




Public narratives of disadvantage across multiple groups in Australia: A research map and practice reflections

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Funding information

Paul Ramsay Foundation, Grant/Award Number: 5012

Abstract

This paper provides the first known “heatmap” representing Australian public narratives across a range of groups experiencing disadvantage developed from a comprehensive literature review of primary Australian studies between 2020 and 2021. Eleven narratives were identified across 14 population groups with the most frequent being *deficit narratives*, *misrepresentation of the issue* and *‘absent’ narratives* (group being described not represented in the narrative). The most frequently described groups were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people living with a disability, racial minorities and women. The heatmap resonated with three global review-level studies and findings of supplementary qualitative interviews. Examination of relationships between the heatmap and empirical

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Australian disadvantage data enabled identification of missing and misleading public narratives. Attempts to disrupt such narratives can improve the understanding of disadvantage by more truthfully reflecting the lives, experiences and challenges of groups experiencing disadvantage. Updates to the heatmap can enable analysis of the impact of disruption strategies.

KEYWORDS

disadvantage, heatmap, media narratives, review

1 | INTRODUCTION

All people can experience disadvantage in life. “Disadvantage” is a multidimensional phenomenon. It can be described temporally (e.g., as transient, persistent or generational); in terms of contributing factors (e.g., poverty, deprivation, capabilities, level of social inclusion and access to opportunities); and with respect to specific areas in which disadvantage manifests (e.g., socioeconomic, educational, racial and gender-based); (Bessell, 2021; Cobb-Clark et al., 2017; McLachlan et al., 2013; Norris et al., 2008; Victorian Council of Social Services, 2014). Beyond individuals, disadvantage is also conceptualised in relation to families, communities and places as in the *Dropping off the Edge 2021* report (Tanton et al., 2021).

Markers of disadvantage are not necessarily linear “cause-effect” indicators for future outcomes. Some outcomes of disadvantage can be precursors to others, for example, poverty leading to homelessness. Others are intersectional, having compounding and persistent effects. For example, the Australian Productivity Commission (PC) report on “deep and persistent” disadvantage in Australia stated that “disadvantage is about ‘impoverished lives’” (including a lack of opportunities), not just low income (McLachlan et al., 2013). Non-monetary aspects of advantage and disadvantage, including social exclusion, include human capability and opportunity, the strength of community networks and civic engagement. The linking of these aspects to problems such as unemployment, poor housing, crime, bad health and family dysfunction is critical to better understand the causes of and solutions to entrenched disadvantage (Saunders et al., 2008). The overlap of different types of disadvantage can reinforce barriers to overcoming it (Thomas et al., 2019; Victorian Council of Social Services, 2014). Disadvantage can also be an isolated and transient experience, such as losing one's house in a fire. Understanding the multifaceted nature of disadvantage is an important precursor to meaningful policy and practice action, as reflected by the development of multidimensional, dynamic measurement approaches (McLachlan et al., 2013).

Given the relationship between social exclusion and disadvantage, it is equally important to consider the way disadvantage is portrayed and understood by the general community. In this paper, we argue that community understanding of disadvantage can be influenced by mass media narratives (Gandy, 2009; Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021; Popović, 2018; Rees et al., 2019). “Narratives” are broadly defined as “*rhetoric that either explicitly tells a story or that clearly implies a story*” (Rowland, 1987; p. 273). Narratives presented by newspapers, television news current affairs or fictional programmes, or on social media can shape public perceptions and attitudes toward certain groups and communities (Weng & Mansouri, 2021).

Perceptions of disadvantage can translate into negative actions taken toward those groups and communities. For example, negative media depictions of young “African crime gangs” between 2016 and 2018 in the Australian state of Victoria led to the media dubbing Victoria “a

state of fear” (Benier et al., 2020; Wahlquist, 2018). However, police said crime from African “street gangs” was ongoing but not growing, and that characterising these groups as “gangs” might be overstated (Wahlquist, 2018). A consequence of this misreporting was an increase in reported racism and institutionalised forms of discrimination toward people of African appearance in Melbourne (Benier et al., 2020).

Exposure to narratives can also impact how people experiencing disadvantage view themselves. For example, a recent study reported negative self-views of children from low socioeconomic status backgrounds driven in part by cultural values, which undermine academic achievement, reinforcing inequality (Brummelman & Sedikides, 2023). Narratives can also be harnessed as a rationale for policy and/or practice actions (Cripps, 2021). In Australia in recent years, narratives have encompassed global issues such as the “Black Lives Matter” and “Me Too” movements as well as country-level challenges such as closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in areas including life expectancy, education and employment (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019). The *Dropping off the Edge 2021* report found that many locations identified in previous reports remain disadvantaged, based particularly on over-representation in the indicators of prison admissions, juvenile convictions, long-term unemployment, public housing and households with no parent in paid work (Tanton et al., 2021).

As disadvantage remains an ongoing challenge in Australia (Fischer & Davis, 2023; Mendes & Roche, 2023), examining Australian public disadvantage narratives is important to aid in understanding how they shape perceptions, shift negative or inaccurate perceptions, and spark action to address disadvantage.

This evidence and practice review:

- identifies narratives about disadvantage that have been presented or implied in Australian public-facing documents and media (e.g., mainstream newspapers, radio and free-to-air television) and described in peer-reviewed literature and represents them on a heatmap;
- gathers perspectives on disadvantage narratives from people with deep experience and/or expertise in this field; and
- explores how these perspectives resonate with the heatmap.

2 | METHODS

Methods were informed by an expert programme-level steering group comprising the authorship team and expert academics and practitioners who supplemented existing expertise within the team with domain expertise in data sciences, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and education, and the health charity sector. This group advised a broad definition of “disadvantage” (encompassing “advantage”) and a focus on any identified shifts in narrative over time.

2.1 | Evidence heatmap

The Australian narratives of disadvantage heatmap were created based on established techniques of research evidence mapping, which focus on high-level descriptions of a broad field of literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) through visual representation (Bragge et al., 2011; Katz et al., 2003). The heatmap employed best review practice (Page et al., 2021):

- *An explicit review question* was co-designed with input from the programme steering group: *What narratives about disadvantage have been presented in public-facing documents and described in research?*

- A *comprehensive search strategy* was developed using articles identified by the expert group, scoping searches, specialist university-based librarian advice and mapping of the 62 initially identified terms from the first stage into the FastText English word embedding space (300 dimension) to obtain the 10 semantically closest terms by cosine similarity (Mikolov et al., 2018). The final search strategy used in the Scopus database comprised 60+ terms pertaining to disadvantage/advantage and 11 media terms. Consistent with the advice of the steering group, the search strategy contained “disadvantage” terms (e.g., “poverty”) and neutral “advantage” terms (e.g., “social capital”, “equality” and “gender-based”). The Google Scholar database was also searched (search strategies available from the lead author upon request).
- *Study Selection*: Citations and full-text studies were screened against *predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria* (available from the lead author upon request) by two independent reviewers (AL and PB) with disagreements resolved through consensus discussion. For review purposes, “disadvantage” was defined as “*The experience of discrimination, lack of resources/opportunities, low social or financial capital, exclusion, marginalisation, inequality and other barriers to a fulfilling life.*” Two types of literature were sought—(i) review-level studies published from 2018 and (ii) primary studies from 2020. The rationale for a limited year range was that primary studies cover a large year-range of source materials in describing a narrative.
- *Data analysis and extraction*: The following data were extracted from reviews by two reviewers (PB and AL)—citation, disadvantage focus, number of included studies, search date, review question and key findings. For primary studies, we extracted data on citation, disadvantage focus, narrator (the person or group producing the analysed narrative), sources, intended audience for the narrative, narrative analysis method and key findings.
- *Quality appraisal*: Quality of included systematic reviews was appraised by one reviewer using the AMSTAR 2 tool, a validated quality appraisal tool for this purpose (Shea et al., 2017).

To build the heatmap, narrative categories (rows) and groups described using the narrative (columns) were named, defined and iterated based on how they were reported in the included studies. Dividing the individual studies in each narrative-group cell by the total number of primary studies included in the review (32) and shading the cells accordingly created the “heatmap”—that is, darker cells represented greater relative density of each cell relative to each other cell. Rows and columns were sorted such that higher density cells were grouped toward the top left and lower density toward the bottom right of the heatmap.

2.2 | Practice review methods

The heatmap was supplemented with qualitative interviews with 10 participants purposively sampled through the steering group and author team (Coyne, 1997) with a focus on identifying established leaders in disadvantage research and/or practice. Ethics approval was obtained from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee (ref: 27567). Interviewees came from a range of universities, NGOs and social service providers, including Smith Family Foundation, Bapcare, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Anglicare, University of Melbourne, Griffith University, UNSW, FrameWorks and Purpose.

Combining reviews with an examination of “what's happening on the ground” provides insights into real-world experience of the reviewed topic, enabling knowledge from studies identified in desktop searching to be filtered through specific problem-solving settings and contexts. In this context, the qualitative interviews are designed to enable exploration of the intersection between academic knowledge and real-world practice rather than as a stand-alone, comprehensive qualitative exploration. We have published this evidence and practice review

approach across numerous review topics and domains (Borg et al., 2019; Kunstler et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2020).

Interviews were semi-structured to explore emerging themes and salient issues (Spencer et al., 2003); ranged from 55 to 90 min; were conducted by one researcher (AW) between April and May 2021; and were digitally audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, anonymised and stored securely.

The interviews were designed to elicit perceptions about Australian media disadvantage narratives; specific examples known to the participant; and beliefs about how media and politicians should talk about disadvantage/disadvantaged groups. Transcripts were coded and analysed thematically (Boyatzis, 1998) using NVivo10 (QSR International Pty Ltd 2014).

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Evidence review and heatmap

3.1.1 | Search and selection (Figure 1)

The Scopus search identified 3050 citations, including 1549, from the year 2020 onwards. Following review of 211 full-text articles from 2020 onwards and free text searching of 1603 citations for reviews from the years 2018-19, three reviews and 32 Australian studies met eligibility criteria. This included two reviews from the 2018-19 search and two primary studies published prior to 2020 from the Google search (was not limited by year but sorted by relevance).

3.1.2 | Review studies (File S1)

- Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021) reviewed 104 studies of narratives focussing on racism, hate speech and social media (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). They found that the United States and Twitter were over-represented compared with other countries and platforms; analysis focussed on written text over images; there was a lack of Indigenous perspectives; and there was little evidence of use of critical race perspectives and intersectionality.
- Rees et al.'s review of 24 studies of media portrayal of elite athletes with disability reported less visibility of elite athletes with disability compared with their non-disabled counterparts; media coverage favoured male athletes with certain types of disability; and descriptions of disabled athletes were largely medicalised or underpinned by a “supercrip” (superhuman) narrative (Rees et al., 2019).
- Popović (2018) reviewed 24 analyses of child sexual abuse news, finding that most news was case-based and focussed on criminal justice details; child sexual abuse was more frequently reported than adult sexual abuse; and framing and newsworthy theories were most commonly used in analysis (Popović, 2018).

Two of the three reviews (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021; Popović, 2018) were of poor methodological quality, fulfilling less than half of applicable quality criteria in the AMSTAR 2 quality appraisal tool (Shea et al., 2017); the remaining review (Rees et al., 2019) was of good quality. Strengths of the reviews included clear statements of review research questions, description of included study designs and quality appraisal; shortcomings of reviews included lack of dual study selection/data extraction and lack of description of the review protocol. Based on these findings, care needs to be taken in interpretation of the review findings.

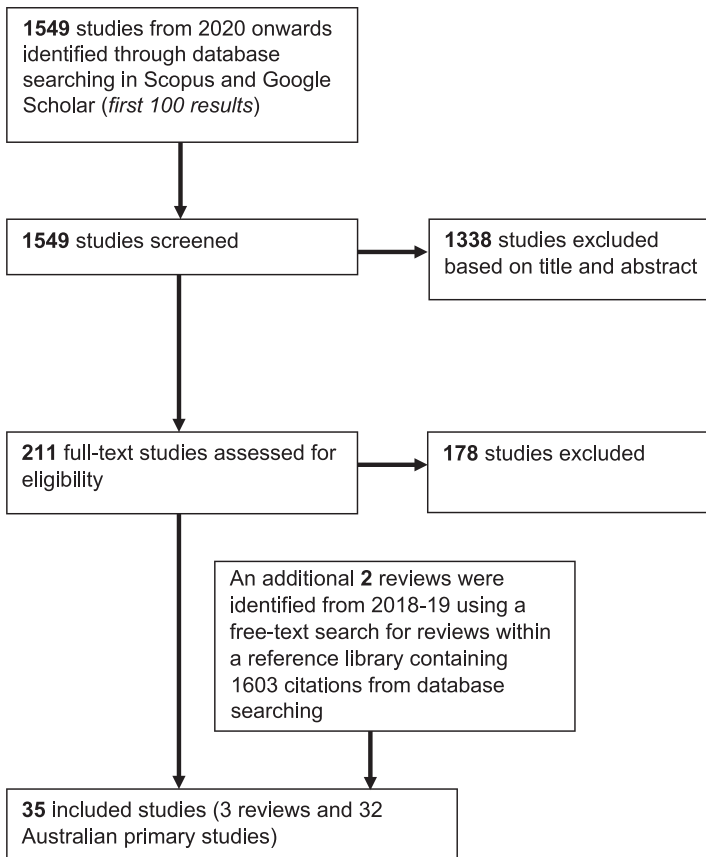


FIGURE 1 Study selection summary.

3.1.3 | Primary studies (File S2)

Narratives produced by journalists were by far the most frequently studied (19 studies and 15 print newspaper). All but four of the analysed narratives were directed to a non-specified general public audience. Specifically, the three reviews explored mass media and social media narratives, and the primary studies focussed on content designed for a general public audience including radio from Australia's government-funded national broadcaster (Waller et al., 2020), mainstream newspaper and broadcast media (Weng & Mansouri, 2021), online news (Uibu, 2020) and free-to-air television (Monaghan, 2020).

Twenty-six of the 32 studies specified their analysis method, with the most frequently reported approaches being unspecified content analysis (seven studies) and Critical Discourse Analysis (5). There was considerable variation in the time periods over which narratives were analysed, ranging from ranges of one—several weeks to over 20 years, including one study analysing narratives spanning a 68-year period.

3.1.4 | Heatmap of primary studies (Table 1)

The heatmap is presented in Table 1.

Definition of narrative categories:

TABLE 1 Heatmap of narratives by group.

Type of narrative (n of articles) / Group (n or articles)	Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders (8)	Disabled / Chronic health condition (8)	Racial minorities (6)	Women (6)	Homeless people (5)	Young people (5)	Students (4)	Working class (4)	Elderly (3)	Asylum seekers / Migrants & refugees (2)	LGBTIQ+ (2)	People living in poverty (2)	People in regional and remote areas (2)	People living in prison (1)
Deficit (10)	28%	13%	3%	6%	6%		13%	3%	3%			3%	9%	
Misrepresentation (issue) (10)	13%	9%	6%	13%	9%	3%	3%		3%			6%		3%
Absent (7)	9%	3%		13%	3%	3%		3%		3%				
Persisting dominant narrative (6)	6%	6%	3%	13%				3%						
Shift (6)	6%	6%	3%	3%		3%					3%			
Awareness – raising (5)	6%	3%		3%	3%						6%			
Cultural framing (4)	19%						9%						13%	
Labelling (4)	3%	3%						3%	3%					
Empty rhetoric (2)							3%			3%				
Misrepresentation (solution) (2)					6%									
Outsider (1)			6%											

Note: The rows are narrative categories identified as defined below; the columns are the groups referred to in the narratives; shaded cells indicate that at least one primary study identified a narrative for the corresponding group; density of shading reflects the intensity of the narrative, calculated by dividing the number of individual studies in each cell by the total number of primary studies included in the review (32) to generate a percentage. The rows and columns were sorted to place higher density cells toward the top left of the heatmap, and lower density cells toward the bottom right.

- **Deficit:** Descriptions of a group focussed on negative characteristics and/or tropes associated with the group. Example: educational attainment in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- **Misrepresentation (issue):** Description of the group, which exaggerates and/or omits key group characteristics. Examples: descriptions of the elderly people's focus on illness rather than health.
- **Absent:** The group being described is not represented in the narrative. Example: disabled children/children in out-of-home care
- **Persistence of a dominant narrative:** The narrative focusses on previously dominant ideas that have been superseded. Example: mentally ill characters on TV portrayed as “crazy and dangerous.”
- **Shift:** Changes in a narrative to a more normative or realistic focus over time. Example: more Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual people appearing as regular characters in TV (1970–2000)
- **Awareness—raising:** Narratives directed at increasing awareness of a particular issue or group. Example: homelessness.
- **Cultural framing:** Descriptions of the phenomenon do not account for and/or are inconsistent with the groups' views/ beliefs regarding the phenomenon. Example: Educational disadvantage in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is based on neoliberal notions of the “good life.”
- **Labelling:** People are identified in relation to one characteristic. Example: “diabetic” rather than “[person] with diabetes.”
- **Empty rhetoric:** Statements do not match actions. Example: universities market universal access to higher education but have not kept pace with the expanding definition of equity—for example key groups such as asylum seekers are rarely mentioned.

- **Misrepresentation (solution):** A solution is built on a misrepresented problem. Example: Homeless people were portrayed as a problem due to the aesthetic violation of displaying their belongings in a public setting, thereby characterising homelessness as a law enforcement issue.
- **Outsider:** Highlighting difference rather than commonality. Example: by highlighting his Tongan ethnicity, Israel Folau was portrayed as an “outsider,” in contrast to the largely Anglo-Celtic population of people playing Australian Rules football

Eleven narratives were identified across 14 population groups. The most frequent narratives were as follows:

- *Deficit narratives* focussing on negative group characteristics and/or tropes (10 of the 14 groups);
- *Misrepresentation of the issue*, in which description exaggerated and/or omitted key group characteristics (10/14); and
- *“Absent” narratives*, in which the group being described was not represented in the narrative (7/14).

Narratives pertaining to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (eight narratives), people living with a disability (8), racial minorities (6) and women (6) were more frequently identified than those describing people living in poverty (2), people in regional/remote areas (2), people identifying as LGBTQI (2) and people living in prison (1). Negative narratives—for example, those emphasising deficits at a group level or misrepresenting group characteristics—were more frequently identified than positive narratives such as those raising awareness of an issue or repositioning a negative narrative in more realistic or positive terms (“shift”).

The narratives described in the primary studies reflected those identified in the three reviews, specifically with respect to lack of Indigenous perspectives in analysis of racism and hate speech (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021); under-representation of disabled vs non-disabled people in coverage of elite athletes (Rees et al., 2019); and sensationalism in reporting of violence (Popović, 2018).

3.2 | Practice review

The reflections of practitioners and experts provided insights into how public narratives of disadvantage matter (both to people who are disadvantaged and to policymakers); what narratives are pervasive, reflected by a tendency to fragment the intersectional concept of disadvantage into separate groups; key changes in narratives of disadvantage; and some of the ways that new media are enabling channels for groups experiencing disadvantage groups and others to “speak back” to mainstream public narratives through curation, amplification or contest. Below are quotes reflecting these themes:

3.2.1 | Tendency to break down disadvantage

... refugees, immigrants, sole parents, young people, renters ... are all groups that we know, from the data, are at the bottom of the hierarchy ... focusing on separate groups ... may keep us from asking those broader questions about what a fair society looks like.

(R4)

3.2.2 | Shifts in narratives

If we'd been doing this interview 20 years ago, we wouldn't have used the word disadvantage. We would have talked about poverty ... In political circles, the word poverty is never mentioned by those people who are forced to confront it. And I think that's a pity, because despite all of the problems with poverty research, I think it does have something to contribute in a specific way that some of the other approaches can't do.

(R1)

Since COVID 19, there has been a greater appetite in the media for structural explanations ... It has really shed a light on the reality that unemployment or precarious financial situation is something we could all be exposed to.

(R9)

Well, I think social inclusion has been important ... and it provides a more positive framing than 'social disadvantage' which politicians like.

(R7)

3.2.3 | New media "speaking back" to narratives

... it's actually more social media and those groups on Facebook that have the biggest impact, in terms of narratives ... People create support groups that are worldwide ... And then from there, I guess, I found the best, most helpful media, because it is people with shared lived experience, and they can run it by other people in the same community.

(R6)

As we have had more people start to raise their voices, because they found these groups of support, often online ... The people we work with, a lot of times they point to these communities as places to find resources, and stories ... it's where they are sharing, I mean, just day to day struggles of living, say, with disability. But then that empowers people, I think, to start speaking out.

(R2)

I think that's a really important point, that often those groups are set up to share the experiences that are missing to normalise that, and to have that sense of belonging and feel represented. So there's a lot of putting your own stories out there in groups like that, and then sharing them among one another to fill the absence of those experiences.

(R8)

3.3 | Examination of the intersection between evidence and practice

The interviews reinforce the premise that public narratives matter to the groups that they refer to both in terms of their potential to create damaging public perceptions of groups in society (Weng & Mansouri, 2021) and in terms of their effect on how groups view themselves (Cripps, 2021). The heatmap shows dominance of deficit narratives, misrepresentation or

absence of groups from narratives and associated lack of cultural nuance. This suggests a net negative effect of public narratives across multiple groups and issues. Understanding this requires attention to a larger issue highlighted in the practice interviews and reflected by the published research—the lack of attention to intersectionality, which brings artificial focus onto specific groups and issues rather than the complex interplay of factors that create various types of disadvantage.

The breaking down of disadvantage into manageable, newsworthy and publicly digestible “chunks” is understandable. Issues are brought into focus at various time points and often connected to specific events, initiatives and activities. Furthermore, political, public service and other systems are siloed into portfolios of specific expertise such as housing, education and health. As a result, disadvantage is not “joined up” conceptually, practically or temporally in a way that enables it to be understood and dealt with as an intersectional challenge. Reflecting this, although research has acknowledged intersectionality, analysis of disadvantage remains focussed on specific groups and/or issues. To understand patterns within these analyses, the heatmap itself also breaks disadvantage into rows, columns and cells. This reflects a conundrum: Understanding intersectionality requires thinking beyond individual issues and groups to their numerous, reinforcing intersections; this requires identification of individual issues and groups; yet although this makes disadvantage more tractable, too much attention to individual issues and groups can itself contribute to harmful narratives by neglecting intersectionality. The challenge of fostering greater understanding of intersectionality in both those creating narratives and those exposed to them is therefore considerable.

This highlights the importance of shifts in narratives—a theme identified in both the heatmap and the interviews. The interviews underline the challenge of holding attention on both the “umbrella” concepts such as “disadvantage” and important individual elements such as poverty. However, there is evidence from both the interviews and the heatmap that narrative shifts are a key element in addressing disadvantage. The “shifts” identified in the heatmap are instructive in this regard. Mason et al. (2020) reported that the death of George Floyd in the United States and the resultant “Black Lives Matter” movement spawned fresh awareness and examination of Australia's long-standing challenge of Aboriginal deaths in custody. Importantly, this coverage has been more complete and contextual, highlighting the opportunity of both elevating the issue and bringing intersectionality into the foreground (Mason, 2020). Similarly, Australian coverage of domestic violence rose in 2015, when Rosie Batty was named Australian of the Year in recognition of her efforts to raise awareness following the death of her son Luke at the hands of his father, and the authors also found that this coverage has become more nuanced (Uibu, 2020).

Shifts can also themselves be more understated by altering social norms. An analysis of 30 years of depiction of lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) people in fictional TV series' by Monaghan (2020) revealed a decrease in single-episode LGB characters and an increase in the number of series featuring regular LGB characters (Monaghan, 2020). The premise of this analysis was societal attitudes evolving over time as the cause, with depiction on television as the effect. It is also possible for a change in narrative to be purposefully generated in the absence of a specific event or societal trend; the 2017 report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse recommended a fundamental shift in the framing of child safety by focussing on the cultural characteristics of “child safe” organisations. This “elevates the status of children from objects of concern to human beings to be engaged with, indicating respect for children and recognition of their capacity to participate in their own safety and wellbeing” (Powell et al., 2021).

The rise of new media has created opportunities for communities to mobilise and “speak back” to public narratives in ways that were not previously possible. The practice interviews revealed this to have several positive impacts including empowerment, facilitation of practice support and advice and unfiltered surfacing of the realities of lived experience. This raises

interesting questions in the context of the findings on intersectionality. When individuals participate in discussion, they frequently self-identify as belonging to specific groups or representing single issues. This creates the space to provide important counter-narratives and perspectives to narratives promoted in mass media and other public discourses; however, if this does not introduce the context and nuance necessary to understand intersectionality, could it also inadvertently contribute to over-simplification of disadvantage? This risk was highlighted in the review of 104 published studies examining racism, hate speech and social media by Matamoros-Fernandez and colleagues (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). The authors cautioned that the focus on “hate speech” neglects important structural determinants of racism by reducing the issue to something that can be addressed by moderating and removing offensive online content. Furthermore, they expressed concern that focussing on social media content neglects “how race is baked into social media technologies' design and governance” (p. 218) and highlighted an absence of attention to image-based racism, critical race perspectives and intersectionality.

4 | DISCUSSION AND OPPORTUNITIES

This is the first known attempt to represent multiple public narratives of disadvantage across multiple groups. A systematic search using scoping review methodology was used to identify three review-level studies and 32 primary studies. The three review-level studies highlighted under-, over- and mis-representation of specific characteristics of groups and/or narrative elements and inadequate attention to intersectionality. The 32 primary studies focussed mainly on journalistic narratives in print newspapers. An evidence “heatmap” of key narratives and the groups they described identified 11 narratives across 14 population groups with the most frequent narratives being *deficit narratives* (negative characteristics), *misrepresentation of the issue* (exaggeration or omission) and “*absent*” narratives (the group described not represented). Qualitative interviews with 10 participants elucidated four themes—*how public narratives matter*; *tendency to break down disadvantage*; *shifts in narratives*; and *new media ‘speaking back’ to narratives*.

Limitations of the review warrant mention. “Disadvantage” and “narratives” are complex and difficult to define; we acknowledge that our operational definitions may not accord with the numerous definitions and lenses that can be taken to these issues, including within the research identified in the review. The review had to be geographically and temporally limited to be feasible—a limitation offset by long time periods of narrative analysis within included studies. Finally, academic publications lag behind the events and narratives they have analysed. For example, in 2017 Australia underwent a prolonged debate on marriage equality—a public narrative not captured in this review.

Synthesis of findings of the desktop review and interviews surfaced insights into the challenge of balancing an understanding of intersectionality with its constituent and necessarily more specific, group-focussed disadvantage narratives. It also revealed the importance of narrative “shifts” in both reflecting and initiating changes in attitudes, beliefs and potentially actions addressing disadvantage. These insights surface important questions about public narrative discourse, which cannot arise unless multiple narratives across multiple groups are analysed in a systematically gathered corpus of literature. The opportunities unlocked by viewing disadvantage narratives in relation to each other is a major strength of this review.

One such opportunity is to examine empirical evidence on the incidence of disadvantage in Australia in the context of the heatmap. The Australian PC report on “deep and persistent” disadvantage in Australia (McLachlan et al., 2013) reported prevalence of *relative income poverty*, *multiple deprivation* and *deep social exclusion* across various demographic

groups, including several represented in the heatmap from our study (Indigenous persons, migrants and public housing tenants). The *Dropping off the Edge 2021* report (Tanton et al., 2021) highlighted relatively high disadvantage in regional and rural areas. These communities were also represented in the heatmap. An ongoing longitudinal study specific to Indigenous Children, *Footprints in Time* (Mishra et al., 2016) reported that an Indigenous child in Australia is between 60% and 160% more likely to experience multi-dimensional disadvantage than a non-Indigenous child—a finding also strongly resonant with the present study.

Significantly, this study also reported that most participants had negative views of how Indigenous issues and people are represented in news and social media. Again, this directly aligns with the high-density, predominantly negative narratives in the heatmap. The finding also highlights an opportunity to shift narratives to better reflect realities; similarly, areas of *misalignment* (e.g., lack of description of unemployed people) offer opportunities for *raising awareness* narratives to be promoted. The concept of *narrative shifts* highlights the potential of a “living” heatmap that tracks both the narratives themselves and their analysis over time through regular update searches. For example, the less dense areas of the heatmap (bottom-right) reveal that groups such as those living in poverty, regional and remote areas and who identify as LGBTIQ have not frequently been the subject of narrative analysis. Could “awareness raising” narratives surface ideas and strategies that facilitate “shift narratives?” Similarly, could “shifts” reduce the density of negative and persistent narratives in the dense areas of the heatmap (top-left)? A “living” heatmap could address these questions, however was beyond the scope of this study.

Other research avenues to extend upon this work include application to other countries, enabling inter-country comparison; further exploration of empirical data (e.g., research funding, policy); and examining the impact of deliberate attempts to disrupt and/or shift narratives. In addition to examining the narrative itself, such research could also explore how narrative shifts influence perceptions of disadvantage both in the general community and within specific groups experiencing disadvantage. This would illuminate the pathway of influence from the intention to lift people out of disadvantage to its ultimate and visible impact on those affected.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Peter Bragge: Conceptualization; data curation; funding acquisition; formal analysis; methodology; investigation; validation; visualization; project administration; writing – review and editing; writing – original draft. **Simon Angus:** Conceptualization; methodology; funding acquisition; writing – review and editing. **Alex Fischer:** Conceptualization; methodology; writing – review and editing. **Alyse Lennox:** Data curation; methodology; investigation; formal analysis; project administration; validation; visualization; writing – review and editing. **Alex Piquero:** Validation; writing – review and editing. **Tim Reddel:** Validation; writing – review and editing. **Liam Smith:** Conceptualization; funding acquisition; validation; writing – review and editing. **Lucas Walsh:** Validation; writing – review and editing; writing – original draft. **Rebecca Wickes:** Validation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Abby Wild:** Data curation; formal analysis; investigation; validation; writing – review and editing. **Nicholas Faulkner:** Conceptualization; funding acquisition; validation; writing – review and editing; project administration.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the academic contribution of Sascha Becker to this work, and Katrina Tepper for her assistance in the literature search for this review. Open access publishing facilitated by Monash University, as part of the Wiley - Monash University agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This work was supported by the Paul Ramsay Foundation (grant number/s: 5012, *Understanding policy, media and academic narratives around cycles of disadvantage in Australia*). Any opinions, findings or conclusions expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Bragge, P., Angus, S.D., Fischer, A., Lennox, A., Piquero, A.R., Reddel, T. et al. (2024) Public narratives of disadvantage across multiple groups in Australia: A research map and practice reflections. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 59, 979–994. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs.4.322>