



NOTE

West Midlands Combined Authority

White Working Class Communities and Leadership:

Problems and Challenges

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KEY HEADLINES

There is very little research or data with reference to white working class communities and leadership in the West Midlands or indeed more broadly.

1. *Problems in defining white working class:* This has been a problematic construction which has nevertheless framed discussion about communities. Much of this has been pathologised where communities and the places they live across the West Midlands and more widely are perceived to be challenging. For example, ‘sink estates’, ‘chav communities’ and people who are hostile to the prospect of an increasingly ethnically diverse region (Hanley, 2007; Beider, 2016).
2. *Problems in collating data on white working class and leadership:* There is no systematic analysis available on white working class communities and leadership in the West Midlands. Data is collated on race, gender, disability but not on social class. In the absence of a framework, broad and negative perceptions of communities fill this gap.
3. *General attitudes about working class are at odds with decision-makers and politicians:*
 - Despite a decline in the number of routine and semi-routine workers in Britain, a majority still identify as working class.
 - 60% still identify as working class. This has not changed since 1983.
 - Nearly 50% of those in jobs classified as managerial and professional consider themselves working class (NatCen Social Research, 2015).
4. *No clear pathway for white working class to leadership:* Given the above, there are no specific leadership programmes targeted at white working class communities in contrast to well established schemes on race and gender. Possibilities to increase the levels of white working class representation in leadership positions include:
 - Positive action schemes: building on positive action schemes designed for minority communities and gender and apply to white working class communities
 - Spatial approaches: target cities and neighbourhoods that are largely white and working class and work with existing community organisations and stakeholders such as schools, housing associations and local representatives to identify young people who could become potential leaders.
 - Establishing a mentoring programme: work with existing organisations i.e. The Princes Trust, to develop pioneer programmes for young people from targeted neighbourhoods to become leaders of tomorrow in the WM.

BACKGROUND

The dominant trend in research and policy on social cohesion has centred on minority communities. The perspectives of white working class¹ communities have been absent altogether or they have been cast as passive observers. This has been the case when they have been active participants such as the 2001 disturbances in Burnley, Oldham and Bradford that led to the term community cohesion (Home Office, 2001). More recent inquiries into cohesion and integration have been characterised by an absence of white working class communities in the overarching narrative (Commission on Integration and Cohesion, 2007) or very limited exposure (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2016).

The absence of sustained analysis of white working class communities has been even more jarring given that recent political and economic turbulence has centred on disconnected places and people who do not have a voice (Beider, 2016). For example, at the 2014 European Elections when UKIP topped the poll and secured 26% of the popular vote based on the fusion of concerns about autonomy from the EU and impact of immigration. Most notably, the 2016 referendum result when the UK decided to leave the EU showed that large segments of the population felt ‘left behind’; especially in working class areas in the Midlands and the North (Ford and Goodwin, 2017).

Closer to home in the West Midlands, debates on social cohesion have followed a similar pattern with a focus on minority communities following the ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech made by Enoch Powell in 1968 (Foot, 1969), the rioting in Handsworth in 1981 and 1985 (Benyon and Solomos, 1986) and the increased levels of representation of minorities as councillors in local politics (BRAP, 2017). There has been an absence in discussion of the position of white working class communities. Yet this is even more surprising when reflecting on those areas voting leave in the Brexit referendum. In Birmingham, some of the biggest votes were in outer neighbourhoods such as Longbridge, Shard End and Erdington. Some claim that Stoke on Trent is the “Brexit capital of the UK” with almost 70% of voters deciding on leave in a place which is marked by post-industrial decline. Even in Coventry - the 2021 City of Culture and having two large universities and big student population – people voted Brexit by 55%. Of course, Brexit should not be proxy for white working class protest vote but the unfolding analysis has repeatedly pointed to the mobilisation of this constituency on the basis of being disconnected, concerned about the impact of immigration and social change and feeling voiceless.

In the West Midlands, there is little to no data on white working class communities and leadership. In this note we identify key issues and implications for the WM Combined Authority on engaging with white working class communities and implications for action.

¹ We define white working class communities as people who: occupy social class C1, D and E, classified themselves as white in the 2011 census.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

There is a general mismatch between how social scientists and policy makers view what working class means and who belongs in that category than people who define themselves as working class. This is an issue at the local level because if we are trying to identify working class leaders, job category may not be a useful marker. Similarly, location and places where ‘white, working class’ people live will not always be in traditional working class areas. Thus, any outreach and development work has to be planned to include from wider areas.

This brief review has identified a number of challenges for policy makers and implications for non-action. These are summarised below:

1. *Non-Voting*

- There is a rise in non-voting among the disadvantaged which reinforces their lack of representation.
- They are less likely to be targeted by political parties
- Protest parties will appeal to white, working class voters left behind by traditional parties. But may lead to the left resurrecting its appeal to white, working class.
- The new class war is not being waged by the working class but argued to be against them (IPPR, 2015)

Implications

There is a potential threat of radicalisation, increase in far-right activity in certain areas and a direct threat to community cohesion. There is a need to create programmes of leadership, development and engagement with isolated, disengaged communities and respond to their concerns

2. *Deliberate targeting or positive action*

The Local Government Association (LGA) evaluated The People’s Panel which was a citizens’ assembly made up of 5000 members of the public with the aim of acting as a sounding board for government policy. It was organised by the Labour Party from 1998 to 2002.

The review found that the Panel, whilst meant to be representative was largely white, middle class, professional and activists. It was less likely to attract black and minority ethnic and white working class. It was also more likely to be used as a consultation body rather than making genuine decisions (LGA, 2016).

Implications

- Local community based representation has to be deliberate and targeted
- Considerations need to be made of how white working class people can actively engage and participate and what are the barriers to their participation.
- Any community engagement has to be meaningful with demonstrable outcomes
- Should we consider using positive action measure to bring to the fore white working class and BME working class representation and leadership?
- Intersectional considerations across gender, age, sexual orientation, income and ethnicity certainly need to be explored in patterns of leadership.

3. *Class and Political Representation*

- In 2015 only 3% of MPs came from manual backgrounds. This stood at 16% in 1979 (37% for Labour in 1979, only 7% in 2015)
- Conversely, there has been a growth in the number of MPs who already had previous political experience. In 1979 this was 3%, and in 2015 it stood at 17% (House of Commons Library, 2016)
- 54% of Conservative MPs attended fee-paying schools compared with 7% of the population.

Implications

The declining influence of traditional occupations and representation coming from them may leave a representation and leadership void. There needs to be greater activity to attract people into leadership from the 'new occupations' through which white people (and BME) are defining themselves as working class.

4. Equal Participation

Often white working class is viewed in opposition to black and minority ethnic or 'race'. This creates a pathologized process that blames one or the other depending on the priorities of politics, policies and processes of elites. White Working class is often seen as a group that have lost ground, culture, status in direct opposition to the growth in multiculturalism and diversity. However, white, working class people do not hold leadership and powerful positions to be able to make decisions on, for example, austerity, public sector cuts, employment decisions that discriminate between racial/ethnic groups or gender pay gaps.

As the Runnymede Trust, has argued (2017) it is time class and race were more closely aligned to form new analysis, connections between communities who are disadvantaged and have access to voice and power. There is an emerging legitimization crisis of representation that will lead to a rise in populist politics, potential increases in hate crime and destabilizing communities without a programme of outreach, activities, policy and political recognition of the need for equal representation and participation from white working class communities.

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