



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

Living with Difference in Europe Brief No. 3

The Privatisation of Prejudice: equality legislation and political correctness in the UK.



In this brief the *Living with Difference in Europe* Research Programme (LIVEDIFFERENCE) looks at contemporary attitudes towards minority groups and equality legislation in the UK. The research identifies widespread hostility towards laws and regulations which were viewed as unfairly privileging minority groups and curtailing freedom of expression. Employing dominant narratives around 'political correctness', respondents perceived equality legislation to have resulted in an over-bearing regulation of public space and to the excessive empowerment of minority groups. The research therefore argues that we are seeing a 'privatisation of prejudice' in the UK: prejudice has not gone away as a result of equality legislation but rather has been forced out of public spaces such as the workplace and into the private sphere of the home. The rise of anti-immigrant populist parties can be partly understood in this context. For example, UKIP might be seen in part as a vehicle which attempts to re-legitimise prejudice and traditional 'British values' in the public sphere in response to the 'privatisation of prejudice' identified in the research.

Background

- Western societies have become increasingly cosmopolitan over the past few decades. This is evidenced by relatively high levels of immigration in the UK and an attendant growing diversity of ethnic, cultural, religious groups and practices.
- Since the 1960s, this diversity has been paralleled with the development of progressive legislative frameworks which seek to protect the rights of minority groups such as minority ethnic groups, disabled people, lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, and religious groups.
- One such example of 'equality legislation' is the development of Article 13 of the European Union Treaty of Amsterdam, signed by EU member states. This was formalised into UK law under the *Equality Act (2010)* which sought to extend protection against discrimination to cover a wide range of 'protected characteristics'.
- As a result of these social and legal developments, citizens find they increasingly have to negotiate 'difference' in their everyday lives
- However, the development of equality legislation has been met with pronounced hostility from right-wing commentators and the tabloid press. The legislation has been denounced in line with a dominant narrative of 'political correctness': a claim that the expansion of 'liberal' values and the legally-enshrined protection of minority groups has led to the curtailment of freedom of expression and a corresponding erosion of 'normal' and legitimate cultural practices.
- Within this context, the question emerges of: how do ordinary citizens experience 'difference' and equality legislation in their everyday lives and how does this in turn relate to their conceptions of the public sphere?



Evidence

- This brief is based on in-depth multi-stage qualitative research involving 30 individual case studies (n=90 interviews). Each case comprises a time-line, a life-story interview, a semi-structured interview about understandings of and attitudes towards equality and diversity, and an interview reflecting on the emerging findings of the study. The informants were recruited from amongst respondents to a survey about attitudes towards difference which was conducted in the UK. They were sampled to include those from a range of social backgrounds (in terms of socio-economic status, occupation, gender, ethnicity, religious/belief, sexual orientation and (dis)ability); whose personal circumstances and lifestyle affords them a range of opportunities for/experiences of encountering 'difference'; and reflect the range of responses to the survey.
- While the majority of the respondents acknowledged their ignorance of the specifics of *The Equality Act* (2010) many nonetheless expressed hostility to the form and content of the equality law in general.
- Equality legislation was customarily expressed through the dominant popular discourse of 'political correctness'.
- There was a common sense perception that behaviour in public space is 'regulated' and 'controlled' by equality legislation. This was seen as effectively curtailing 'natural' or 'normal' ways of behaving towards minority groups.
- The workplace was identified as a site in which these forms of regulation are particularly prevalent and that expressing prejudice in public would run the risk of legal sanction or disciplinary actions at work.
- There was therefore a widespread perception that these forms of legislation unduly privilege minority groups.

There are a lot of things that you can't say and do in everyday life that you used to be able to...Like during Ramadan. Eating. Is it politically correct for me to eat my lunch at my desk during Ramadan when a Muslim's fasting and sat next to me? If my work were to turn around and say you can't do that, that's political correctness gone mad. I suppose it's how it affects you in everyday life... It's all about boundaries...at work - the workplace - it is a very taboo area. How you speak to people. How people perceive - because the thing with it is what might not seem offensive to me if somebody else overheard it they might find it offensive. It could be one of the women that I work with who are white and middle-aged. They might deem it as offensive and they don't think it's politically correct because it's not what they want to hear. (Male, 30-34, heterosexual, white British).

If another driver that's not English at work, say Polish, Pakistani, dark, whatever you want to call them. If they make a complaint about me the company will investigate....we've got notices up saying that calling names or slang or stuff like is a disciplinary offence. So if you get caught saying 'that bloody Paki over there has run me off the road today', if anybody hears you they can report you for it. It's a sackable offence now. It's political correctness gone overboard, I think (Male 55-59, heterosexual, white British)

What annoys people is that some people can be seen to get away with things. You can't be racist to someone but they can be racist back to you. That's what annoys people (Female, 20-24, heterosexual, white British).



- As such, many respondents claimed that their 'true' opinions about minority groups could only be freely voiced in the private setting of the home amongst known and trusted people such as friends and family members where they would be immune from the legal constraints and socio-cultural expectations which characterize the public sphere.

With political correctness - like say talking about things such as that out in public, if you said it in the wrong light, it would be misconstrued ...so I think you've got to be careful in what you say. What environment you're in, who's about... Within my own home's, probably the only place, or a couple of friend's homes, but nowhere else (Male, 30-34, heterosexual, White British).

Analysis

- The research suggests that equality legislation is having an impact on contemporary social relations.
- It has produced an expectation that the UK has a progressive and cosmopolitan public culture.
- Yet, prejudice, rather than disappearing as a consequence of the obligation and expectation to comply with equality legislation, is changing its form.
- Blatant public expressions of intolerance are becoming less commonplace, but privatized and discrete forms of prejudice persist.
- That said, respondents also identified ways of subverting what they understand to be norms about how they ought to talk, or ought to behave in different types of public space. In this sense covert discrimination is still practiced in public space even though open prejudice is not tolerated.
- This is problematic for both those whom the legislation seeks to protect, and those who are critical of the social norms it affords.
- For those the law was introduced to protect, the privatized nature of contemporary prejudice makes it more difficult to expose and challenge, producing a frustration that offenders are 'getting away with it', and making it harder to identify patterns of prejudice in form and intent.
- For those who are critical of the progressive social norms equality legislation is perceived to have produced, there is a sense of anger and frustration that their views are being silenced in public by the law.
- The 'majority' citizens also perceive themselves to suffer as a consequence of this public loss of voice.
- The danger is that if these mutual and antagonistic senses of injustice are not openly acknowledged they might be exploited by extremist political parties and erupt into tension and conflict.
- The 'privatization of prejudice' provides a new angle through which to understand the rise of populist parties such as UKIP. In positioning itself against the 'political correctness' of the Westminster establishment and the European Union in particular, UKIP offers a vehicle through which entrenched prejudices can find a kind of legitimation in the public domain.



Conclusions

- In an age of diversity individuals' perceptions of minority groups and of equality legislation matter.
- While respondents' recognized that their knowledge of the specifics of equality legislation is very limited nonetheless they perceive it to impact on their lives in negative ways.
- Drawing on the popular discourse of 'political correctness' respondents argued that equality legislation unfairly privileges or empowers minority groups and is redefining how people should talk or behave in public space.
- Individuals claimed they edit or alter how they to relate to others out of an obligation to comply with these norms and because of an expectation that they might be prosecuted and/or morally judged if they fail to do so, rather than because they necessarily believe in, or accept, such values.
- The extension of equality legislation has not eradicated prejudice but rather produced a transformation in its form. Specifically, popular understandings of equality legislation are changing the ways in which prejudice can be expressed. Increasingly, prejudice is voiced either covertly in the public sphere or is reserved for the private domain. A privatization of prejudice is taking place.
- This privatization of prejudice provides fertile ground for anti-immigration 'traditionalist' parties such as UKIP. As disaffected citizens feel increasingly unable to express their anxieties about minority groups in the public sphere because of what they perceive to be 'political correctness' they may start to do so through the ballot box instead.

Further reading:

Valentine G. and Harris C. (working paper available from author, see back cover) Encounters and the spatiality of (in)tolerance: implications for future social relations.

Valentine, G., Piekut, A., Winisarka A., Harris, C. and Jackson, L., (working paper available from the authors, see back cover) Mapping the meaning of 'difference' in Europe: a social topography of prejudice.

Valentine, G., Piekut, A. and Harris, C. (2014) Intimate encounters: the negotiation of difference within the family and its implications for social relations in public space, *The Geographical Journal* , doi:10.1111/geoj.12095

Valentine, G., and Sadgrove, J. (2014) Biographical narratives of encounter: The significance of mobility and emplacement in shaping attitudes towards difference, *Urban Studies*, 51, 9, 1979-1994.

Valentine, G. (2008) Living with difference: reflections on geographies of encounter. *Progress in Human Geography* 32.3, 321–35.





The
University
Of
Sheffield.

Living with Difference in Europe: Making Communities Out of Strangers in an Era of Super Mobility and Super Diversity was a four-year research programme (2010-2014). The research involved five inter-linked projects which explored the extent and nature of everyday encounters with 'difference', by each collecting original data in the UK (a post-colonial European state) and Poland (a post-communist European state). The findings provide an integrated evidence base that can be used to inform European policies and strategies for living with difference.

Living with Difference in Europe was funded by the European Research Council through an Advanced Investigator Award for Professor Gill Valentine (grant agreement no. 249658).

Published 17 November 2014

More information is available at: www.livedifference.group.shef.ac.uk

**Contact: Professor Gill Valentine, ICOSS, University of Sheffield,
219 Portobello, Sheffield, S1 4DP, UK. Tel: +44(0)114 222 9780. Email: g.valentine@sheffield.ac.uk**

