the major analytical interest flowing from this understanding of place. Second, place can be a sense that one has about one's own identity, when one feels 'in place' or 'out of place' – thus, place can mean a sense of place. From this idea of place much analytical focus has been directed to what conditions make people feel outsiders, including the effects of globalisation on residents' and newcomers' sense of belonging (or accessibility) in local settings. Third, place can mean a locale, understood as 'a setting and scale for people's daily actions and interactions' (Castree, 2009, 155). From this idea of place, it is evident that places are in fact assemblages of contexts for people's activities. These contexts will have institutional, economic and



environmental features, as well as being influenced by the histories of the places and the intentions and interests of their dwellers.

We might see both the approaches to place-thinking in Australian public policy described in sections 1 and 2 above as aligned principally with the old-fashioned way of understanding place as location. In the place-as-container approach of section 1, postcode areas are contrasted for the different levels of disadvantage in their populations. In the locational (dis)advantage approach of section 2, locations are differentiated by their infrastructure and services, and policy attempts are made to even things up between areas in this respect. In neither of these approaches is there emphasis of whether people feel ‘out of place’ in an area, or how the activities and actions of people in a place in fact constitute the place, for themselves. Thus, I regard the approaches to place described in sections 1 and 2 as largely population-centred, rather than people-centred.

In this paper, with its interest in how place-thinking might be useful for creating inclusion in places, the third idea of place as locale gives us the most to work with. For it suggests that places are produced, and therefore can be reorganised or altered. Places are the product of agency, exercised individually and collectively, in the present and the past. It suggests also that there is an ethical dimension associated with place – there are differences between places in the extent to which their characteristics serve their populations, with some populations in some places being better served than others. The idea of place as locale perhaps best aligns with the point strongly made in phenomenological thinking about place, that all being in the world is situated – ‘being’ is not separable from ‘being there’ (Larsen and Johnson, 2012). Of course, we can see the presence of the first two meanings of place inside this third one of place as locale. By seeing that some locales serve their populations better than others we are drawing on that first meaning of place as location, which observes that places are not the same. And we are also taking note of the feelings of place-dwellers when they are not well-served or are well-served by their contexts, and thus have a sense of place as an insider who belongs there, or an outsider who does not.

Consider now how place is produced, or can be produced, given this conceptualisation of place as locale. Also consider who produces it, or creates it. One of the important matters to note is that place is produced by a mix of institutional and individual actions that occur at different scales – thus in a locale, a place of activity that is likely to have the scale and extent needed for everyday life, the place produced is nevertheless influenced by processes from outside that locality. Places thus cannot be seen as containers, bounded, fixed and inward-looking. Rather they are porous, and reshaped by affairs of the



world and the globe as much as by affairs internal to their dwellers. Another important matter is that what place means to one individual or group of dwellers may differ from what it means to others, and some have more power to influence the meanings of the place that prevail in decisions about it. Power relations are certainly exercised in the creation of places.

We see these points emphasised in the following insightful comments from contemporary theorists of place, writing in the journals of geography. From Ray Hudson (2006, p. 627):

‘Places’ can be thought of as complex entities, ensembles of material objects, people, and systems of social relationships embodying distinct cultures and multiple meanings, identities and practices. As such, places are contested and continually in the process of becoming, rather than essentialized, fixed, open and porous to a variety of flows in and out rather than closed and hermetically sealed.

From Larsen and Johnson (2012, p. 632):

Recent thinking on place stresses not only its open, fluid and contested nature but also its structural power to create boundaries and opacity in the reproduction of socioecological dominance and cultural hegemony.

It is evident that those who create places also create the boundaries of those places, and therefore the forms of exclusion and inclusion that are associated with them. When discussing any particular place, therefore, one needs to ask: whose place this is, and for whom it is a place? Awareness of the need for such questioning has given rise to criticism by some writers interested in the progressive potential of place, of hierarchical notions of scale that tend to render ‘the local’ as a more minor feature than the ‘national’ and the ‘international’ in human affairs (especially in practices of governance). Such hierarchical thinking about scale can, they say, put as a last priority the features of everyday life in which people’s lives are situated or grounded. This is not thinking that defines places according to features of value and importance to people in local communities. With greater relative importance imparted to the national or international scale, in addition, there can be failure to see that locally-lived lives are a manifestation of global processes as much as they are of small, locally-generated processes, and that via locally-lived lives progressive changes can be made together (Larsen and Johnson, 2012). Significant theoretical writing in geography has proposed a flat ontology to counter the hegemony of higher scales



(Marston, Jones and Woodward, 2005). As the DSS (2017) report observes, priority in governance that is sensitive to place must be given to local interests and stakeholders.

But not only governance, and consultation with local stakeholders with a view to including their perspectives in top-down changes, is important in producing local places. The actual activities and practices of place-dwellers are also important in producing those places. Furthermore, it is the activities and practices together of place-dwellers and others associated with the place that produce that place, rather than just the actions of individuals alone. (Recognising the potential of this is perhaps what motivates claims for community-strengthening by Vinson and Rawsthorne (2015)). Thus, the literature in urban studies that has arisen recently, about ongoing encounters or interactions between people being what actually makes the city, in the environmental and social contexts on which they draw and in fact through which they are constituted, is a useful model for our discussion of place. The commentary in urban studies is particularly focused on encounters across difference, rather than merely 'providing another metaphor for the social and material assembling of urban life' (Wilson and Darling, 2016, p. 1). Encounters are seen as fundamental (ontologically) to the ongoing making of the social relations of the city, nevertheless. Perhaps we could say about place what has been said about care – that it is not 'located in individual identities. ... [It] is produced inter-subjectively, in relation, and through practice' (Raghuram 2016, p. 515). Far from merely considering people as individuals or households, acting in isolation from each other in the areas in which they live, this perspective puts the social interactions in people's lives as central to their agency and their habitual practice. In every sphere of life people encounter others, and act by virtue of those encounters with others, even if those encounters are fleeting rather than sustained, and anonymous rather than familiar.

It is important to note the emphasis that perspectives on encounter give to fleeting interactions as well as to the sustained relationships, networking and building of social capital that tend to be what is sought in community development approaches, if we are to generate greater inclusion. Encounter approaches recognise that fleeting meetings, such as one might have with others in a shop each morning when lining up to buy a coffee and saying good morning to the person standing next in the queue, or everyday proximities like travelling together on public transport or passing people when on one's morning walk, are very important in constituting one's belonging in a place, alongside the ongoing networks one might develop with people one comes to know personally. Community participation is not just about forming sustained networks of activity with people one comes to know well, but also includes this everyday citizenship of joining others in negotiating the spaces and resources of the local area, with the



occasional brief, acknowledging, chat with unknown others that this produces. Being able to get out and about in the local area, in order to have such fleeting connections regularly, is also emphasised by new writing about mobilities.

If this thinking about the city and its basis in encounter is transferred to our thinking about place, seeing place as having a basis in encounter as well, then an important analytical point ensues. The nature of the encounters in which people actually engage with each other needs to be taken into account in infrastructure and services provision in places, when those places are being planned for. For the manner of provision of infrastructure and services can affect how people interact together and encounter each other, as well as how people and households individually receive services. With a new understanding of place that recognises the reality of encounter in constituting place, we can no longer see the provision of services to individuals (such as in a range of social welfare services) or households as sufficient for enhancing inclusion, as if encounter will automatically follow from the fact that individuals are better-resourced. Rather, the actual social fact of generating encounter in both fleeting and sustained ways needs to be factored in to our thinking and facilitated in our policy.

Though the design of public spaces and other parts of built environments is not the only factor in facilitating inclusion, it is a contributing factor. One example of a professional practice, undertaken by agents seeking change and improvement in the built environment (though not necessarily inclusion as defined in this paper), is place-making. Place-making as a form of professional practice has become associated with urban built environment professionals, especially urban designers, seeking to 'improve' local urban areas in contexts in which governments are requiring urban renewal. It is to be distinguished from the making of place as envisaged in broader conceptualisations of people's relationships to locale and belonging, discussed earlier, in which it is accepted that everyone contributes to the making of place in the area they inhabit, by the many practices they engage in repeatedly and habitually in their daily lives. Place-making as a professional practice is practitioners taking up the understanding of how places are formed by actors and institutions and inserting their own actions and aims into the mix, even as they work alongside 'stakeholders' who comprise community members in the present and those who might be interested in the area in the future. Making place can be greatly influenced by the professional interpretations of the actors employed to do this work (often urban designers) as they try to put into practice the agendas of major institutional players, even whilst consulting local stakeholders. Their understanding of what is appropriate for these places comes from their professional backgrounds and their experiences with the guiding institutions with which they have



worked. Such a process occurred recently in State Government-led urban renewal programs in Dandenong, Footscray and Docklands in Melbourne, when place-making was being undertaken to implement those programs by a workforce of urban designers in State Government agencies, working in partnership with local Councils (Fincher, Pardy and Shaw, 2016). The result was that urban renewal in these places was seen as an urban design problem, or set of projects, to be solved. Focus was therefore on improving the form of the built environment, especially the design of public space, and questions of social equity or social inclusion were not a priority but rather merely one of many relevant factors. Elected local councillors aligned with this aim, seeing the opportunity of greater economic achievement for their municipalities. They looked forward to new commercial entities in their localities and some wealthier residents, and also wanted to market their newly-improved localities to outsiders who might visit and spend money there. Present-day residents, especially those who were disadvantaged, were but one focus of the urban designers working on these projects – their concept of the ‘stakeholders’ with whom they should consult included potential new residents and businesspeople as well as people there now.

One can see from this example that intentions and norms can be plugged into the positive-sounding idea of place-making, to make it a practice that is quite specific and attuned to particular priorities. It can’t be assumed that place-making will focus only on the needs of existing residents, or give priority to values of which we (or any set of others) might approve. Professional place-making will have priorities set down by its institutional leaders, and interpretations will often come from its implementers’ background (often in urban design). So the analytical task, if we are to find place-making a useful idea because it shows that place can be actively produced for progressive outcomes (or for non-progressive outcomes), becomes one of identifying the appropriate professional interpretation to be applied to making a particular place (which may not be that of urban design, or of certain firms of urban designers), and to work out how this chosen professional interpretation can be used properly in consultation with those who are the relevant local stakeholders. As Raghuram (2016, p. 519) has noted in her discussion of the importance of ‘emplacing’ care regimes, understanding the histories of those regimes and not assuming that what is the case in one place will be the case in another, is crucial. As she says, delivery of care in a place will have its own ‘teleologies, aspirations and aims, depending on who exactly inhabits the field of care’. In any work to address place it is important to ensure that things important to locals, the very people with whom place facilitators are trying to work, are not overlooked, but also that things that none of these people may have thought of are able to be imagined and introduced. What a ‘place’ is already made up of, and the sorts of encounters that underpin this, must



be discovered before new action is taken. These are issues that are certainly not new. In urban planning discussions they are often deemed to be questions of good consultative process – though here I am laying much more onto the idea of consultation, by insisting that consultation should uncover people’s actual practices of encounter rather than only their attitudes and opinions. Further, consultation should not result in a top-down implementation of place-making for an area, but rather a participatory implementation of place-making in an area. Place itself is not a prescribed norm – it needs norms and collective practices, uncovered locally, to inhabit it and give it meaning.

New forms of place-based social policy thinking?

Working with the concept of place may help to devise ways to produce greater inclusion in the settings in which people’s lives are lived. If we add to our social policy thinking a deeper understanding of what place is, comprehending how place is produced by people’s (inter)actions in quite specific contexts rather than understanding place as something containing individual people of certain characteristics in locations, additional insights might be developed that foster inclusion. It will be evident from the discussion in the previous section that I regard inclusion as participation in the forms of ongoing encounter that constitute a place. To facilitate inclusion thus requires identifying those encounters or interactions that make a place that is positive and welcoming in a local area, and seeking to facilitate these so that they can be participated in by people, across their differences.

I have three points to make, in conclusion.

First, the longstanding approaches to place-based social policy thinking – place as container and place as sites of locational (dis)advantage – do provide important sources of information about the enabling infrastructure of localities, and their populations as depicted in census and other government data. As a basis for future planning for intervention to enhance inclusion, however, they would be improved if accompanied by a critical review of the scale at which place is assumed to exist, that does not regard all places everywhere as existing at the scale of the postcode. A program of ‘ground-truthing’, involving visits to areas in which intervention is planned and skilled consultation with people there would also be a useful accompaniment to the long-used policy approaches to place, rather than assumptions about what is needed coming from desk-top overviews. Acceptance that universal provision of infrastructure and services is needed for the lives of people living in very different settings, in order that they may be more equal, needs to be skilfully accompanied by recognition that the form of these universal provisions may differ for people in different places.



Second, the concept of place as the product of practices conducted through encounter, is important. It demonstrates the necessary inadequacy of census data to comprehend the characteristics of people in places, insofar as those census data can never indicate what people's collective activities are and with whom, as place is made. Accordingly, when interventions are made in places, in the name of social policy, it is necessary to gather background information on the encounters that are important to people's lives in places – what they value as evidenced in their actual practices (not just in what they say) in their setting, their society, their environment, their country, and their mobility at a range of different scales. Any new infrastructure or services will need to be provided to take into account, and support, the actual lived practices of encounter in the place. Encounters in places are what will create inclusion; without them there will not be the new forms of inclusion that are hoped for.

Third, emplacing any new provisions for people in places involves those in charge of new programs, who have their own compelling histories, divesting themselves of assumptions of their own that may actively preclude that emplacement working in the interests of local people. Such critical self-review will always be a challenge for governance, but is an aim, anyway. In her discussion of care practices and ethics in the Global South, Raghuram (2016, p. 521) has referred to 'tactics of place' needed to 'dislodge care from what may be seen as its [in her case] Eurocentric origins'. Insofar as care is probably a broad term for what much social policy seeks to implement in different contexts, this is a useful prompt for our thinking.

It is a telling feature of the Department of Social Services' (DSS, 2017) recent policy paper about place-based approaches to (reducing) disadvantage in Australia that the guiding principles it develops concern forms of governance, especially insofar as these lead to better consultation, data-sharing and engagement with local communities. The question of what place is, is deemed too difficult to determine. I have argued, however, that place is able to be understood and determined as a reality actively produced, by encounters that often occur across the differences that make us unequal. With the recognition that place is formed in the encounters of people's lives, rather than being primarily an administrative device to demonstrate the spatial distribution of certain individuals, new ways to enhance positive forms of inclusion might be identified for social policy-makers to work with, in their governance and consultation.



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