

Connected Communities

Connectivity and conflict in periods of austerity

Annette Hastings and Peter Matthews



Connectivity and conflict in periods of austerity: what do we know about middle class political activism and its effects on public services?

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Executive Summary

There is concern that the middle classes enjoy advantages over less affluent social groups in relation to public service provision. Research on this question is, however, fragmented across policy fields and disciplines. This paper presents the results of a realist synthesis of academic research from the UK, US and Scandinavia since 1980. It shows that there is indeed evidence of middle class advantage in relation to public services, with the evidence most secure with respect to the UK, especially schooling, health and land use planning. It also notes, however, that there is insufficient evidence to identify the scale or import of additional benefit. The paper identifies four causal theories derived from the evidence which appear to explain how this advantage comes about. It offers an overview assessment of the strength of the evidence base in relation to both the mechanisms which underpin advantage, and the contexts which support these. It argues that middle class advantage accrues as a result of the interplay between the attitudes and activities of service users, service providers and the broader policy and social context. The paper argues for a more concerted research effort designed to determine the nature, extent and import of middle class advantage.

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Introduction

There is long standing concern that the middle classes can capture a disproportionate share of the benefits of public services (Le Grand, 1982). The contraction of public services from 2010 onwards will intensify pressures on service providers trying to protect services for less advantaged social groups in the face of increasing competition for ever scarcer resources. The political drive towards 'localism' is likely to produce additional opportunities for community influence in the design and delivery of local services. The question of who benefits, and to what degree, from this re-thinking of the relationship between state and citizens is clearly pertinent. To this end, there is a need to assess the diffuse and fragmented evidence on how the middle classes engage with public services and with what impact.

About the research and this paper

This paper presents and discusses the results of the very first comprehensive synthesis of research on the nature, extent and impacts of middle class activism in relation to public service provision. For the purposes of the review, we defined middle class activism broadly - as the strategic articulation of non-poor interests on a collective or individual basis. The research involved a realist synthesis (Pawson, 2002) of original academic research evidence on aspects of this core theme from the UK, US and Scandinavian literature between 1980 and the present. Some 65 papers across disciplinary perspectives have been examined, with the literature on specific services such as schooling, health care, land use and neighbourhood planning, emergency services, local transportation and neighbourhood environmental services assessed thematically, alongside broader literatures on middle class activism and public service provision more generally. In Hastings and Matthews (2011a) we provide a more detailed discussion of the conduct of the review.

The first task was to build mid-range theory about the effects of middle class activism via two related processes:

1. By identifying theorised 'mechanisms' linking middle class activism with specific processes and outcomes.
2. By exploring how contextual factors – as diverse as policy priorities or levels of social inequality – can explain both the nature and efficacy of these mechanisms.

In practice this involved a critical, conceptual and empirical analysis of the evidence, together with processes of reflection and deliberation. The second task was to assess the strength of the evidence which supports specific mechanisms.

The synthesis therefore makes two contributions on middle class effects on public services. First, it explicates the range of theories (mechanisms and contexts) for which there is some evidence. Second, it assesses the relative strength of the evidence base in

support of the specific theories. This short paper summarises our findings. It concludes by reflecting on the nature of the evidence on middle class activism and identifies some priority themes for further research.

Main findings of the synthesis

Do the middle classes have advantages in public services provision?

There is evidence that middle class and relatively affluent individuals and groups are often advantaged in their use of local public services compared to poorer social groups. This finding is in itself significant. It is important to briefly summarise the evidence on the nature and scale of middle class advantage as well as account for this advantage.

- Middle class advantage has been researched more extensively in the UK than elsewhere. We can only speculate as to why the scale of the research effort differs, but it is likely to relate to differences between the nature and reach of differing welfare states as well as levels of inequality. That the UK enjoys a universal welfare state and high levels of inequality – suggesting class competition over finite resources – may be significant. However, further research would have to be done in the US and Scandinavia in order to determine the relative scale of middle class advantage there.
- The UK evidence is limited as to the scale of middle class advantage and the extent to which it 'matters' for winners and losers. Le Grand's early work – which suggested that the middle classes were the 'main beneficiaries' of the welfare state – has been neither proven nor disproven, although Bramley and Evans' spatial analysis of the distribution of spending by deprivation decile suggests a spectrum of pro-poor to pro-rich services (2000). There is some quantitative evidence which demonstrates that resources for environmental services can be skewed to affluent neighbourhoods (Hastings et al, 2009). Within policy there has often been an *a priori* assumption that middle class complaining drives up standards, for example through mixed communities policies bringing in more affluent residents to improve neighbourhoods. There is little evidence that an influential middle class has wider benefits for service users who are not middle class – by driving up service quality for example. This suggests that middle class advantage may be a 'zero-sum game'.
- There is clear evidence the middle classes obtain particular, identifiable benefits from public services in the UK which other social groups do not. There is qualitative evidence from land use planning, schooling, health services and environmental services of decisions being made which favour middle class service users. These include changes to proposals in land use planning and on school closures, gaining access to favoured schools or top streams within schools and accessing quicker or better levels of service from health professionals and environmental service providers (e.g. Yarwood, 2002; Bondi, 1988; Carroll & Walford, 1996; Pell et al, 2000).

- Perhaps stronger is the evidence of a generally favourable pre-disposition to middle class needs within public services. This means benefits can be more extensive but also more difficult to detect as they are often part of the status quo of service delivery, or reflect a priori assumptions of practitioners (Lipsky, 1980). However both qualitative and quantitative evidence does exist. Examples include resource distribution which allows for longer GP consultations (Mercer and Watt, 2007), or which provide for more street cleaning capacity in more affluent neighbourhoods (Hastings et al, 2009). Policies which support 'school choice' appear to favour middle class parents (Carroll and Walford, 1996; Reay & Lucey, 2003), and local land use policies can pre-emptively respond to the 'imagined opposition' of the middle classes (Boschken, 1998; Walker et al, 2010). There is also evidence from the health literature of the existence and impacts of particularly empathetic relationships between middle class health professionals and similar service users (Mercer and Watt, 2007; Neumann, 2009).

How does middle class advantage come about?

There is strong evidence that the benefits enjoyed by the middle classes are only partially due to the deliberate actions of service users. The evidence points to a more complex picture in which the actions and attitudes of service providers are key, as are the signals arising from the broader policy context. The synthesis has therefore led to a re-thinking of the role of middle class activism in securing advantage. The evidence is it accrues as a result of the interplay between service users, providers and the broader policy and social context.

By synthesising the evidence across a wide range of policy fields and disciplines, as well as evidence from the UK, US and Scandinavia, this research clarifies a set of causal theories which explain this interplay. Four causal theories were derived from the evidence. In Hastings and Matthews (2011b) we detail each causal theory, set out the range of mechanisms, contexts and outcomes associated with each and assess the strength of the evidence base in relation to each element. In what follows, we provide an outline of each theory.

1. *The level and nature of middle class interest group formation allows for the collective articulation of their needs and demands, and that service providers respond to this.*

This theory describes how an agentive middle class are more likely to collectively organise (Carroll and Walford, 1996) and to focus their participation on groups with the greatest potential for influence (McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999; Bagnall, Longhurst & Savage, 2003, Yarwood, 2002). The prior social and professional links between middle class people are important for connecting individuals (Li, Savage et.al 2003) and for providing access to information which will justify a case or identify pathways of influence (Bondi, 1988; Carroll and Walford, 1996; Vincent, Braun & Ball, 2008; Archer, 2010). The evidence base is strongest in relation to the UK (particularly England) although there is also evidence from the US and Norway (Baeck, 2010, Campbell, 2002; Walsh, Jennings et al, 2004). The evidence is strongest in the fields of schooling and land use planning.

These policy fields encourage this kind of engagement and the evidence for these mechanisms and outcomes is apparent from this. For example, it is clear that collective organising can influence planning decisions and broader planning policies (Abram, Murdoch and Marsden, 1996; Yarwood, 2002; Sturzaker, 2010). Where middle class parents dominate parent advocacy groups they influence policies on pupil placing, practices on streaming, special education needs and school closures (Bondi, 1988; Carroll & Walford, 1996; McGrath and Kuriloff, 1999; Archer, 2010; Baeck, 2010). There is some indication service providers afford formal engagement more validity than, for example, the campaigning activity associated with working class organising (Bondi, 1988).

2. *The level and nature of middle class engagement with public services on an individualised basis means that services are more likely to be provided according to their needs and demands.*

This theory focuses on two key mechanisms facilitating engagement between service users and providers on an individual basis, which are both used more extensively by the middle classes. The first is 'co-production' which covers a range of behaviours from attending parents meetings at school, commenting on planning policies or sharing medical information with health professionals. Some services, such as health, require more coproduction and this is apparent in the evidence. While the impacts of co-production appear under researched there is evidence in schooling – where the involvement of middle class parents is valued as a tool for school improvement (Crozier, 1997) – of tangible benefits for middle class children (Crozier, 1997; Crozier et al, 1998, McGrath and Kuriloff, 1999). In health, coproduction produces longer consultations for affluent groups as well as greater information exchange with health professionals (Martin, 1991; Somerset, 1999; Mercer and Watt, 2007). The second mechanism concerns complaining behaviour. Here the evidence is strong the middle classes complain more often and more vociferously (Sharp, 1982; Walsh, Jennings et al., 2004; Hastings, 2009a). A large body of work exists from the US in the 1970s theorising and empirically testing whether the likelihood of contacting was related to socio-economic status (Sharp, 1982). That complaining makes at least some difference to service received is clear from health, planning and environmental services. This evidences a tendency for service providers to anticipate middle class complaints in policy design and in specific decisions (Somerset, 1999; Walker et al, 2010; Hastings, 2009a). The efficacy of complaints is undoubtedly supported by a broader climate where the 'active consumer' is encouraged. Finally, the evidence also points to a virtuous cycle in which a sense of personal efficacy is built from successful encounters with public agencies (Aars. & Strømsnes, 2007; Hastings, 2009b; Abram et.al., 1996).

3. *The alignment in the cultural capital enjoyed by middle class service users and service providers leads to engagement which is constructive and confers advantage.*

This further explains how and why both middle class collective and individual engagement confer advantages. The importance of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) for securing advantage in the field of education featured prominently in the review. This evidence points to how confidence, educational status and soft knowledge of the system, along with alignment with the cultural capital of education professionals, eases engagement and facilitates the other mechanisms identified (Crozier, 1997; McGrath and Kuriloff, 1999; Crozier et al, 2008; Archer, 2010). Across policy domains it is clear that the capacity of middle class actors to use 'appropriate' language and to access the 'right' knowledge – often by informal means or tacit channels – is vital for securing advantage. For example, three studies of land use planning (Abram, Murdoch and Marsden, 1996; Yarwood, 2002; Sturzaker, 2010) suggested a 'sustainability' discourse was used strategically by middle class actors to prevent rural house-building. In health, the difference which the cultural alignment between middle class patients and health professionals makes to the constructiveness of services received is routinely hinted at, although rarely rigorously researched. Examples include GPs and midwives admitting to providing more detailed information to articulate patients (Martin, 1991; Hart and Lockey, 2002) and GPs referring patients deemed articulate to consultants (Somerset et al, 1999). Two papers which showed a clear statistical relationship between social status and hospital admission and prioritization (Reid et al, 1999; Pell et al, 2000) suggested the relationship at least partly reflected variations in levels of articulateness across the social gradient.

4. *The needs of middle class service users, or their expectations of service quality, are 'normalised' in policy and practice to the extent that policy priorities sometimes favour the middle classes.*

The normalisation of middle class needs and demands can be explained with reference to the alignment of cultural capital between decision makers and middle class service users. This theory foregrounds how resource allocation can underestimate differences in need between poorer and affluent groups, facilitating longer, more constructive GP consultations for affluent patients (Mercer and Watt, 2007; Somerset, 1999:) and higher standards of street cleanliness in middle class neighbourhoods (Hastings et al, 2009). That such issues are not usually framed as policy problems may be a result of the political need to secure middle class votes and assent, although empirical evidence on this question is not available. This mechanism also highlights how the 'choice' agenda in education and health policy constructs a service user with middle class cultural capital, thus normalising middle class modes of engagement.

Recommendations for future research

The evidence undoubtedly points to middle class advantage in relation to public service provision. However, it is incomplete and dispersed across policy fields and disciplines. These two findings in themselves justify more significant research effort designed to determine the nature, extent and import of middle class advantage. Such endeavours could generate new understandings of inequities in terms of who benefits from public services and suggest a fresh perspective on understanding the determinants inequality. We would also argue that more attention needs to be paid in policy and practice to

middle class advantage. Hastings and Matthews (2011c) is short accessible summary of the evidence which will be disseminated widely to policy audiences in order to provoke debate and reflection.

It seems that the existing research is sufficient to enable theory building in terms of linking middle class service engagement with advantage. However, as Hastings and Matthews (2011b) shows, the causal chains we have derived from the extant evidence include many elements for which the evidence base is at best only adequate. There is a real paucity of direct evidence which links specific contextualised mechanisms to particular outcomes. There is enormous scope for further empirical work designed to explicitly test and develop these theories across policy domains, particularly the impact on outcomes, and to develop further theorisations of the nature and production of middle class advantage in different contexts.

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