The importance of visibility for social inequality research

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Introduction

The nature and extent of social inequality has been of interest to us for over 20 years (Dwan & Western 2003, Western 1983, Western et al. 1998, Western & Turrell 1993, Western & Western 1988), so when invited to contribute to the 40th edition of *Australian Journal of Social Inequality* we resolved to take the concept of inequality, as we understand it, and apply it to the Journal’s publications over the past 40 years. This seems appropriate and feasible since the inaugural editorial asserted that the *AJSI* was broadly interested in “social problems as that term is usually understood.” Of interest to us, and hopefully to you, were the following two questions: What issues pertaining to social inequality were of most interest to the readers and editors of *AJSI*? How were these issues perceived and empirically understood?

Our analysis of journal contributions identifies various dimensions of social inequality, that is, factors affecting quality of life and human wellbeing, and their determinants or the bases of social inequality, namely factors that give rise to inequality. In addition, we highlight the structurally patterned nature of relationships among the dimensions and bases. This framework is then used to classify some 240 *AJSI* contributions, and we propose some reasons why certain dimensions and bases are more visible in the Journal than others. Before we begin, however, it is important to distinguish between the terms poverty and inequality, and define what we mean by social inequality.
Poverty

Inequality and poverty are often conflated in the minds of the general public, but also by service providers and scholars in the field. The term poverty carries a lot of emotional weight and should be used judiciously (Greenwell et al. 2001: 25), for any definition of poverty clearly reflects one’s “value judgements” (Saunders 2002b: 2). Much Australian research tends to use “poverty lines” that is, some proportion (usually one-half) of the average income (Greenwell et al. 2001: 19), with those below the poverty line being “in poverty”. Debate abounds about whether it is more accurate and/or appropriate to use the mean or the median income as the discriminator. However, like much in the area the debates and the choices being discussed appear to be driven by the individual’s normative position, more so than by their methodological arguments. Further muddying the waters is the distinction between absolute and relative poverty. Some authors, commentators and policy makers choose to equate absolute poverty with some sort of objective measurement of the phenomenon in question - as if that were possible - while others insist that the standard of living and the values of the community must be taken into consideration in determining what constitutes poverty, and therefore they believe that poverty should be understood in comparison with the living standards of the majority of the community (Saunders 2002a: 2,4).

The recent Australian Senate report on poverty and financial hardship, entitled A hand up not a hand out (Australian Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2004) helpfully published the definitions of poverty provided by many of the key stakeholders, including the government department responsible for families and community services, the peak body representing social service delivery agencies in Australia, several religious organisations and a couple of research institutions. All these definitions emphasise different but equally important aspects of social inequality and poverty. For instance, submissions from both the St Vincent de Paul Society and the Brotherhood of St Lawrence refer to a lack of “opportunity”, and while the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) focuses on the “material resources” lacked by disadvantaged people, Mission Australia and Uniting Care urge one not to forget the “social elements”. As Peter Saunders of the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) rightly pointed out to the Senate Committee, definitions of inequality usually “embody community perceptions” (Australian Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2004: 8), and it was indeed the differing normative views of poverty and inequality that recently led to the academic equivalent of fisticuffs.

In late 2001 the Smith Family released a report entitled Financial disadvantage in Australia 1990 to 2000 (Harding et al. 2001), prepared by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM). The report’s findings, that inequality in Australia had increased over the past decade, were bitterly criticised by scholars at the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS), mainly on the grounds that NATSEM researchers placed the poverty line at one half of the mean rather than the median income (Tsumori et al. 2002). Given the skewed nature of the income distribution curve, the mean income is always likely to
be higher than the median income and thus will result in a higher poverty rate (Saunders 2002a: 1). While CIS scholars were justified in challenging the methods chosen by the NATSEM researchers, the many technical errors and misinterpretations in their published rebuttal primarily served to highlight the ideological differences between the two research institutions (Saunders 2002b). The real sticking point in this scholastic brouhaha was the “rightness” of absolute poverty versus relative poverty. Whereas the notion of poverty is based on one’s normative judgement, the existence of social inequality per se is not a normative issue; rather it is a statement about the access certain groups have to desirable resources. Admittedly, our normative position comes into play when we consider the ways in which social disadvantage is structurally determined (Dwan & Western 2003).

Social inequality

Social inequality is the result of differential access to scarce and valued social resources by some individuals and groups, on the grounds of structural factors beyond their control (Dwan & Western 2003: 433). More important than social inequality per se is the way it is patterned. Therefore, we do not argue that social inequality can or should be eliminated, or that inequality in and of itself is necessarily a problem. Nor do we feel obliged to declare our preference for absolute or relative poverty, for as (Saunders 2002b) persuasively argues, absolute poverty as it is currently understood is an instance of relative poverty. Our approach is to focus on social inequality and to argue that we may speak of “unfairness” when people’s access to social resources is restricted by factors that lie beyond their control.

To assist empirical investigation of social inequality we further conceptualise it in terms of bases and dimensions. Factors which determine one’s access to scarce and valued resources, and thus give rise to inequality, are known as bases, and include class, gender, ethnicity, Aboriginality, lifecycle stage and space. Importantly, this is not an exhaustive list and the influence of the bases can change over time (Dwan & Western 2003). The desired resources or dimensions of social inequality include, among others, income, health and education. As the dimensions of social inequality affect quality of life and human wellbeing, it is easy to appreciate how the absence of even one of the listed dimensions can have negative consequences. Differential outcomes are structurally patterned, that is, they reflect the bases of social inequality, which by definition lie largely beyond an individual’s ability to change them; individuals, in this sense, cannot determine their life chances. No amount of pulling on one’s individual bootstraps can change the statistical likelihood that groups with particular characteristics will be prevented from enjoying the benefits more readily available to other social groups. Social inequality of this nature is, in the words of Gavin Turrell (2001), “morally reprehensible”. Our analysis considers what bases and dimensions of social inequality have been discussed by contributors to the AJSI over the last 40 years.
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Methods

All articles published in AJSI over the last 40 years (1961-2003), that tackled social inequality in some capacity, were identified and then classified according to the bases and/or dimensions of social inequality that they specifically addressed. In addition to the previously identified bases and dimensions, there existed a sizeable number of articles devoted to a topic that resisted classification. These articles tended to discuss the welfare provisions for disadvantaged groups, but they lacked specificity about either the causes or consequences. We classified these articles as "social welfare" and allocated them to either the bases or dimensions as appropriate. In order to identify the most common interactions between our two categories, we cross-tabulated the bases and dimensions, and grouped them according to the decade in which they were published.

Data analysis and discussion

The first issue of Volume 1 of the Australian Journal of Social Issues appeared in 1961. While the notion that articles would be arranged around a central theme or topic was soon abandoned, the social problems focus continued, albeit, as we will see, in a somewhat different form over the years. Over the period we are concerned with, from 1960 to 2002, the AJSI published 867 authored papers. Our research has indicated that 240 had a prominent social inequality theme, that is, 27 percent of the total number of articles appearing in the journal over 40 years dealt with social inequality in one form or another. There were marked differences over the four decades. Of the 97 articles that appeared between 1961 and 1970, only 8 percent, we concluded, had a significant social inequality component. The proportion had risen to 19 percent in the decade 1971-1980 when 263 articles were published, and to 32 percent in the next decade when 242 articles were published, and to a high of 41 percent in the last decade, 1991-2002 when 259 articles appeared. The details are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. The changing emphasis on inequality over the four decades of the AJSI's existence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Total Authored Articles (n=867)</th>
<th>Percent of articles with Inequality Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1961-1970</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971-1980</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981-1990</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991-2002</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clearly a concern about matters of social inequality has grown with the years. The bases of inequality that captured the interest of the authors were lifecycle stage and Aboriginality that, between them, accounted for almost 50 percent of all articles. Gender with 12 percent and ethnicity with 10 percent were two other bases of importance. The category, social welfare, accounted for around 14 percent. The consequences of inequality were a little more evenly spread: 18 percent of the articles dealt with issues of health, 15 percent with unemployment.
and poverty, and 14 percent with the legal system. Education was a concern in 10 percent of contributions, and social welfare in 15 percent. The specifics of these trends can be found in Table 2. It is clear that much inequality has its origins in Aboriginality and lifecycle stage, while class, gender and ethnicity are less significant. It is also clear that inequality is exhibited in health, in the likelihood of unemployment and poverty, in experiences with the legal system, and in education.

Table 2. The bases and dimensions of inequality (percentages) identified in articles (n=240) over the four decades of the AJSI’s existence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bases of Inequality</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Consequences of Inequality</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lifecycle stage</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginality</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Unemployment/Poverty</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Welfare</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Social Welfare</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Legal System</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Income/Wealth</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over forty years the welfare system has steadily changed. There is agreement in both the Australian and overseas literature that the old “welfare state” based on full employment of largely male breadwinners and the assumption of temporary welfare needs, in the main, no longer exists. Increasing participation of women in paid work, the casualisation of work, the decline in award rates of pay, the growth of enterprise bargaining agreements and the market assuming a prominence it had not previously seen have resulted in a change in “welfare regimes” (Cass & Smyth 1998, Castles & Mitchell 1993, Esping-Anderson et al. 2002, O’Connor et al. 1999). In addition the period has seen a sharp rise in unemployment followed by a somewhat more gradual fall, and inflation peaked and was brought under control. Was the changing socio-economic landscape reflected in AJSI contributions? If we look first at the prevalence of different structural bases of inequality, as these appear in articles over time, we see both change and consistency. While only a small proportion of articles in the issues of the AJSI in its first decade of publication, around 8 percent, had a focus on social inequality, those that did were concerned overwhelmingly with Aboriginal issues. Inequality was a more popular topic in the next decade and, of the 50 articles dealing with it, 28 percent had an Aboriginal focus and 20 percent concerned lifecycle stage and typically young people were the focus of attention. In the next decade, 1981-1990, lifecycle stage and Aboriginality were reversed: 29 percent of the inequality articles concerned lifecycle stage, and again these typically were concerned with young people and the disadvantaged position of certain groups.
of them, while 23 percent focused on Aboriginality and a further 14 percent on gender. In the final decade, 1991-2002, the picture was not very different. Twenty-five percent of the 105 articles concerned the lifecycle while a further 16 percent focused on Aboriginality. Gender and ethnicity as determinants of inequality were taken up by an additional 13 percent each.

The most common structural bases of inequality found in articles over the four decades are shown in Figure 1, and the most durable of these is clearly Aboriginality. The unequal status of indigenous Australians on any dimension of social inequality one chooses to nominate makes the problems facing this particular group in society highly visible. This visibility is, in effect, a measure of the magnitude or size of the problem, but visibility also refers to the importance it is accorded by society. On the latter measure the evidence is ambiguous. For while there is a parlous lack of survey research on public attitudes towards indigenous Australians, the little available demonstrates that over three quarters of Australians consider themselves to be ‘a little’ or ‘a lot’ prejudice against Australian Aborigines. Nevertheless, indigenous issues have certainly established considerable political traction over the last decade, helped in no small way by the High Court decisions on Wik and Mabo, and the shaming publications of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Johnstone 1991) and of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997). So rightly, articles concerning the unequal status of indigenous Australians have been a major pre-occupation of the AJSI, although they were joined in later years by articles identifying other causes of inequality. Lifecycle stage, with a focus on youth, has been prominent, but interestingly, gender, ethnicity and class have not attracted the attention of contributors to the same degree.

There may be several reasons for this state of affairs. Interest in lifecycle stage is perhaps not surprising. Writing back in 1983 one of us claimed that “the young and the old are the two major economically dependent groups in Australian society” (Western 1983: 337). The disproportionate number of unemployed young people was also noted, as was the emerging issue of child abuse and homelessness. Suicide as a major cause of death also distinguished the young (Western 1983, Chapter 6). Reviewing many of the same issues at the turn of the century, Gary Easthope (2000) pointed again to the disproportionate number of young unemployed and to findings from the Select Committee on Youth Affairs in Western Australia “which link high risk sexual behaviour, drug and alcohol abuse, the marginalisation of Aboriginal youth and the deterioration of health among the disadvantaged” (Easthope 2000: 326). Homelessness among young people is still an issue of concern. The Burdekin Report (1989) estimated that there were around 50 to 70 thousand homeless youth. Easthope suggests that the homeless were characterised in the media as “street kids who were liable to drift into crime, drug and alcohol use, sexual promiscuity and prostitution” (Easthope 2000: 341). Youth it seems have continued to attract both academic and general public interest.
The concentration in the *AJSI* on the bases of Aboriginality and lifecycle stage is perhaps then of little surprise. We would suggest that it comes at least in part from its strong practitioner focus where policy matters are of central concern. Since its inception, it has been an ACOSS initiative; its editors and authors have come predominantly from social work and the human services professions. In contrast, social class has been written about extensively by Australian social scientists, and importantly, from a conceptual orientation. In 1970, for example, Sol Encel provided a neo-Weberian account in *Equality and Authority: A Study of Class, Status and Power in Australia* (1970). In 1980, from a neo-Marxist position, Bob Connell and Terry Irving provided *Class Structure in Australian History* (1980). A little more recently, Baxter, Emmison, Western and Western (1991) provided again a neo-Marxist account in *Class Analysis in Contemporary Australia*. While Connell and Irving (1980) see class very much as a lived experience, as argued for by E.P. Thompson (1968) in *The Making of the English Working Class*, Baxter *et al.* (1991) adopt a more structured and analytic approach derived at least in part from the work of Erik Olin Wright (Wright 1985). Finally, from a status attainment framework, there was the work of Leonard Broome and Frank Jones in Canberra (Broom & Jones 1976, Broom *et al.* 1980). Clearly there is no lack of conceptual work in the field of class analysis in Australia.

It appears that the link between the concept of class and its applicability to social inequality has not been made as strongly as it empirically proves to be. This is particularly interesting, for the 1993 National Social Science Survey (NSSS) demonstrated that Australians clearly perceive the existence of class divisions, if
only between the middle (55.7 percent) and the working (37.7 percent) classes. Additionally, over 55 percent believe that "inequality continues to exist because it benefits the rich and powerful". Nevertheless, the Australian public supports the view, shared by conservative commentators and the current Australian Government, that ambition (96 percent), hard work (95.6 percent), education (94.2 percent) and natural ability (94.2 percent) are important "in getting ahead". Education is the only structural factor in this list, despite considerable evidence that one's educational opportunities are closely associated with the class location of one's parents (Dwan & Western 2003: 447), and also to a smooth transition from school to full-time work or higher education (Lamb & McKenzie 2001). Thus class is less visible in its operation than either the lifecycle stage or Aboriginality. The difficulty of determining class, in comparison with Aboriginality, gender or ethnicity has been discussed elsewhere by two of the authors (Dwan & Western 2003: 435). This difficulty may account, at least in part, for class failing to appear thematically in AJSI articles devoted to social inequality. Ethnicity and gender appear to have also suffered a similar fate.

Gender and ethnicity appear to have low visibility, despite considerable evidence that these structural bases influence one's income. We can only speculate that the inequality experienced by these groups did not register strongly with AJSI contributors or was not considered sufficiently important to publish. Data from the 1960s and 1970s indicate that women's participation in higher education was far lower than that of men (Western 1983: 143-148), as was the percentage of immigrant Australians in management relative to English-speaking migrants or white Australian-born men (Western 1983: 248-256). Nevertheless, these issues weren't addressed extensively by AJSI contributors. Fortunately, the recent decade has seen a considerable improvement in both bases; however, women still continue to be paid less than men in equivalent positions (Borland 1999, Gregory 1999, Wooden 1999), and non-English speaking migrants are routinely found in positions for which they are vastly over qualified (Borooah & Mangan 2002).

Notwithstanding, the inequality associated with one's class, gender and ethnicity, in all cases the disadvantage incurred as a result of being born into an Aboriginal family and/or when passing through adolescence, dwarfs the other bases in terms of magnitude. The issue is a complex one and clearly what gets addressed in a journal by contributors is determined by a number of factors. The existing social landscape and the issues it throws up are clearly important. What attracts contributors is of significance while the editorial policy of the journal also plays a role. The earliest policy proposed a thematic approach but this was soon discarded, presumably, at least in part, because of the difficulty of attracting sufficient contributions around particular themes. Very probably, in a practitioner-oriented publication for which issues of social welfare were central, what the AJSI published at any one time would have been a reflection of the issues preoccupying those practitioners.

We now come at the question from the other end, as it were, and ask what consequences or dimensions of inequality have preoccupied our contributors?
Here, after the first decade, we see greater variability. The data are summarised in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The consequences of social inequality over four decades

It will be recalled that of the small number of articles in the first decade of the AJSI dealing with social inequality 75 percent focused on educational disadvantage. Among them Aborigines’ educational disadvantage was a prominent theme. In the second decade, health, social welfare, crime, education, and unemployment and poverty were the major matters discussed. Health was noticeable in nearly one-quarter of the articles (24 percent), social welfare in one-fifth and crime, unemployment and education in between 12 and 15 percent. In the third decade, health was still at the top of the list, a concern of 19 percent, but it had been joined by matters relating to law and the legal system. Papers picking up issues relating to law typically focused on difficulties that certain groups had in confronting the legal system. Social welfare and unemployment were also important issues (13 percent for social welfare and 10 percent for unemployment) but not as important as they had been in the previous decade. Unemployment and poverty remained important in the final decade, with 20 percent of articles dealing with these issues. Matters relating to law and the legal system (15 percent) also attracted attention, as did social welfare (15 percent) and health (13 percent). Notably, issues concerning income differentials and educational disadvantage, with the exception of the first decade, were not of major concern to our authors. There is little comment on housing differentials and, while crime occupied attention in the second decade, it did not figure largely in either the third or the fourth. Some issues attracted attention but clearly others did not.
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Just as the structural bases of inequality gender, ethnicity and class, were of little interest to the contributors to the AJSI, so too were some of the consequences of inequality overlooked. It seems to us that the consequences discussed by AJSI authors reflected issues that could be observed in the social landscape at the time. We suspect that the AJSI's uneven coverage of the consequences of inequality reflects the interests of contributors, the policies of the editorial collective and the demands of the readership, though we have no data on any of these factors. However, social welfare, unemployment, poverty and health were issues of central concern during the period we are examining.

We have put together the bases of social inequality and the identified consequences that follow from them in Figure 3. We have included those instances where four or more articles appeared in the decade because there was a noticeable break in the distribution at this point. Aboriginality as a structural basis appeared in each decade, and it is notably the only structural basis that does. Lifecycle appeared in three of the decades. Typically here the focus was on young people but several of the articles deal with ageing. Gender appears in the last two decades. As discussed by Johns and Sanders elsewhere in this issue, the AJSI's attention to Aborigines focused on their education, particularly in the AJSI's first decade, and on health, crime and the legal system. The papers on Aborigines' education were largely about primary and secondary schooling and the marked differences at that time in retention rates. Even by the low standards compared with today's retention rates, the retention rates then were distressingly low (Western 1983). Articles on education looked extensively at the disadvantaged position of Aboriginal young people in the educational system. The articles on crime focused on the disproportionate representation of Aborigines in the criminal justice system and the conspicuous presence of misdemeanours and crimes against public order. Aboriginal health issues cited the marked differences in life expectancy between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, the higher mortality rates among indigenous Australians and morbidity differentials, including the issue of alcoholism.

The issue of unemployment as a function of lifecycle stage was of concern to authors in the second and final decades. Here the focus was characteristically on youth unemployment. A homeless person is particularly likely to be unemployed, and this problem was taken up in the final decade of the AJSI, also with a focus on young people. Where health is a concern, it was typically the problems confronting an ageing population. Gender was seen as being linked to unemployment in articles in the third and fourth decades, and it is interesting to note that articles addressing gender were not particularly prominent during the more politically radical 1970s. The issues raised here have to do with women and unemployment, not infrequently problems confronting single mothers. In all but the first decade there were overarching concerns, we classified as "social welfare", that were both a cause and effect. As discussed earlier, these articles dealt with social welfare recipients, a structural basis of inequality, and the problems confronting recipients, the dimensions of inequality, frequently in fairly general terms.
In summing up these trends we see that there was both an increasing concern with issues of social inequality and a narrowing of focus. Aboriginality and the lifecycle occupied centre stage. Social class was not considered in any detail, nor was ethnicity, and gender did not get as much attention as we expected. Is the implication of this situation that class, ethnicity and gender are of less importance as sources of inequality than was perhaps once thought? In a recent publication two of us (Dwan and Western 2003) examined changes in social inequality over the period from the early 1980s up to around 2002. We found that class was still a significant base for inequality, that gender differences were smaller than they had been previously, that Aboriginality still significantly affected an individual’s life chances, and that ethnicity, as a cause of social inequality, was not as pronounced in 2000 as it had been in the early 1980s. To some extent what is found in the *AJSI* is a reflection of this reality, but not entirely. Class, as we have argued is still pervasive in its effects although for reasons already discussed it has not found its way into the Journal very frequently. It is also noteworthy that space, in the sense of urban-rural differences and the significantly disadvantaged position of rural communities, has not attracted a great deal of attention. In contrast, the issue of social welfare, while not in the majority, was a theme taken up by a number of the contributors to the *AJSI* in each of the last three decades.
Conclusion

In summary, it is clear that issues of social inequality have become increasingly more prominent over the four decades of the AJSI's existence. Inequality, for the AJSI, importantly has its origins in Aboriginality and lifecycle position, and finds expression in the areas of health, homelessness, crime, unemployment and access to the legal system. We have argued that the focus upon Aboriginality and lifecycle stage is associated with visibility; in this context the term refers both to the magnitude of the problem and its importance as perceived by politicians and the general public. This understanding of social inequality, and the relative visibility of its bases and dimensions, may help explain public debate, opinion polling and voting preferences of the Australian people at the recent federal election.

Sound economic management proved to be an important voter issue in the last Australian federal election, possibly because a good national economy is expected to deliver its largesse across the community. Indeed the data indicate that those in the bottom quintile are better off now than they were a decade ago, despite the increasing gap between those in the highest quintile and those in the middle and lower quintiles. Where the evidence does not support the folk wisdom of the Australian public is in its belief that “getting ahead” relies more upon ambition, hard work and natural ability, than one's class location, gender, ethnicity, Aboriginality or lifecycle stage. Perceptions of income are also subject to bias, and a comparison of perceived and actual income distributional rankings based on CESC survey and ABS income survey data for 1996-97 indicates that it is primarily in the top 40 percent of the distribution that people have the least accurate idea of their true economic position (Saunders 2002a: 204-205). This stands in stark contrast to the view promulgated by the Centre for Independent Studies, which claims that “much (probably most) of this unreported income accrues to the people who end up at the lower end of the income distribution in social surveys,” namely the self-employed and those reliant of government benefits (Tsumori et al. 2002). Perhaps a greater focus upon other bases of social inequality, that is, increasing their visibility, might improve the accuracy of a range of misperceptions.

As for the dimensions of social inequality, it is clear that some like health and education resonate more strongly with the Australian public than others. Using data from the Australian Election Study between 1987 and 2001, Wilson and Breusch (2003) claim to have demonstrated that Australians have consistently supported a shift away from low taxes and towards higher spending on social services over a score of years. In contrast, an earlier piece of work conducted by the Economic Planning Advisory Commission in Canberra asserts just the opposite (Withers et al. 1994). In deciding who to believe, it may be worth bearing in mind that “when research becomes too closely aligned with policy, there is a danger that it will be used to justify actions already taken, rather than contributing to knowledge about the design and delivery of new policies and programs” (Saunders 2002a: 13). Returning to the, perhaps counter intuitive, view that spending on social services is more important than the lowering of
taxes, it is important to note that the data only supports this trend when "social services" explicitly refers to popular broad-based items like health services and old age pensions (Grant 2004). Wilson and Breusch (2003, 2004) argue that this view is largely in response to public dissatisfaction with Medicare and public education. Visibility in terms of public importance certainly appears to be playing a role here.

In the main our analysis shows that the study of social inequality, at least in the AJSI, has been preoccupied with variables that are visible, that is, of considerable magnitude and social importance. To date, this has meant that studies of Aboriginality and lifecycle stage have been prominent within AJSI's consideration of the bases of inequality, and that health, unemployment/poverty and education have been prominent among the studied dimensions on inequality. However, just as the bases of social inequality may change, so too may social interest in bases and dimensions may change. Perhaps the political attention now being given to the hardship facing those living in rural and regional Australia (e.g. those not based in a pleasant spot on the eastern seaboard), will prompt articles in AJSI on spatial variables associated with income, education and health?

Acknowledgement
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Technical Appendix

This paper identifies the dominant themes of social inequality in Australia as seen by the contributors to Australian Journal of Social Issues (AJSI) since its inception. To determine what these themes have been, we identified the bases (independent variables) and dimensions (dependent variables) of social inequality. Initially, the bases comprised class, gender, Aboriginality, ethnicity, lifecycle stage and space, whilst the dimensions comprised health, income/wealth, homelessness, poverty, legal rights, occupation, leisure, social security and crime. Given the orientation of the AJSI we argue that our classification provides a sound basis for identifying and understanding the key themes in Australian social inequality over the past four decades. In reviewing this literature, attention was given only to AJSI articles that addressed some aspect of social inequality. The themes emerging from our analysis were compared over the period from 1961 when the first edition of the AJSI was published, to 2002.

To identify articles that were immediately relevant for our task, we interrogated the complete listing of the AJSI abstracts provided in the form of an Endnote library. The resultant keyword searches included articles not only with bases and dimensions as major themes, but also as sub-themes. In short, the articles did not always deal with only one issue. In instances where the abstracts were not provided in the Endnote library, we used the Sociofile database to search for them. If the abstracts were not available by Sociofile either, we did a manual search at the library for the abstracts.
In an attempt to investigate the interaction between the "bases and dimensions," or put differently, the themes and sub-themes within articles, we cross-tabulated the bases of inequality, six in number, with the dimensions or areas where inequality appeared, and we emerged with a 48-cell matrix. It became clear, after we had begun classifying articles in this way that while the matrix was proving to be a useful device; certain articles, which clearly had an inequality focus, were difficult to locate within the framework. We addressed this problem by introducing a further category in both the columns and rows of the matrix. We called this "social welfare". A number of papers consisted of general discussions of welfare provision for disadvantaged groups. While clearly concerned with matters of inequality, these lacked specificity about either causes or consequences. Social welfare could be classified as a structural base in instances where the paper's focus is on welfare recipients and their disadvantaged position with respect to housing or health maintenance, for example. Alternatively, social welfare could be classified as a consequence of social inequality, for example in the situation of Aboriginal groups requiring welfare support because of their disadvantaged situation. And finally, social welfare could be classified both as a cause and a consequence. In this instance, non-specific disadvantaged groups could be reported as in need of welfare provision. A number of articles fell into one of the above three categories, although, in most of the decades, the majority of articles (>70 percent) focused on one or other of the structural bases and identified consequences.

Once we had the matrix set up, it became a seven-category by nine-category matrix of 63 cells, and we had to decide whether we would classify the relevant articles on a year-by-year basis or collapse the years into decades or five-year periods or, ambitiously perhaps, examine the situation over the "reigns" of the various governments: the Fraser years, the Hawke ascendancy, Keating's moment of fame or the Howard mendacity. While it might have been interesting to adopt the latter strategy, the problem of time lag between the occurrence of events and their capture in a journal article would have made it difficult to establish a correlation. We felt that examining the situation year by year would be too cumbersome and the unit of analysis too small to be meaningful, so we chose instead to look at ten-year periods from 1961 to 1970, from 1971 to 1980, from 1981 to 1990 and from 1991 to 2002.

References


Elliot J. (1991) *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*, AGPS.


Footnotes


2 Notions of space situate analysis within the political, social, economic and geographic environments of the subject.


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