

# White working-class neighbourhoods: Common themes and policy suggestions

Round-up  
Reviewing the evidence

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What does it mean to be white and working class in modern Britain?

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation's studies of traditionally white estates in Bradford, London, Coventry and Birmingham are part of a growing body of research into 'white identities'.

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## This paper:

- identifies common findings from JRF research into traditionally white estates, in the context of other similar work;
- suggests how issues of white identity can be better understood and makes recommendations for policy and practice.

## Key points

- Profound economic and social change has increased isolation and fear in traditionally white estates. Residents often claim that things were better in the past.
- 'Estatism' refers to specific social dynamics associated with council estates and prejudice towards residents based on where they live. This can result in lowered self-esteem and reluctance to participate in community campaigns.
- People on traditionally white estates often feel they are not listened to by outside agencies. Consultations can raise hopes but ultimately reinforce disengagement. Initiatives to ensure equality have become associated with political correctness ('PC').
- White working-class people feel they are bound by values of hard work, reciprocity and support. They are frustrated by the closure and lack of access to community facilities. The social class system simultaneously disadvantages the working class while giving advantage to other classes.
- There is a strong desire for allocation of resources to be fair, with a widespread perception that minorities are given preference. Blaming incomers for decline is common, with the target of blame differing between sites. Participants did not want to be considered racist and felt that labelling ideas as racist prevents discussion. Similarly, the term 'PC' can also be used to shut down debate.
- Recommendations include community-twinning, new ways of accessing local authorities, involvement from the private sector in disadvantaged areas and local panels to define and develop the 'Big Society'. Initiatives aimed solely at white working-class people are unlikely to be successful.

## Introduction

Research interest in white identities is not new, but a growing literature has been concerned with the local specifics of being white and working class, especially, but not exclusively, on what JRF has referred to as ‘traditionally white estates’.<sup>1</sup> This paper seeks to do three things:

- Identify common findings from the JRF research studies and set these alongside work in similar areas to demonstrate their more general application;
- Suggest frameworks within which interested professionals and decision-makers can better understand issues emerging from traditionally white estates;
- Make recommendations for policy and action based on the evidence produced.

## The research

In recent years, JRF has commissioned work exploring what it means to be white and working class in contemporary Britain.

Illingworth, H. (2008) *Findings from the Holme Wood Development Project 2007–08: Demographic changes and effects*. There is also a film, *Voices from Holme Wood*, accompanying this research.

Pearce, J. and Milne, E. J. (2010) *Participation and community on Bradford's traditionally white estates: a community research project*.

Beider, H. (2011) *Community cohesion: the views of white working-class communities*.

These pieces of research were carried out in Bradford, London (Somers Town), Coventry and Birmingham. They are complemented by other recent JRF work in neighbourhoods across the UK looking at community dynamics, such as *Low-income neighbourhoods in Britain: The gap between policy ideas and residents' realities* (Cole, 2011) and *Working in neighbourhoods in Bradford* (Richardson, 2011).

## Research into white working-class identities

The JRF's studies of white identities are part of a growing literature on this topic in the UK, and of course part of a much larger body of work focused on the US, Australia, Canada and South Africa. Before examining a small fraction of this research, the next section explains its rationale.

### Why study white identities?

In the voluminous published work on 'race' and ethnicity in the UK, the majority of texts relate to work done on and within minority ethnic communities. This was certainly the thrust of the 'race relations' paradigm, for example, in the post-war period. Indeed, Beider (2011) outlines some of the limited ways in which white working-class communities were discussed in academic literature, and points out the overlap of this with ideas about the 'underclass' in the 1990s. A significant stream of that writing, focusing on the perceived cultural failings of the white working classes, has strongly influenced discourse and policy into the twenty-first century, as noted by Pearce and Milne (2010). One effect of poorer people being blamed for their own poverty has been to shift focus from the economic inequalities underlying the relationships of social class (Hills *et al.*, 2010) to issues of culture and poor individual choices.

What studies of white identities restore to this picture is an understanding of the interplay between class and 'race', and the ways in which identities are constructed in relation to one another. For example, while there is clearly a set of social boundaries between white and black people, there are also a series of distinctions made between the mainstream and other, nominally white groups. The latter are distinguished from the mainstream by values and culture. Examples that fall into this category in the JRF work are white European migrants, students and Travellers. Additionally, we might think of Jewish and Catholic Irish migrants, both of which have been perceived as intrinsically different from the native British population over the last few centuries. So the recognition that some white groups do not fit – at specific times – with mainstream working-class values is a key one (Garner, 2007).

Research on white identities is not about homogenising white people and suggesting they are all privileged and racist, which would be neither interesting nor accurate. In fact, looking at white identities is supposed to be a critique of power, in the same way that studies of gender identify power imbalances between men and women at a social level. In the case of gender studies, while men's bodies differ biologically from those of women, the social interpretation of these differences in a given society at a given time is what we understand as 'gender'. Similarly, in studying white identities, the focus is therefore not just the division into who is 'white' and who is not, but why, under what circumstances, and how this works – in different places and at different times. The ideas, actions and practices that characterise 'whiteness' can be separated from the bodies of the individuals who think and carry them out – people do not have to think and act 'white'. It is also worth noting that the privilege of being white in the UK is not spread equally across social class and gender. The key aims of studying white identities are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Key aims of studying white identities.

Actual objectives	Not aimed at ...
Identifying the ways in which white identities are formed.	Making white people responsible for all racism everywhere.
Deconstructing the idea of a single homogenous white 'community'.	Ignoring the inequalities within the group nominally seen as 'white'.
Developing tools to understand how discrimination functions, by simultaneously disadvantaging some groups while giving advantage to others e.g. the idea of 'white privilege'.	Homogenising whiteness so that everyone is understood as benefiting equally from being white.
Paying attention to the local specifics that shape the construction of identity.	Focusing only on relations between white and black people.
Seeing how class; gender; culture; nationality and religion can also be utilised as markers of distinction and hierarchies between white groups.	Arguing that 'race' is the only source of social division.

The research commissioned by the JRF covers a variety of contexts, not only all-white estates, but also spaces in which white people are the minority (e.g. Aston). Yet despite the local specifics of neighbourhood, ward and city, there are recurring themes in the findings.

Qualitative fieldwork (interviews and ethnographies) is frequently criticised as unrepresentative. This is certainly true of individual projects, if representativeness is purely numerical. Few pieces of qualitative fieldwork, for example, include 1,000 interviews, which is the threshold for opinion polls. The argument for qualitative research does not rely purely on numbers, but on the depth of the interview. However, by this stage, the total interviews carried out in the body of work done nationally (Garner, 2009) must so far number in the thousands.

## Key themes

Through JRF research, as well as wider literature around issues of white identity, some key themes emerge:

- Fear, insecurity and change;
- 'Estatism' and the specifics;
- Relations with outside agencies;
- Social class, values and community spirit;
- Desire for 'fairness', rather than 'equality' and tensions over resource allocation;
- Analysing racism.

## Fear, insecurity and change

The amount of change impacting upon communities, as a result of globalisation and other phenomena, has been well researched in recent years. A recent JRF study (Hanley, 2011) looked at how different aspects of globalisation, from economics to foreign policy, had significant impacts upon local communities. The context of this change and the way in which people react to it has been a consistent theme throughout recent JRF research and its impact upon the communities studied in these reports is significant.

Virtually all the people interviewed refer to social change of one kind or another, and this takes both economic and cultural forms. People identify the economy as contracting and the privatisation of services as having shrunk the public sector. The various consequences of this, individualism for example, are seen as a result of long-term processes that have changed the ways in which we make sense of our identities. Earlier work (Robertson, 2008) also tells us that people's sense of identity in similar communities was clearly defined by the history of industrialisation in the area and thus the loss of manufacturing work not only had a profound economic impact upon communities but also threatened their sense of identity. The loss of jobs has not simply been damaging economically but also culturally (Hanley, 2011).

However, as Beider (2011) notes, the research focus has been more on culture, with explanations of poverty being linked to intergenerational 'cultures of poverty', and cultural deficiencies that result in anti-social behaviour etc., rather than on long-term economic changes and resulting social inequalities. The scope of these inequalities is revealed nationally by Hills *et al.* (2010). Over the last forty years, there has been a shift from manufacturing to service industry employment; a reduction in the available social housing stock; enormous increases in housing prices; increasing inequalities in wealth and pensions etc., especially between the most and the least wealthy. These changes have had an uneven impact on cities, regions and rural areas. With severe public service cuts approaching, local economies in which public-sector employment accounts for a higher percentage will be hit hardest, as were the areas of manufacturing industry in the 1970s and 1980s.

'Estatist' attitudes (which will be explored later) apply the characteristics of the few to the entire community, and therefore damage all residents' reputations. However, many of the perceptions held by the external world can be exemplified *in individual cases*. The majority understand their areas as containing spaces in which they are more or less safe; more or less at home; where some people on the estate do not follow the ethical codes to which they subscribe in terms of values (e.g. in parenting and public behaviour). One of the reasons for this, according to residents, is that individuals and families with multiple problems are 'dumped' on their estates. As Pearce and Milne (2010) point out, 'One of the factors that make these insecurities difficult to address is the pervasive sense that residents face such problems alone and with little support from public authorities'. The feeling that the council 'dumps' problem families on the estate seems to arise in most places, and is one of the conundrums produced by the changing role of local authority housing over the past thirty years (Pearce and Milne, 2010; Sveinsson, 2009).

Like their counterparts in Bradford, many in Hillfields (Bristol) are conscious of avoiding certain areas in, and pathways across, their estate, and are very wary of confronting people known to be violent and anti-social. This significantly shapes people's perceptions of living in an area (Hoggett *et al.*, 2008). Residents in Runcorn/Widnes (Garner *et al.*, 2009), and parts of Birmingham talk of levels of public and domestic violence and how it becomes a norm. Indeed, people's lives are often shaped by the fear of confronting individuals who may well respond violently. Moreover, having a well-developed knowledge of safe and unsafe places seems common in these contexts, for both older and younger people (Watt and Stenson, 1998; Kintrea *et al.*, 2008).

Lastly, since the mid-1990s, Britain has been a net importer of people. This has helped shape the environment in which people live. As Hanley (2011) argues, 'global links can raise complex challenges for local areas, particularly with the movements of people and rapid flows of information between local areas'. The world of permanent full-time jobs in the primary and manufacturing industries, and an adequate supply of social housing have disappeared, to be replaced by a much less secure labour market, dwindling social housing, an expensive private rented sector, and housing that is largely unaffordable even for many families with two wages.

While in many ways the stories people tell about migrants and 'lazy' white people leapfrogging them in the allocation of resources are quite similar in all Western countries, their context differs from that of the 1960s. Immigration is now drawn from a much wider range of countries, and there are much higher numbers of asylum-seekers (although this is decreasing rapidly from a peak at the turn of the twenty-first century) (Berkeley *et al.*, 2006). Together with the current unlimited movement of people from other EU member-states, there is consequently more pressure on public resources than in previous generations, and this pressure is set to increase further over the coming years.

## ‘Estatism’ and the specifics of place

As previous JRF work in Scotland found, ‘neighbourhood identities are underpinned by social class and social status, and these identities are very resilient to change’ (Robertson *et al.*, 2008). Thus we see in these studies that place plays a significant role in attitudes as well as opportunities. Indeed, place is often a way in which outsiders define a whole community as much as it shapes the attitudes and behaviour of those living in an area.

Pearce and Milne’s (2010) definition for ‘estatism’ (drawn from community workers interviewed as part of their study) is ‘the sense among estate residents that there are specific social dynamics of place associated with council estates, and that residents experience prejudice based upon where they live’. While not all the areas researched were estates, this concept is relevant to the other survey sites.

Cole’s work in low-income neighbourhoods shows how place was viewed as central to many people’s sense of identity. Even when problems surrounding anti-social behaviour and poor economic opportunities were frequently cited, people still felt a sense of attachment to their neighbourhood.

Respondents often had ‘a very strong emotional and social attachment to their existing neighbourhood, with memories, family and friendship networks, services and the benefits of familiarity and ontological security all located within it. For these reasons, these people often viewed their futures (and those of their children) playing out in these same neighbourhoods, even if there might be better economic prospects elsewhere.’  
(Cole, 2011)

External views of the estate/area of residence by local authorities and other people impact profoundly upon residents, because perceptions of ‘cultures of poverty’; the lack of a work ethic; a propensity for violence, criminality and so on structure the relations between outsiders and insiders. Consequences include lowered self-esteem and a feeling of beleagueredness, underscored by poor experiences of contact with local authorities and officials.

You’re embarrassed to bring people on the estate sometimes because of the old fencing, debris and rubbish. It’s not inviting’.

(Woman from the Scholemoor estate, Bradford, in Pearce and Milne, 2010)

This has a knock-on effect, deterring people from participating in community campaigns and activities, especially if they entail engagement with outside agencies. This negativity leads to lack of consultation and disrespectful relations, for example the school that absorbed playing fields on Braithwaite and Guardhouse estates (Bradford) and the traffic island covered with dirt and bollards and abandoned by council workers (Pearce and Milne, 2010). This frequently undermines trust in local authorities.

On one estate in Milton Keynes (Garner *et al.*, 2009), residents’ anxiety about being displaced by asylum-seekers, who they saw as the privileged recipients of welfare, meant that rather than move out temporarily and allow the local authority to upgrade the housing, many tenants preferred to remain in sub-standard accommodation. In Castle Vale, Birmingham (Garner *et al.*, 2009), an ambitious regeneration programme improved the environment and succeeded in reducing crime in an area that had been notorious. However, two decades on, the reputation of the estate in some quarters, as a hotbed of crime and social issues, unjustifiably remains.

Challenging this notion remains important for significant change.

There was little evidence in the research of any fault line between ‘cohesive’ and ‘broken’ communities, of places somehow set apart from ‘the rest of us’. The gradations were more finely calibrated, created by a constantly shifting balance of forces between social solidarity and social division.

(Cole, 2011)

The approach used by the Runnymede Trust on estates in recent years is perhaps instructive here. By focusing on local needs and enabling discussions between communities, their work has found that there are a range of shared aspirations for neighbourhoods across racial lines and that collective discussion and action around these can be good for social cohesion (Sveinsson, 2007).

For a long time, the 'black-white' division central to American work on 'race' and ethnicity (on which UK scholarship in this field was often based) dominated the way policy evolved. From the 1990s, the three-way black/Asian/white framework developed. However, in the twenty-first century, this is not an adequate reflection of the allegiances and identifications people make on the ground. What the newer fieldwork increasingly shows is that the lines between fractions of communities do not always lie between the same groups; and what is true of one place is not true of another.

Local histories are very much behind the construction of these boundaries (CIC, 2007). More and more we see, as on Scholemoor estate in Bradford (Pearce and Milne, 2010), that white and Asian, or white and black British people are anxious about migrant groups. In Thetford (Garner *et al.*, 2009) it was the Polish and Portuguese migrants disliked by white British people, who identified black and Asian people on their estate as part of the 'we'. Similarly, in Bristol (Hoggett *et al.*, 2008), it was the Somalis, and for some, Eastern Europeans, who were the outsiders. Similar stories are told in other parts of provincial Britain, such as Peterborough (BBC, 2008). White identities are not always a guarantee of relative privilege in local hierarchies. Indeed, the centrality of place and belonging can determine relations between long-term residents and new migrants, as Hickman *et al.* (2008) conclude:

If the dominant narrative has strong elements of perceiving the local area as comprised of people who are 'the same' or 'like us' or 'from here' until new immigrants appear, then the likelihood of a more negative response to new arrivals is heightened. Alternatively, if the dominant narrative is one that recognises the history of immigration to the area and the mixture of residents in terms of a range of social divisions, and sees no ethnic group as having a privileged claim on the area, then the likelihood of an accepting response towards new immigrants is correspondingly heightened.

(Hickman *et al.*, 2008)

## Relations with outside agencies

The most significant aspect of the often strained relationship between locals and external agencies is the widespread sentiment that communities are not seriously listened to, or responded to. Worse still, for many, consultations seem to be merely exercises that raise people's expectations but end up reinforcing the feeling of disengagement. Issues ranging from rubbish collection to the use of public buildings and spaces, when addressed without meaningful consultation, lead to resentment, and some of that gets focused on other residents.

Does this push people to political action? While a portion of the last Labour Government's energies (especially at the Department for Communities and Local Government) was expended on trying to ensure that traditionally white areas did not turn to the political far-right (CIC, 2007) as in the 'Connecting Communities' programme, what emerges from these studies is that far from pushing people into the arms of the British National Party (BNP) for example, these experiences, when repeated over a period of many years, actually result 'in a disconnection with all forms of politics and decision-making' (Pearce and Milne, 2010).

Beider (2011), whose study more specifically discusses the policy heading 'community cohesion', finds people identifying formal policies, on equality for example, with 'political correctness', and thus disengaging. There is often a feeling of powerlessness, engendered by the working practices of outside agencies.

People in local government aren't interested in our views. Yeah, most of the local councillors are Bengali now.  
(Resident of Somers Town, London, in Beider, 2011)

One of the worst experiences in this respect, as experienced over a school's takeover of playing fields in Bradford (Pearce and Milne, 2010), is for those groups to find that precious resources have been cut, transferred elsewhere or have otherwise deteriorated, without warning or consultation. In Hillfields (Bristol), the renovation of a piece of wasteland into a community park was one of these examples. The land had been leased to a community group for development, and the scheme had funding and volunteer labour. Suddenly, after two years' work, the group learned that the land had been sold for private development (Hoggett *et al.*, 2008). Regeneration schemes are often the source of discontent within communities who feel alienated by the process as well as the outcome (Cole, 2011).

Researchers also encounter a sense that local authorities ‘washed their hands of us’, as a woman in Thetford, Norfolk told a researcher (Garner *et al.*, 2009). For the interviewees, evidence of such abandonment is expressed in the failure to adequately maintain local authority housing; when amenities such as sports and community centres are not maintained or replaced when unfit for use (Hoggett *et al.*, 2008); and, importantly, in the failure to ‘stand up for’ local white working-class people in relation to minority groups, as a researcher was told in the Coffee Hall and Beanhill estates in Milton Keynes (Garner, 2009).

We also want to discuss the state of our community at present, i.e. rubbish, empty houses, the bad state of lived-in houses on the estate etc. We are a group who do care about our environment and want to be able to be proud of that fact. We can only do this if people like you listen to us and try and work together on the problems.

(Letter from teenage resident to Council Chief Executive, in Pearce and Milne, 2010)

The Coalition Government’s commitment to localism could address some of these issues of powerlessness, although it requires neighbourhood infrastructure to be maintained, and continued investment in local structures and representation (Cole, 2011). This message is reinforced by JRF’s work in Bradford (Richardson, 2011) which highlights the need for continued devolution of power from the state to the local level, although this devolution must be inclusive and not foster increased social division.

## Social class, values and community spirit

From outside, white working-class communities are often viewed negatively in terms of what goes on in them, and the supposed values of residents. JRF’s studies however, demonstrate that white working-class people have a strong idea of what values bind them: ‘hard work, reciprocity and support’ (Beider, 2011). Indeed, recognising these as core values seemed intrinsic to people’s sense of their collective identity. Beider (2011) concludes that the ‘bounded set of egalitarian values are important and help the group to self-identify. Rather than being presented as a dependent community that had lost its way, participants across study areas emphasised a framework or code of working-class principles’.

This challenges notions that these places, and thus the communities which reside there, are somehow ‘broken’. This is a finding reinforced by JRF’s study of six different low-income neighbourhoods across the country. Cole (2011) concludes that there is a ‘strong affiliation to the virtues of hard work, self-reliance, responsibility and independence’.

Yet knowing what binds people together also accentuates the gap between the current situation and the desired one, in terms of community spirit and values. The recurring claims that things were better in the past (Pearce and Milne, 2010; Beider, 2011) are ways of recognising the growing disparity between those possibly idealised days, and the contemporary fragmentation that people complain about.

My fondest memories are of growing up in Scholemoor. It was a community. People didn’t lock their doors. We were in and out of people’s houses. Everybody knew everybody. And it’s all gone now.

(Long-term resident of Scholemoor estate, Bradford, in Pearce and Milne, 2010)

‘Community’, state Pearce and Milne (2010), ‘is something that has to be activated and renewed in the midst of counter-trends that have led people to “lock their doors”’. It is this tension between fragmentation and solidarity that brings us to discussions of community spirit (Illingworth, 2008; Pearce and Milne, 2010), or ‘community cohesion’ (Beider, 2011). The argument is clearly made that ‘community cohesion’, as measured and striven for by local authorities, is a top-down imposition onto communities that are often struggling for internal cohesion.

Formal interventions have their place, but also generate a recurrent problem of who gets access to leadership positions and who is seen as ‘representative’ by outside bodies (Illingworth, 2008; Pearce and Milne, 2010; Beider, 2011). Aston Pride, the Aston community group through which funds are passed, had no white members, a point that was repeatedly made to Beider’s team. Moreover, interviewees stress that informal interactions, such as attending festivals and meeting in public spaces such as schools and community centres, are just as important to the development of community spirit. A Zimbabwean migrant in Holme Wood, interviewed in Illingworth’s film (Illingworth/JRF, 2009) talks of her pleasure of feeling included because she was given a birthday card at her local pub.



The construction of 'community values' means that distinctions between good and bad values are made. Much of the insecurity experienced is due to the behaviour and values of other white residents on estates, people who are seen as not sharing the interviewees' sense of community, respectability and decorum. The JRF papers highlight how white working-class people see themselves as the bearers of a particular set of values that distinguishes them from other groups, but we also see that these values are not held by everyone. One of the most striking and recurrent distinctions made by interviewees is between good and bad behaviour and values, and this is applied not only to black people and white foreigners, but to other white British people living on their estates. As Pearce and Milne (2010) and Clarke and Garner (2010) argue, community does not create itself: it needs active construction. Part of this process entails a division, not just by the more obvious variables (area of residence, gender, age, etc.) but above all, by values. Indeed, gender emerges as a key theme in some studies of working-class culture with women cited as being central to the social networks that enable communities to function and be mutually supportive (Robertson, 2008).

People frequently criticise those viewed as not contributing to the economy, not parenting properly and those whose behaviour upsets or intimidates other residents. Those individuals are seen as a serious threat to values based on shared responsibilities and solidarity, or as representative of what is going wrong.

The benefits culture isn't working class. It's not the unfortunate ones that need benefits that are the problem; it is the deliberate exploiters of the system who don't want to work. They are an underclass and at odds with the working class.

(Resident of Somers Town, London, in Beider, 2011)

This trend toward individualism and away from community-oriented life is often viewed as a feature of contemporary society. Indeed, the nostalgic narration of old communal activities – no necessity for locking doors, looking after people suffering from sickness or bereavement, etc. – is often contrasted with the fracturing of decent communities in the present. These discourses are so commonplace that they are not specific to any of the research cited above.

The people – used to be a garden competition every year, and there would be such beautiful gardens, people would really try – there's no pride anymore. People cared for each other in the past – you didn't worry if they'd think you were gonna be nosey: if they were sick, you'd knock on their door and see if you could help with the kids, bring them food, whatever. Nowadays people just go into their houses and shut the doors – people are more afraid.

(Resident of Canley, Coventry, in Beider, 2011)

While communities are constituted by people, it is also clear that institutions and amenities are important. Some of the main sources of frustration in working-class communities are the closure of, lack of access to, or absence of schools; community meeting places; recreation grounds; decent shopping facilities and transport links. In the same way that new amenities can boost local economies (e.g. the shopping centre at Castle Vale in Birmingham), their absence can generate anti-social behaviour, e.g. failure to replace the community centre on Hillfields; and finally, their lack of maintenance, inaccessibility (Pearce and Milne, 2010) or closure can underscore residents' feelings of abandonment, as witnessed in the closure of secondary schools and associated spaces on two estates (in Bristol and Plymouth) investigated by Clarke and Garner (2010).

Social class has many definitions. The most influential in terms of policy in the UK is that used for data collection by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), which has eight hierarchical categories based on types of employment. In a simpler version, that seems implicit in the fieldwork referred to above, there are three: working, middle and upper. However, significantly, this model is a static one. An alternative view is that social class is also a dynamic *relationship*, not merely a set of separate and bounded groups. In other words, the social processes that end up disadvantaging the working classes simultaneously grant advantage to the other two classes. All three are therefore in a symbiotic relationship. However, when the focus of the study is solely the white working class, the other groups evaporate, becoming invisible agents in the process.

In reality, members of other social classes are not marginal, but central to the story: as local authority and central government decision-makers, academics, teachers, and other professionals whose work involves interventions on estates. In these roles they do two significant things: manage the allocation of resources and generate ideas about the working class. However, the power imbalance is such that the middle classes are almost never referred to either as a 'community' or a social problem to be solved.

Moreover, in terms of hostility toward migrants and asylum-seekers for example, McLaren and Johnson (2007) argue that, based on the British Social Attitudes surveys, the gap between Labour-voting graduates (traditionally the group most liberal on immigration) and right-wing voters has been shrinking since the early 1990s, as those previously most favourable to immigration have become more restrictive in their outlook. In 2011, the distinction in opinion polls between 'liberal' middle classes and the 'hostile' working classes is therefore much more a question of degree than it was two decades ago.

Understanding white working-class identities could therefore be enhanced by bearing in mind the inherent tension between how these identities are formed, and how those in other wealthier residential areas are formed. This process is relational, in that middle-class ideas about the working class being impoverished, rough, tribal and abject are produced in opposition to working-class ideas about the white middle classes being instrumental, individualist and detached. In the same way, the places interviewees live are structured not solely by the culture(s) of the people who live in them, but also by economic and social relationships with other areas of the same towns that are over-endowed with resources.

## Desire for 'fairness' rather than 'equality' and tensions over resource allocation

Part of the story of disengagement with politics, as Beider (2011) notes, is white British people's perceptions that the 'equality' agenda is not in their interests, and that it falls under the category of 'political correctness'. While 'perceptions of fairness' is a theme developed by the Commission on Integration and Cohesion in 2007 (CIC, 2007), the current Government has also picked up on this line of argument, now using 'fairness' as a key theme, and de-prioritising the term 'equality' (May, 2010).<sup>2</sup>

We wanted to be treated equally rather than feeling that we are last in line ... we want to feel valued and be listened to.

(Resident of Somers Town, London, in Beider, 2011)

The desire for allocation of resources to be fair comes through strongly from Beider's material. A perception that minorities are given preference in various kinds of public resource is a common feature of studies carried out in the last decade (see Lewis, 2005, for example). Hewitt (2005) suggests that the majority understand local authority equalities work as political correctness, or 'one rule for us and another for them'. Beider (2011) provides specific examples of what people think is fair: community advocacy ought to be located in neutral bodies such as schools; agencies should be accessible to everyone; and resentment is expressed over minority-only facilities (especially those that entail exclusive use of public spaces, such as women's groups and the use of public buildings as mosques). However, there is wider evidence that perceptions over resource allocation also owe much to the relationship between individual local authorities and the communities they serve (Richardson, 2011).

A theme arising throughout interviews is that the concepts underlying the equalities agenda in Britain is part of what is popularly called 'PC'. Political correctness covers a broad range of ideas, from health and safety regulations preventing schoolchildren from playing conkers, via attempts to ban Christmas because it offends other religions, through to allocating resources to people based on ethnic identity. Sometimes there is substance to the claim that is being criticised, but often there is not.

Less political correctness – we have gone too far. My dad was Latvian. Community cohesion is part of that political correctness – it alienates and divides people. Even communities has issues with it – they don't want to be tarred with the same brush – the stuff around not having Christmas having a winter festival – Indians I know are aghast at it.

(Man, Canley, in Beider, 2011)

A lot of what people think is 'PC' may well be legitimately open to discussion. That is a separate topic, which could form part of dialogue within and between communities. However, one of the functions of political correctness, as noted above, is to render someone else's argument invalid. Just as anti-PC people argue that 'racist' is a term deployed to close down argument, so too is PC.

The term PC is also being used to avoid listening to people's experiences, and belittling advances toward equality and fairness, especially in terms of what labels are acceptable to minority groups. There are now taboos over the use of insulting terms for very good reasons. At the same time, terms that are not insulting but descriptive ('black', 'Asian', 'ethnic minority', etc.), are not taboo. These discussions often distract from the economic/material factors that generate empirically-provable differences in life chances for different groups. This impedes efforts to narrow those differences through policy and community development strategies.

One respondent on Castle Vale (Birmingham) (Garner *et al.*, 2009) who had helped to organise a community 'clean up day' on another estate, in which members of all ethnic groups had taken part, stated that 'after the event, a city councillor managed to get funding for a day trip as a reward – but only for the Asian participants'. This action was felt to have 'destroyed the ethos' of what they were trying to achieve through the original activity. Moreover, it appears that any initiative aimed at minority-only groups of clients, or any funding received by such groups is perceived as part of the 'equality agenda', and thus automatically seen as unfair.

They've, they've got the Race Relations Officer at the Milton Keynes Council. They can phone him, or her, or whoever it is and say "well, look the white man down the road is calling my son names". You get a letter then, to say that you're a ... racist. But we're not!! We're not! We're trying to stick up for ourselves. We are white, we are ... this is our country, and as they are coming in they should be taught, there should be said "alright, what can you offer, how do you feel ... living among white people?"

(Woman, 60s, in Garner *et al.*, 2009)

Policy-making has always had unintended consequences. This widespread interpretation of the equality agenda as actually *contributing* to inequality, or generating reverse discrimination is striking in qualitative fieldwork with white working-class people in the last few years. In this way, resource allocation has often become 'racialised'. Similar patterns have been seen in the impact of both the previous and current governments' counter-terrorism policies, which have often worked against their aims by fostering suspicion and divisions within and between communities (Husband and Alam, 2011). There is a danger that policy-makers turn to 'blaming' their target communities, whereas the fault lies primarily with those developing and implementing policy with limited understanding of community dynamics, and without proper consideration of the likely impact of the policy.

The term 'racialisation' has become a key concept in the study of 'race' and ethnicity in the UK. The academic model used until the early 1980s was 'race relations': various races competing for resources. Racialisation contests the idea of distinct 'races' (with globally accepted characteristics and a position in an international hierarchy). Instead, it seeks to understand the processes through which 'race' becomes a salient issue in a given situation. In this perspective, groups of people and issues can be 'racialised'. The racialisation of social housing, for example, would involve agents (the local authority, civil society, the media, etc.); discourses (thematic patterns of talking and thinking); and practices that recognise the allocation of social housing as being racially patterned, giving advantage to some groups and disadvantaging others.

Housing – both social housing stock and the availability of and access to the privately owned market – is a particular flashpoint in issues over the allocation of resources. It is also important in fostering a local sense of community. As Robertson has argued, 'housing and its specific spatial locality is a reflection of status and now, with the growth of the private housing market, it is also important to the accumulation of personal wealth' (Robertson *et al.*, 2008). The lack of social housing and the insecurity of tenancy was also an issue in Cole's (2011) work, where fear was expressed about the proposed changes to Housing Benefit and tenancy further weakening community ties.

In work with white communities, we can see how these fears often found a racialised voice. Housing is so important to communities that the perception that stock is going to 'outsiders' is highly significant. How those 'outsiders' are defined varies in different places, and often owes more to the presence of ties and how people behave rather than being purely defined by 'race' or ethnicity.

I was told I didn't have enough points – they haven't been here two minutes and they get a house, we have to wait years. Why should we have to?

(Resident of Canley, Coventry, in Beider, 2011)

For a long time in the post-war era, it was understood that there were different forms of discrimination operating in the allocation of both social housing (Ginsburg, 1988) and private rented accommodation. However, it is only relatively recently that the *idea* that housing discrimination disadvantages white people and benefits minorities has taken root. As well as suggesting that minorities receive systematic preference in housing, this discourse suggests that all types of migrant, including asylum seekers do so without contributing to the public coffers (Lewis, 2005). Ideas about the biggest houses going only to minorities, and special modifications being made to them also circulate widely (Hoggett *et al.*, 2008). David Robinson (2010) points out that much of this is exaggeration. Moreover, the experiences of minority groups in public housing are actually poor (Ginsburg, 1988; Robinson, 2010).

New immigrants have little access to social housing, and asylum-seekers even less. Both these groups are overwhelmingly concentrated in private rented accommodation, some of which may be on estates (in houses that have been purchased and let out). The notion that minorities access housing ahead of white British people is based on two elements: first, identifying black people or white foreigners as not belonging; and second, entitlement. After all, how can you know, just from looking at someone, what their immigration status is? Many of the Somalis in Hillfields in Bristol (Hoggett *et al.*, 2008), for example, turned out to be Danish or UK nationals. Responses in interviews indicate that white people almost always overestimate the numbers of black people in their towns (Byrne, 2006), and frequently label people with different immigration statuses as one: 'asylum seeker' (Lewis, 2005).

The view that housing should be the entitlement of white UK nationals with local ties is also built on assumptions of privilege. It could be that, for a long time, white working-class people saw local authority housing as exclusively theirs – a reward for paying in contributions and local advantage. In this view, entitlement is based on either bloodlines or money. Either you are entitled because you are British, or because you are a taxpayer. This is why white people who do not pay taxes are also seen as undeserving. However, the least deserving (because they are perceived as not contributing) are migrants. The latter do pay taxes, yet, in the hierarchy of entitlement developed through hundreds of interviews in the research referred to here, are placed below the white people who do not work. It is easy, then, for British and European Union black and minority ethnic (BME) people to be categorised with undeserving migrants. If BME people are included as the 'we', it is when they are known personally to the interviewee.

Claims about entitlement to resources rest on the idea that minority ethnic groups are given *preferential* access to funding, jobs and housing by local authorities on the sole basis of their ethnic group or their immigration status (Wells and Watson, 2005; Garner *et al.*, 2009). In the absence of empirical evidence to bolster this claim, there are lots of anecdotes which are recognisable across the country (Garner *et al.*, 2009). However, the claim of unfairness is only made when it is perceived that minorities are getting something at the expense of the white working classes. A situation of resource allocation in which the odds are stacked toward the white working classes is seen not as unfair, but normal – because nationality, local kinship and contributions determine rightful access.

This distinction is important when we come to issues of racism, as in many cases (though not all) it is tied to the local community and a sense of belonging rather than 'race' or nationality as such that is considered important. This is the logic of arguments put forward in hundreds of interviews. The ubiquitous undeserving white benefit-claimants (some lazy and/or fraudulent, others criminal) appear in the same stories, which challenges the picture of entitlement through racial belonging, but complements the picture of entitlement accrued through contributions. Once again, this questions assumptions that it is always 'race' – as opposed to fitting in with social norms – that determines perceptions.

Studies frequently raise access to social housing as a problematic issue. Extensive coverage of this is given in Dench *et al.*'s (2006) study of Tower Hamlets<sup>3</sup>, in which people repeatedly argue that the local authority systematically favours minorities rather than local white families in its housing allocations. This accusation has been made across the country. Participants in Lewis' (2005) focus groups on asylum maintain that asylum-seekers are automatically given housing ahead of white families. A 21-year-old Milton Keynes man, who had to move away from the Coffee Hall estate as he was informed that there was not enough housing available there commented: 'The housing list is too long. I would have to be black, foreign or have a baby to get up there' (Garner *et al.*, 2009). A typical feeling is that the people responsible for allocating housing should 'look after their own first'.

The diminishing availability of local authority housing stock, as noted by Pearce and Milne (2010) and Dorling (2009), is explained by the reduction in housing brought about by the right-to-buy scheme since the early 1980s, and the requirement on local authorities to prioritise access by needs rather than residence. These changes in policy have led to extended families finding it difficult to remain in close proximity to each other. In the dominant way of thinking on estates, this process translates as housing being given away to outsiders instead of the locals.

## Analysing racism

All three studies take a sophisticated approach to the ideas expressed around racial difference, preferring to analyse and contextualise these ideas rather than label them as unproblematically 'racist'. Context is everything: the range of locations runs from white people as a minority within a ward (Aston, Birmingham) through to them comprising 96 per cent of the estate (Braithwaite and Guardhouse estates in Bradford). Usually, context in the UK is closer to the Canley (Coventry) model, in which over 90 per cent of the population is white. Social relationships are always partly products of place.

Research participants are often adamant that the ideas they express are not racist, and that the labelling of them as such prevents discussion. Of course, these are definitely not the only ideas that can be heard expressed in these discussions. There is also plenty of goodwill, desire for contact and integration<sup>4</sup> and some participants felt that dialogue can produce progress in developing community spirit.

*We close down debates about race. Conflict is not always bad and difference can be good and leads to change.*  
(Somers Town stakeholder, in Beider, 2011)

The repeated claims by white working-class interviewees that neither they nor the things they say are racist indicate that being racist is an undesirable position. Even far-right parties in the twenty-first century officially deny that they are working toward racist objectives. Indeed, part of the complicated terrain of public discourse on 'race' involves distinguishing between 'racist' and 'not racist' in a way that makes understanding racism properly virtually impossible. All the focus is on individuals saying or doing racist things: in the past few years there has been intermittent media focus on individuals making comments, and then being criticised in the media, the most high-profile of these being the Jade Goody–Shilpa Shetty incident on the Channel 4 programme *Celebrity Big Brother* in 2007, and more recently David Starkey's references to 'black culture' on *Newsnight* in August 2011. So it would be easy to conclude from the way people discuss racism that it is a) taboo; b) what individuals do; and c) constitutes a moral flaw.

Interviewees expressed a variety of resentments, with the identity of the out-groups depending on place. Pearce and Milne (2010) argue that on their Bradford estates, 'the traditional "Asian other" was being displaced for some by the asylum seeker and migrant worker from Eastern Europe, and these were resented by the Asian and white working-class communities alike'.

On Holme Wood in Bradford, Asian residents seem to face more sustained aggression than others:

*Incidents of racist language reveal more an excuse than a planned programme of racial harassment. In cases where Asian families have been targeted, for example, it has been reported by housing services that the intention has been to persist until the family move, creating a sense of hopelessness in the targeted family. In cases I have heard reported from African families, though not all, the harassment has subsided significantly over time, something that may well not be possible with families from Asian backgrounds or with a more Asian appearance (e.g. Middle Eastern immigrants/asylum seekers).*

(Illingworth, 2008)

In Canley (Coventry), Polish migrants, students and other British white people who did not share values of work ethic and respectability were viewed as not properly belonging to the white working class (Beider, 2011). In Somers Town and Aston, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Somalis were seen as more different and separate than others such as African-Caribbean people, who are often viewed as far more integrated than other British minorities.

*They were largely viewed as being outside the framework of working-class values discussed previously in terms of both ethnicity and class. Some residents suggested that the problem could be seen as Muslim culture being outside the norms of living in the UK. Specifically, concern was expressed about the views and status of women, the propensity to have large families (and thus access social housing) and the introduction of mosques creating problems with street parking.*

(Beider, 2011)

The way in which difference is seen as negative is evident in the summary above and in the attachment of narratives of decline to the arrival of migrants. Beider (2011) notes this in all of his research sites, with examples such as closing neighbourhood pubs, previously centres of community activity, blamed on minorities who do not use them. In fact, blaming incomers for decline is marked across the board, with the precise 'culprit' or 'scapegoat' groups differing from one place to another. People are viewed as fitting or not fitting into the local norms, in a context of social change frequently seen in a negative light.

The academic concept of 'prejudiced people', with a set of particular characteristics, goes back to Allport's social psychology studies in the 1940s.<sup>5</sup> This was a dominant way to frame discussions of racism in academia until the 1970s. It is therefore perfectly understandable why people would want to avoid being labelled racist. A defence mechanism that has emerged is to portray those who would designate someone as a racist as PC, thus discrediting them.

A further theme in which racialised ideas are expressed is the assertion of a failure to integrate through shared values. This type of accusation in Bristol, for example, is directed at Somalis (Hoggett *et al.*, 2008), characterised as 'rude' and 'stand-offish'; and Asians, viewed as not learning English and remaining in parallel circuits (Clarke and Garner, 2010). However, this 'sticking together', both financially and in terms of lobbying is also sometimes referred to jealously, as a form of solidarity of which white working-class communities are no longer capable. Solidarity and strong social ties are important in these communities (Robertson *et al.*, 2008), and those who do not seem to value these or become part of them are viewed as undermining the sense of community. As Cole's (2011) work demonstrates, the importance of strong social networks is often increased in low-income neighbourhoods and thus perhaps we should see integration as being more than simply an issue of integration between groups racialised as not white, but within a neighbourhood as a whole (Johnson, 2010).

## Policy implications and recommendations

Part of our previous weakness in addressing many of the issues cited by participants in these research projects is that we have made false assumptions. Before setting out specific areas for action, it is important to consider the lens through which we examine these issues and determine responses.

White working-class people experience social change from different positions. There is diversity in terms of age, employment experience, adherence to core values, openness to community, etc. Obviously, the way people are socialised into masculinity or femininity is also a distinguishing factor, affecting how men and women act in relation to a variety of issues. We must reject notions that the white working class is homogenous: people end up feeling no distinctions are made to reward good citizenship and that policy is 'one-size-fits-all' (Cole *et al.*, 2011).

We live in a system in which class (as well as racialisation) is a relationship. Diverse groups of individuals can move up or down, through the levels of working class, even to middle- or upper-class positions through education, qualifications and employment. These people are social actors rather than passive figures who are only acted upon. However, the choices for people on these estates are limited by specific obstacles (physical, internal and external), as clearly demonstrated in the JRF's Bradford research and the other work referred to here. Individual behaviour and individual choices are not the only factors determining outcomes.

The white working classes have strong values to do with work, respectability and solidarity. The majority of people interviewed in this research are ambivalent over illegitimacy; against anti-social behaviour; ambivalent over 'race', and are attached to a vision of the past in which people demonstrated more solidarity.

Assumptions that the white working classes are easy pickings for the far-right are not borne out in the literature (Cruddas *et al.*, 2006; John *et al.*, 2005), which finds that there are a number of factors making groups and places more likely to vote for far-right groups. Most white working-class people are against the BNP, which is widely seen as extremist. Even those who do support that party seem to replicate the distinction seen so frequently in our studies – where they seek to valorise themselves as hard-working and ethical in contrast to the groups they see as not belonging (Rhodes, 2011).

Place is all-important. The local contexts and experiences of people on these estates and areas are often downplayed or ignored altogether in favour of one-size-fits-all policies that are top-down rather than bottom-up. This will negate the impact of top-down national frameworks and policy headings such as Britishness or community cohesion.

It is important to clarify that none of these suggestions here are based on the idea that the white working class face structural disadvantage through being *white*, rather than through occupying a disadvantaged class position. There is no evidence that whiteness bestows relative economic disadvantage, and the range of suggestions below assume that measures that improve the lives of working-class people living on estates are what is required.

Feigning white working-class disadvantage as an ethnic disadvantage rather than as class disadvantage is exactly what rhetorically places this group in direct competition with minority ethnic groups. As such, it does little to address the real and legitimate grievances poor white people in Britain have.

(Sveinsson, 2009)

## A focus on all classes, not just the working class

Policy-makers must stop problematising the working class. Just as with other parts of society, we must not see a few individuals as representative of the wider character of neighbourhoods. Middle class domination of politics, education and the media reflects power relationships. It is not surprising that distinctions are made between middle- and working-class cultures, but we should bear in mind that these distinctions are mostly value judgements rather than universal norms.

Furthermore, we need to look at how others behave towards the white working class. The inhabitants of middle-class residential districts are also part of the processes of 'integration' and 'segregation' (Dorling, 2009). Over and above the professional roles that middle-class people play in relation to working-class communities, there are other options. What roles can members of this group fulfil to help reduce inequalities? **Twinning can be used to improve understanding and interaction between different social class groups**, just as it has been used in the past to break down ethnic polarisation. Twinning some of these estates with middle-class areas can achieve a number of objectives, such as at skills sharing; the development of cultural capital; shadowing of people doing professional jobs; and mentoring young people in terms of educational choices and employment opportunities.

## The role of the economy

There has been too much focus upon the cultural issues of these communities. While we cannot dismiss this as a factor, interviewees in the research make a persuasive case that it is economic and labour market pressures that have led to fracture and alienation. The erosion of traditional manufacturing jobs has also undermined roles within the community and may have particularly damaged the self-esteem of men. Thus there needs to be **dedicated economic development strategies** that address the needs of these communities. Also, rather than concentrate on cultural differences between white communities and minority ethnic ones in the locality, we should look more closely at the economic inequalities faced by these communities.

The focus should be more on inequality that has significant economic aspects (as consistently identified in reports by the JRF through to the Hills Report) rather than being fixated on correcting culture. We need to move beyond viewing the white working classes and minority ethnic groups as culturally-determined (i.e. defined by their cultural norms – usually seen as problematic but sometimes as exotic or picturesque).

One of the key areas of anxiety and resentment is the allocation of resources. It is no coincidence that the BNP, for example, base many local campaigns around the perceived unfairness of resource allocation: this is not likely to be very effectively challenged by local or central authorities.<sup>6</sup> There may be particular issues with local authorities being seen as untrustworthy sources of information, but these are not insurmountable. Some authorities have experimented with **community representatives** as transmitters of information.

## Nurturing localism

The current trend toward devolution and empowering local communities is welcome and could help strengthen community ties and generate economic opportunity. However, this will not happen by osmosis. While many agree that some services could be better delivered by local people, the funding of the very organisations and structures that would enable this to happen are at the highest risk of having their funding cut.

One example of a local group already active is Holme Wood Ethnic Minorities, a voluntary organisation which provides information and support to new arrivals on the estate, as well as people who have been around longer. It is staffed by local people and is a response to some of the needs identified in Illingworth's (2008) study.

The research indicates that relationships between citizens and their local authorities are poor. It is striking how little people interviewed as part of the research projects seem to be helped in their collective action by local councillors. They often find themselves at loggerheads with local authorities, particularly, but not exclusively, over service delivery.

One suggestion is that **within each local authority there should be a structure enabling local people to talk face to face with decision-makers** without being mediated by councillors. As a secondary element of this process, communities need a designated official within the local authority whose interests are allied with theirs. This began under the Neighbourhood Partnerships scheme, where officials would be responsible for development in particular areas of cities. However, those posts were funded out of a now-discontinued central government initiative.

It is common for reports on community development to suggest more effective mechanisms are put in place to enable participatory politics. Part of this could be the cultivation of a local leadership (Beider, 2011), but Pearce and Milne's (2010) subtle point about the pressures generated by, and possible negative aspects of this in activists' lives should also be borne in mind. Equally as important as *activists* are *structures* to enable an effective form of communication between community bodies and outside agencies.

## Increased private sector involvement

With the increasing emphasis on the private sector as a dynamo of the economy, this sector should be encouraged to play a leading role in tackling issues endemic on some white estates.

One thing that can be done by both the private sector and planning department is to encourage **business to locate or relocate close to working-class neighbourhoods** and away from city centres, in order to grow local employment. Another public-private collaboration should be in **services being contracted directly**, with local authority credits, instead of them going through local authorities. This means closer control over the services coming into working-class communities and potential for more flexibility.

Accepting that these changes take some time and require co-operation, there are some direct things that the private sector could do immediately. One of these is to **boost the number of apprenticeships and promote them**, providing pathways into skilled labour. Business can also take on the **sponsorship of social enterprises** (especially around leisure and amenities) and perhaps provide support to local voluntary and community sector activities that are threatened by the withdrawal of public funding. The private sector can also lend their expertise to communities who are looking to take control of their services by **offering business advice** in matters such as setting up housing trusts or other services.

## Local input to define the 'Big Society'

Aspects of what is contained in this report might fit into the broad notion of local participative democracy that seems to be one strand of the 'Big Society'.

The Big Society is about a huge culture change, where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace, don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face, but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities.

(Cameron, 2010)

There are a range of critical reflections about what the Big Society might be (e.g. Runnymede Trust, 2011a, 2011b; Stott, 2011) and there is an opportunity for local community groups to help shape this agenda before it becomes fixed. Moreover, it is important that community groups are allowed to campaign for social change, not just delivery of services. Part of empowerment is pursuing community interests without intermediaries, and if the Big Society is to mean anything it must include such groups, which are vital to democracy and social justice.



In order to propel this item into the public realm, the Runnymede Trust (2011b) has taken a lead in **setting up local panels** to listen to what ordinary people think the Big Society should actually consist of, and the potential advantages and pitfalls of its three strands. If this loose idea is actually turned into a discussion, in which people's opinions are registered and acted upon, the policy deriving from it would be at least partly embedded in the aspirations and needs of those it is aimed at. Bradford might be a pilot area for the initial projects. A chair, drawn from the world of community development and not aligned to a political party, could be seconded to take charge of this work, with findings circulated to all levels of governance in Britain.

## Dialogue and interaction between groups

In the research referred to in this paper, divisions within and between communities have been identified. Dialogue around the reasons for tension is one step towards resolving it. The form and topics of this dialogue should be decided locally. It could, if necessary, be mediated on conflict resolution principles. Dialogue involves both talking and listening, and minority groups also have narratives of loss and abandonment to tell.

To help this, area **twinning for community development projects** should be encouraged. This is particularly aimed at helping develop links across space, generations and possibly across ethnicity. **Transport credits** should be made available to reduce the obstacle created by movement in order to access other communities. While contact through dialogue is not a cure-all (Orton, 2009), if skilfully managed it can broker conflict resolution and help start relationships.

## Opening up conversations about racism

Many of the ideas expressed around resources, culture and belonging in the extensive fieldwork referred to above could be considered 'racist'. It would be a colossal waste, however, not to examine them in more detail and move towards a better understanding of the anxieties that push people toward exclusionary practices.

The problem for most people is that the terms 'racism' and 'racist' shut down conversations. However, we need to avoid going to the other extreme: where racism is dismissed outright as an invented term that has no substance, where nothing can ever be described as racist. We must ask what 'fairness' really means, for example. Some of the assumptions that seem to underlie it are immensely problematic. Are the respondents in the research here looking for social justice *per se*, or to re-establish a social differential between the British and the rest?

Instead, we need a more mature conversation where **people are allowed to express their concerns over resource allocation or representation without immediately being labelled 'racist'**. In many working-class communities, a loss of identity has gone alongside, and been negatively reinforced by, more profound socio-economic changes. Following the decline of manufacturing industries, these communities have seen levels of disadvantage and deprivation rise. Worklessness and the loss of stable jobs have impacted upon social structures and are linked to a decline in traditional institutions such as trade unions and social clubs. In some places, these issues do become racialised, as competition for resources or perceptions of bad service are exploited by extremists and 'the other' is blamed. However, for many of these communities, 'race' is not their top priority and therefore addressing their concerns through an anti-racist campaigning message is unlikely to have much impact.

**A distinction should be made between people, ideas and practices.** The labelling of people, and indeed, entire communities (as seen in the JRF's Bradford work) as 'racist' is not contributing to a better understanding of how racism functions. Indeed, as many of the interviewees have made clear, it is shutting down discussion and dialogue. A more effective model would be one in which *ideas* and *actions* can be identified as racist, and explained. People would, ideally, then be capable of distinguishing between them.

The tensions on each side are evident: on one side, many white people feel they are neglected and cannot talk about why they feel that way. On the other side are black people and other minority groups who experience verbal abuse and physical violence, and who have historically confronted racism from white British people. Continuing as if nothing were wrong, despite all the evidence, is no longer an option.

The patterns of racial disadvantage are still identifiable in various fields, including employment, poverty, housing, education, criminal justice and health (Platt, 2005; Hills *et al.*, 2010), and these are not solely attributable to individual prejudices. We have to move away from a model in which individuals are thought to be deficient and therefore primarily responsible for on-going social patterns of inequality.

There are diverse experiences of being white and working class, and many involve being structurally excluded in different ways: however, this set of experiences does not mean that those who are excluded cannot have racist ideas or engage in racist practices. Nor does it mean that if you are white and working class, you enjoy no forms of privilege over ethnic minorities.

## Public spaces and whole community activities

Certain buildings, services and spaces are seen as shared community assets. They provide part of the vital infrastructure that supports community ties. It is important that these **assets are both protected and maintained in times of austerity and also made available for the whole community** and not seen as being the province of one particular group.

The association in people's minds between the unfair allocation of resources and ethnic minorities includes public spaces (Wells and Watson, 2005). Interviews reveal concerns about the allocation of resources for any organisation or building that is necessarily exclusive to minorities, especially if it uses public space. Interviewees also have ideas about positive interaction, but this touches on contentious issues: the interfaces between the secular and the religious and arguments for autonomous minority organisations and spaces.

Again, some dialogue has to take place in relation to these issues. However, as usual, there are parameters: focusing on one religious group is inequitable. If there is a discussion about public spaces and worship, it cannot only be about Muslims. Similarly, the outcome sought cannot be a blanket ban on organisations catering for minority-only constituencies. White British people also have to recognise that many public spaces *feel* like whites-only ones to people who do not fit that category; that details to do with faith place limits on what some people can and cannot do; and that there might well be good reasons why certain organisations deal with only minority people. However, all these stories get lost when no-one gets to hear them or discuss their significance.

## Notes

1. This is a marker of tradition and not necessarily current. Both Pearce and Milne (2010) and Illingworth (2008) identify estates they worked on as now having significant minority presence.
2. Home Secretary Theresa May stated in her speech that 'in recent years, equality has become a dirty word because it meant something different. It came to be associated with the worst forms of pointless political correctness and social engineering.'
3. This work is controversial primarily because it was perceived as not adopting a sufficiently critical stance towards the ideas expressed in the interview material by its white working-class respondents. In other words, it allowed people to maintain they were victims of a housing policy that benefits minorities at their expense, but did not seek to establish whether that was really the case.
4. This is evident in all three of the JRF reports reviewed here. Moreover, in Garner *et al.* (2009) there is an entire section on people's suggestions for improving integration.
5. A reprint of Allport's classic text (1979) sets out his main theories, while these were developed further by Tajfel (1981), and Pettigrew (1988).
6. The Maureen Stowe story shows that the information can allay people's fears about unfair policies. She was a BNP councillor in Burnley who joined partly because she was convinced that the local council unfairly discriminated in favour of Asian communities when it came to allocating resources. Stowe resigned from the party soon after her election, when she had first-hand experience of how the decisions surrounding resource allocation were actually made (as well as experience of other figures in the BNP).

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