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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) considers attitudes towards equality and diversity in the UK. It focuses on what ordinary people think about equality laws and how they work, and examines how such popular imaginings become translated into normativities about how people ought to talk, or ought to behave in different types of space which in turn produce effects by causing people to edit or alter their behaviour when they move between 'public' and 'private' spaces.

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.

Background

- Modern Western societies are becoming increasingly cosmopolitan and undergoing rapid demographic change as a product of new patterns of migration driven by processes of globalisation.
- As populations and cultures have become more heterogeneous in this way, discourses of diversity and equality have become increasingly important.
- Struggles over the 'rights' of different social groups have led to the gradual development of progressive legislative frameworks that have changed understandings of what it means to be a citizen.
- At the same time, public space has become increasingly defined as a space of encounter, where as a consequence of living among others, we must all negotiate 'difference' as part of our everyday social routines.
- Growing recognition of the significance of such patterns of social interaction raise questions about the extent to which everyday spatial normativities in public life may be also be changing.
- Here, we understand such normativities to be a product of formal obligations to comply with legislative frameworks, as well as the informal expectations about appropriate ways of behaving.

Evidence

- When asked about their knowledge and understanding of *The Equality Act* (2010) the majority of those interviewed admitted their ignorance of the specificity of the legislation.
- A few of the interviewees did construct themselves as knowledgeable, claiming familiarity with the law, but their common-sense understandings were riddled with confusion.

Interviewer: What do you know about the Single Equality Act?

I think it's bullshit. I've got to be honest. I think it's absolute - for the decent people, it's there to protect, but there are just so many malingers that are abusing the system. The system has got worse and, unless they tighten up on it, it's never going to get any better (Male, 50-54, heterosexual, White British).



- Several of the interviewees did perceive that equality legislation has achieved positive social change even though they lacked understandings of the specifics. In particular, they drew attention to the ways in which they perceive it to have influenced routine ways of thinking and talking about difference for the better.

It's very good because people should be forced to shut their mouths and not say anything stupid... To me it means not saying anything which, could be offensive, genuinely offensive and just taking into consideration every single minority group, even if they're not present in a workplace environment (Male, 20-24, bisexual, White British).

- However, in the majority of the interviews hostility towards equality legislation surfaced. The dominant understanding of equality law was framed through the negative popular discourse of political correctness (PC).
- Interviewees criticized the ways that equality legislation - expressed as political correctness - is perceived to have redefined how people should talk and behave.

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).

- The only place where interviewees claimed that they are freely able to express their attitudes towards social difference is in the private space of the home amongst known and trusted people such as friends and family members.
- In other words, those who can be presumed to hold the same attitudes, and who will not be judgmental should anyone express views which do not accord with equality legislation.

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).

- In public spaces individuals only feel able to speak freely without fear of formal or legal sanction if they can locate people like themselves whom they can trust.

Analysis

- 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.
- Individuals find ways of subverting what they understand to be social normativities about how they ought to talk, or ought to behave in different types of public space.
- This is problematic for both those whom the legislation seeks to protect, and those who are critical of the social normativities 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 normativities 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.

Conclusions

- The evidence of the research is that this legislation - popularly described as political correctness - is redefining how people should talk and behave in public space.
- Individuals are editing or altering how they 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.
- Popular understandings of equality legislation are changing the ways in which prejudice can be expressed. A privatization of prejudice is taking place.



Further reading:

Valentine G. and Harris C. (available from author) Encounters and the spatiality of (in)tolerance: implications for future social relations.

Valentine, G., Piekut, A., Winiarska A., Harris, C. and Jackson, L., (2014) Mapping the meaning of 'difference' in Europe: a social topography of prejudice, *Ethnicities*.

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.





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Living in Difference in Europe: Making communities out of strangers in an era of super mobility and super diversity was a four-year research program (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.

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