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Middle-class political activism and middle-class advantage in relation to public services: a realist synthesis of the evidence base

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Abstract

Since the late 1960s social policy scholarship has been concerned with the distribution of the resources or benefits across social gradients. This paper presents a review of the literature on one mechanism by which inequity might be produced – activism by middle-class service users enabling them to capture a disproportionate share of resources. The review used the methodology of realist synthesis to bring together evidence from the UK, US and Scandinavian countries over the past thirty years. The aim was to construct a "middle-theory" to understand how and in which contexts collective and individual activity by middle-class service users might produce inequitable resource allocation or rationing decisions that

disproportionately benefit middle-class service users. The paper identifies four causal theories which nuance the view that it is the "sharp elbows" of the middle-classes which confer advantage on this group. It shows how advantage accrues via the interplay between service users, providers and the broader policy and social context.

Keywords: inequality; middle-classes; activism; public services; realist synthesis

Introduction

Since the late 1960s social policy scholarship has been concerned that the welfare states of industrial economies fail to distribute their benefits on a socially just, or equitable, basis (for example, Titmuss, 1968; Tudor-Hart, 1971; Le Grand, 1982; Bramley, 1997; Cheshire, 2009). The focus of the earlier researchers was on equity and social class, the consideration of whether non-poor groups were the "main beneficiaries" of the welfare state (Le Grand, 1982) and whether an "inverse care law" operated as to whether relative needs were met across the social gradient (Tudor-Hart, 1971). A later generation of researchers from the US and UK finessed this analysis by considering the distribution of state resources in

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relation to the geography of need. The US 'urban services distribution literature' appeared to show there was no systematic bias against poor, black neighbourhoods (see: Lineberry, 1977), although that this analysis took no account of relative needs was highlighted subsequently (see Hastings, 2007 for a discussion). Research from the UK has tended to be more nuanced, exploring and critiquing notions of justice and public service provision (Powell and Boyne, 2001), as well as empirically investigating distribution (see, for example, Kirby and Pinch, 1983; Bramley, 1997; Boyne and Powell, 2001; Bramley and Evans, 2002; Wheeler, et al, 2005; Hastings, 2007). The evidence from the UK in the latter part of the 1990s and early 2000s pointed to how better off groups were advantaged in relation to *some* services (Bramley and Evans, 2002; Wheeler et al, 2005; Hastings, 2007), although the bigger picture was of an increasing skew of resources towards addressing disadvantage (Bramley and Evans, 2002). Clearly, the details of this picture will be subject to change in response to ideological and policy shifts.

Research on the distribution of benefit from public services has tended to focus on top-down, government policy drivers rather than on the role of bottom up,

political activity. Indeed, the question of how micro-level political processes and actors influence 'who gets what' has not been prominent within social policy (education being the key exception) or, indeed, within the academy in general. The relative silence is surprising, especially given public discourse appears to assume "middle-class parents with sharp elbows"[1] can capture disproportionate advantages, whether this be in schooling, healthcare, planning or other services. The research on the micro-processes of distribution has tended to focus on how public services meet, or fail to meet, the needs of those experiencing multiple deprivations (Duffy, 2000; Davies, 2007; Dubois, 2010). While Lipsky's classic work on street level bureaucrats does pay attention to how different social groups fare in everyday rationing decisions, the focus is on the controversial distinction between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor (1980; 2010). Lipsky's work has influenced numerous researchers interested in questions of justice and service provision (for example, Clapham and Kintrea, 1986; Wright, 2003; Hastings, 2009), yet it is notable that few studies consider the interactions between service providers and *advantaged* groups.

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[1] This phrase was famously used by the leader of the Conservative Party, now Prime Minister, David Cameron in an interview to *The Times* newspaper in January 2008, in defence of his decision to educate his child at a Church of England Primary School.

This paper centres on whether, how and with what effect middle-class activism secures advantage for this group of service users. The UK Government's so called 'localism' agenda - which could lead to larger differentials between places as they choose different 'strategies of equality' (Powell and Boyne, 2001) - make this question particularly pertinent. If the middle-classes are particularly effective at strategically articulating their needs and demands then localism could offer opportunities for them to benefit to a disproportionate extent. The paper brings to the fore and synthesises the evidence which already exists pertaining to the UK, US and Scandinavia over the past thirty years across a range of policy fields and academic disciplines on this topic. The research employed the realist synthesis approach to reviewing existing research evidence. This approach is particularly useful in providing a framework for linking specific micro processes, mechanisms and contexts to wider outcomes.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section overviews the history and rationale of the realist synthesis method. It describes what it offers beyond a traditional literature review and explains how the method is appropriate for assessing the evidence base in relation to

the questions at the centre of this paper. It also provides key information about the scale and scope of the synthesis. The second section presents and discusses the results of the synthesis. The final concluding section identifies key gaps in knowledge with respect to the accrual of middle-class advantage and presents a case for further research on this issue.

Realist synthesis: what is it and what does it offer?

Realist synthesis aims to straddle the divide between systematic literature reviews, such as those carried out by the Campbell Collaboration and more narrative literature syntheses (Pawson, 2002a; 2002b; Pawson, Greenhalgh et al., 2005). Realist synthesis has its roots in policy evaluation and Pawson's realistic evaluation approach (Pawson and Tilley, 1997) and as such it has largely been used to assess evidence in relation to policy interventions and how outcomes can be explained in relation to the mechanisms (social, political, fiscal and so on) inherent in the policy. It has a particular focus on the importance of wider contextual factors, such as policy domain, bureaucratic structures, or participant behaviour, capable of influencing whether or not a particular mechanism is are successful in delivering a desired

outcome (Pawson, 2002b; 2006; Pawson, Greenhalgh et al., 2005). A realist synthesis has two linked purposes: first to review the literature in order to derive from it a set of causal theories which relate mechanisms, contexts and outcomes to one another. And second, to assess the strength of the evidence base in relation to the identified mechanisms as well as the contexts and outcomes. As part of the drive towards evidence-based policy it aims to give the policy-maker a "rule-of-thumb" to understand 'WHAT it is about this kind of intervention that works, for WHOM, in what CIRCUMSTANCES, in what RESPECTS and WHY?' (Pawson, Greenhalgh et al., 2005: 31, emphasis in original).

A realist synthesis of a policy intervention starts by identifying the 'programme logic' underpinning a programme. Pawson's own synthesis of the evidence on the implementation of "Megan's Law" (i.e. an initiative to 'name and shame' sex offenders) breaks down how this might be done. First the specifics of the policy problem which the initiative is designed to address need to be clarified – in this case, the vulnerability of young people to attack from predatory offenders living anonymously in their neighbourhood. He then draws out a stepped programme logic from scrutinising policy reports. He

identifies four causal theories which might explain how naming and shaming interventions work: 1) that the development of a register of sex offenders would keep residents informed of local offenders living nearby 2) that this information would enable residents to protect themselves and their children 3) that residents would be involved in actively co-producing safety by monitoring offenders alongside law enforcement services, and 4) that the requirement on the offender to register their offence and residence, as well as "naming and shaming" itself, should deter sex offenders and reduce recidivism. It should be apparent that, by breaking down the logic in this way, a research synthesis can focus on assessing the evidence base for how each mechanism may work in different contexts. Therefore, rather than reviewing a range of overall evaluations of the implementation of "Megan's Law", Pawson purposively looked at studies that provided evidence on the operation of the individual theories identified above; for example he demonstrates one of the key challenges for successful implementation was the first step of keeping accurate and up-to-date records of offenders.

We argue that this approach to theory-building and assessing evidence is also appropriate to understanding

the effects, drivers and contexts of social or political processes – such as those potentially captured in the term middle-class political activism. In particular, the focus of realist synthesis on identifying mechanisms, underlying processes and the iterative process of theory-building offer a way to produce new critical insight, giving a 'feel for the literature' or a potentially large body of research and the 'caveats and considerations' around any causal theory (Pawson, Greenhalgh et al., 2005; pp.8, 11). While middle-class activism is clearly not a policy intervention, it can be argued to relate to a policy *problem*, albeit a contested one: the idea that better off social groups are advantaged with regard to public services. From a realist synthesis perspective, a 'programme logic' can be articulated.. This logic suggests that middle-class activism is a political intervention which works via a range of mechanisms, which are more or less salient depending on context, to produce outcomes which benefit this particular group. By employing the methodology, nuanced causal theory can be developed from the evidence in order to understand how this intervention operates. In this case – as will be detailed below – the process of realist synthesis allowed the research team to explain   middle class capture in relation

to four distinctive causal theories incorporating contexts,
mechanisms and outcomes.

Conducting the synthesis

Given the broad subject of the review topic and the
purposive breadth, a comprehensive approach to
literature searching was used aiming to encompass
studies that would evidence our initial hypothesis that
middle activism leads to specific benefits. Two electronic
databases were searched (CSA Illumina and Thomson
Web of Knowledge) with a range of keywords derived
from keyword thesauruses covering who was active
(terms such as "middle-class"), how they were active
("complaining" or "partnerships"), who they were
engaging with (different services and synonyms for public
services) (see appendix). The criteria for inclusion were:
original empirical research for the UK, US or Scandinavia
from 1980 to the present published in English in peer-
reviewed journals. The search results were manually
sifted for the most relevant papers based on their
abstracts and this base was complemented by reference-
chaining and more focused searches for specific terms. In
total 65 articles were reviewed (Table 1).

Table 1 - totals of papers reviewed for the synthesis

Policy domain	Countries	Number of papers reviewed
Childcare	England	2
Education	England, US, Norway	28
Health services	UK, US	13
Emergency services	US	3
Environmental services	UK	3
Land use planning	UK	4
Infrastructure investment	US	1
General activism and engagement	UK, US, Norway	13
Total		65

Overall there were surprisingly few papers with the key word or title including "middle-class(es)". Further, the results suggested that the issue has been researched more extensively in the UK than elsewhere, although some articles not in English may have been excluded. We can only speculate as to the reasons for this difference, but it is likely to relate to British approaches to understanding socio-economic class (Lockwood, 1995; Savage, 1995) and differences in the reach of welfare

states as well as inequality (Esping-Andersen, 1990).
Some papers were caught despite variations in
terminology (e.g. the use of 'upper middle class in the
US) but some studies may have been missed.

The wider evidence base from the UK means the
synthesis focuses on the constituent nations and regions
and this also reflects the wide body of literature on the
unequal outcomes of welfare state distribution. The
evidence from different national settings was used largely
to tease out contextual factors. It should be noted that we
did not explicitly engage with wider debates as to who
constitutes the 'middle-class' (or if they exist at all). We
relied on the definitions used in the studies themselves
which included qualitative definitions and economic
definitions – such as professional or managerial
occupation, or higher socio-economic status. Each policy
domain was reviewed in turn and through a process of
review and iteration our initial hypothesis was refined into
the four causal theories explained in turn below.

Causal theories and evidence

Table 2 summarises the four causal theories for which
the review found evidence. The first two focus on the

nature and level of the interactions between middle-class

actors and service providers and the response of service

providers to this interaction. The first – the middle-classes

and interest groups – focuses on collective engagement

and the second captures individual consumer and activist

engagement. The third theory brings to the fore how the

quality of any interaction is affected by an alignment in

cultural capital between middle-class service users and

bureaucrats. The fourth theory conceptualises the

evidence that middle-class needs are 'normalised' in

policy and practice.

Table 2 - summary of causal theories

Theory name	Definition
The middle-classes and interest groups	That the level or nature of middle-class interest group formation allows for the collective articulation of their needs and demands, and that service providers respond to this.
The middle-classes as individual consumers/activists with public services	That 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.
The middle-classes as bureaucrats	That the alignment in the cultural capital enjoyed by middle-classes service users and service providers leads to engagement which is constructive and confers advantage .

Policies and organisational processes and the middle-classes	That the needs of middle-class service users, or their expectations of service quality, are 'normalised' in policy and practice or even that policy priorities can favour middle-class interests.

The remainder of this section considers each causal theory in turn, with a narrative summarising the evidence on the mechanisms operating within each, together with the contexts and outcomes. The narratives use consistent descriptors to indicate the relative strength of the evidence base: 'strong' is defined as from a range of studies, both qualitative and quantitative and spanning different service areas, countries, or both; 'adequate' evidence is, a small number of robustly evidenced studies from a single country, or a range of weaker evidence from across service domains or countries. Finally the descriptor 'limited' refers to one or two robust studies, or to a larger number of weaker studies, but from a single context. The descriptors are intended to aid judgement as to the likelihood of an aspect of the theory being prevalent across policy domains or national contexts (Pawson, Greenhalgh et al., 2005). They should not be understood as indicating that a theory has predictive strength, nor as an assessment of the quality of the research.

The middle-classes and interest groups

The synthesis identified three kinds of mechanisms which appeared to underpin the overall theory that there was a relationship between middle class collective activism and advantage in public service provision. The first related to the propensity of those with a higher socio-economic status to join groups and act collectively. The evidence for this mechanism was strong. The UK evidence demonstrates that middle-class people are more likely to be in groups and engage in formal voluntary activity (Egerton, 2002; Li, Savage et al., 2003; Egerton and Mullan, 2008). Evidence in relation to both the US and England demonstrates how more geographically mobile middle-class mothers, in particular, rely on groups such as parents' groups to make friendship networks in new neighbourhoods (McGrath and Kuriloff, 1999; Bagnall, Longhurst et al., 2003). There was also evidence that middle-class people are also more likely to join groups which are influential, particularly groups that have a direct say in policy, such as parent-teacher associations or parish councils. The evidence from England is adequate that rural parish councils – organisations often given official status as 'consultees' – tend to be dominated by middle-class, educated men (Abram, Murdoch et al., 1996; Yarwood, 2002; Sturzaker, 2010). Thus, Abram,

Murdoch et al. describe how, in a county with a large amount of middle-class rural in-migration, '[m]any of the village societies sought to use the planning system to shape the village in accordance with ideal images of the rural community'. Thus groups involved in these decisions became social networks representing 'middle-professional, comfortable England' (1996: 361).

The second mechanism within the interest group theory relates to how middle class groups behave. It suggests that the level of organisational sophistication in such groups, as well as the level of 'noise' they are able to produce in the policy process, explains their effectiveness. In land-use planning there is qualitative evidence that middle-class rural parish councils are vociferous, organised opponents of social or affordable housing within their villages and how they work to ensure it is retained for "local" people (Abram, Murdoch and Marsden, 1996; Yarwood, 2002). Sturzaker quotes one parish councillor as saying:

> 'In order to keep riff-raff from [nearby city] out of the community you need this s106 Agreement [planning policy]'

> (Sturzaker, 2010: 1014)

There is also qualitative evidence from England that middle-class communities are more likely to develop an 'enraged response' (Carroll and Walford, 1996: 397) to school closures or local education policy and form groups to campaign against proposals (Bondi, 1988; Carroll and Walford, 1996). There is also evidence that they are effective – analysis of the process of drafting Regional Spatial Strategies in England shows those regions with a vocal, organised middle-class had a bigger reduction in housing targets as plans went through the formal consultation process (Sturzaker, 2010).

These kinds of pressures are often dismissed as NIMBYism (not-in-my-back-yard). Although there is a broader literature on 'bad neighbour developments', such as polluting factories or waste facilities, particularly from the perspective of environmental justice in the US (see, for example: Bullard, 2000; Faber and Krieg, 2002), the focus has tended to be on whether and how these are concentrated in deprived neighbourhoods, not on whether middle-class communities actively resist them (Richardson, Short et al.; Faber and Krieg, 2002). Like Yarwood (2002), Walker, Cass et.al. (2010) provide qualitative evidence from renewable energy developers whose experience of interacting with middle-class

NIMBYs leads them to "imagine" an oppositional constituency through specific placatory strategies offering benefits to communities or neighbourhoods. In the case of rural housing, Yarwood (2002) reports one housing officer as saying that, although policies to keep affordable housing for "locals" was not considered 'good practice', parish councils were not always told this as:

> "'it was important to make parish councils think they have a say in housing allocation' even though this was not the case in practice."'
>
> (Yarwood, 2002: 287)

For onshore windfarms in the UK, the provision of a community trust fund has become normalised as a way to offset local complaints (Walker, Cass, Burningham and Barnett, 2010).

A third mechanism identified in the research synthesis suggested that the social processes within middle class groups facilitated the development of useful knowledge for group participants. There is strong evidence from both education and land-use planning demonstrating that the networking opportunities enabled by middle-class collective engagement enables the exchange of 'soft knowledge'. For example, involvement in a PTA allows middle-class parents to engage in conversation at the

school gate, providing deeper knowledge about the school, as well as access to information which might facilitate school choice (Ball, 1993; Ball, Bowe et al., 1995; McGrath and Kuriloff, 1999; Bagnall, Longhurst and Savage, 2003; Crozier, Reay et al., 2008; Vincent, Braun et al., 2008; Archer, 2010). That middle-class Black and minority ethnic parents, in the UK and US, often feel excluded from these networks adds qualitative weight to the evidence of their importance to parents (McGrath and Kuriloff, 1999; Archer, 2010). In land-use planning there is evidence that middle-class parish councils use experience of fighting development proposals to continue to resist development (Abram, Murdoch and Marsden, 1996).

Overall the evidence on the set of mechanisms identified as part of this causal theory is adequate or even strong. There are however evidence gaps in relation to the contextual factors which give these mechanisms their salience and in terms of the links between the mechanisms and eventual policy outcomes. However, the review suggests that the evidence base is at least adequate, and in some aspects strong, in terms of linking collective activity to the accrual of advantage for middle-class service users, for example through ensuring school

places, maintaining the "character" of their village, or
generating a pre-emptive response for a service provider.
Interestingly, we found no evidence that these processes
drive up service standards for a broader cross-section of
service users.

*The middle-classes as individual consumers/activists with
public* services

The review hypothesis focused on middle-class activism,
which suggests collective action. The literature search
also found evidence the middle-classes can impact on
public services as activist individuals via two main
mechanisms. Firstly, via coproduction – the vast majority
of public services are co-produced in some way, for
example a good diagnosis requires discussion with a
doctor. Secondly, individuals can be more active,
complaining about things when they go wrong and
working individually to ensure provision is tailored to their
needs. The evidence which we have categorised as
strong or adequate comes predominantly from the
schooling and health care fields. The evidence from
education tends to be located in the broader literature
concerned with the reproduction of social inequality
through education systems (see, for example, the review
in: Ball, 1993). Evidence from health takes its cue from

the inverse care law (Tudor Hart, 1971) but focuses on the micro-social relationships between practitioners and patients. There is a broader literature focused on how predominantly middle-class bureaucracies fail to engage effectively with poorer or working class individuals (for example: Lipsky, 1980; Wright, 2003; Dubois, 2010).

The ways in which middle-class people gain advantage through co-producing services can be theorised as either: greater knowledge of problems and service providers; or cultural capital meaning norms, behaviour, ways of speaking and deportment. The evidence for the latter is more limited than for the former. The evidence from health is strong that middle-class service users are more vocal. Indeed, the evidence is adequate that this can make a difference to treatment or other interactions with health services. Thus being affluent leads to a greater likelihood of being treated as urgent rather than routine in heart surgery (Pell, Pell et al., 2000); and relates to other admissions rates – although the evidence is mixed over whether it increases your likelihood of being referred to a specialist (O'Donnell, 2000). It also impacts on the nature and quality of information provided by doctors and others (Reid, Cook et al., 1999).

That this is due to middle-class patient's knowledge and social skills is often left implicit in analysis. There are a small number of studies in which health professionals allude directly to the impact on their decisions and practices of – for example – the threat of litigation (Somerset, Faulkner et al., 1999). Studies of GPs suggested that '[t]he patient's social status and ability to articulate verbally were put forward as tacit influences which affect the likelihood of referral.' (Somerset, Faulkner et.al. 1999: 218; Mercer and Watt, 2007). Qualitative evidence from midwifery also suggests middle-class mothers are more knowledgable and better prepared to interact:

> 'They will have like an A4 page of questions waiting for the midwife. So the midwife can't just go in and say, 'Ah, that rash is nothing'. She has to explain what it is called, how long it will last, what colour it will turn, what cream to rub on, what cream to rub off, blah, blah, blah.'
>
> (Hart and Lockey, 2002: 491)

That the evidence is adequate that the ability of middle-class individuals to vocalise their needs leads to them getting better healthcare is concerning. However, the evidence seems to be mixed (O'Donnell, 2000) and sits within broader debates on the redistributive qualities of

universal health care systems, particularly the NHS in England, which has produced mixed evidence and shown that some redistributive efforts have been effective (Bramley and Evans, 2002; Boyne et.al. 2001). Our review suggests this debate needs to be supplemented with evidence on how services are utilised by different people on a day-to-day basis and the impact of this.

Similar evidence of active co-production has emerged from research on education. Evidence from Norway suggests parents with higher socio-economic status are more likely to attend parents' evenings than other parents (Baeck, 2010). It is important to note this pattern has emerged even though parents' evenings are a relatively new phenomenon in Norway. Overall, it seems that while working class parents may be willing to trust educationalists (Crozier, 1997) the anxieties of the middle-classes create a much more hands-on, interventionist approach to education.

Moving on to active complaining, the qualitative evidence is strong to support the stereotype of the pushy, middle-class parent. This comes from childcare and education and from research in England and the US (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz, 1995; Crozier, 1997; McGrath and Kuriloff,

1999; Vincent, Ball et al., 2004; Vincent and Ball, 2007; Crozier, et.al. 2008). Archer (2008) quotes one English, minority ethnic middle-class parent as saying:

> 'If there's something that's not good enough – and my friends' parents were the same – they'd all get together and complain'

> (Archer, 2010: 463)

This is part of a broader literature on the concern of middle-class parents to invest time and energy in their child's education. This may involve: accessing educational childcare and buying-in extra classes such as French lessons or baby gym (Vincent and Ball, 2007); working to ensure that their child attends the school of their choice (Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz, 1995); ensuring their child is kept out of special educational needs classes and in classes for able or gifted and talented children (Crozier, 1997; McGrath and Kuriloff, 1999; Crozier, et.al., 2008); or their child gets specific publicly funded special educational needs provision (Archer, 2010). This evidence blurs the line between active co-production of services and the active process of complaining to get a service tailored to suit needs.

A great deal of the evidence on complaining dates from studies in the US in the 1970s and is therefore outwith

the review, although some does date from the 1980s. In this literature two possible relationships between socio-economic status and complaining behaviour were theorised. Firstly, a direct relationship; those with a higher socio-economic status had greater resources and so complained more. Secondly, a parabolic relationship; those who complained least would be those with low socio-economic status who did not have resources but had need, and those with very high socio-economic status who had resources but did not need to complain. Those who complained the most would be those in the middle, with the resources to do so and a need that made them reliant on public services. Research in Wichita, Kansas, supports the direct relationship, even though those with low socio-economic status have greater dissatisfaction with service provision. The evidence suggests this is because they feel less effective when they do complain (Sharp, 1982).

Evidence from US longitudinal panel data supports the importance of efficacy as a driver associated with socio-economic status, as children who are stable middle-class, (from a middle-class family and have remained middle-class) felt more politically engaged and more politically effective (Walsh, Jennings et al., 2004). More recent data

from Norway adds greater context (Aars and Strømsnes, 2007). This study shows that socio-economic variables had minimal impact on complaining behaviour and in multivariate analysis almost diminished entirely in their effect. The most important factor in explaining complaining behaviour was previous political engagement of some sort, and this was associated with increased feelings of efficacy and trust in institutions. The lack of strong links between socio-economic status and complaining was theorised as being due to continued class-partisan alignment in Norwegian politics which enabled issues to be voiced collectively. This suggests greater socio-economic inequality may mean middle-class people are more likely to complain, are more likely to get a positive response, feel effective and are more likely to complain in future.

As with NIMBY pressures, this propensity to complain is recognised by service providers in the education, environmental services and health spheres who pre-emptively respond to it. In education policy, qualitative evidence from the US and UK suggests headteachers and other education professionals welcome complaints from middle-class parents to keep them on their toes (Crozier, 1997; McGrath and Kuriloff, 1999). In a more

negative way, in environmental services there is evidence (although it is as yet limited to a single study) that street sweepers changed their activities in response to middle-class complaints (providing a better, or personalised service) or changed their behaviour around affluent neighbourhoods to make cleaning more obvious (Hastings, 2009b).

In summary, the evidence base for individual middle-class actors gaining additional benefits as a consequence of the way in which they interact with public services is generally adequate, and in some respects strong. Where it is more limited is on whether distinct cultural capital – how things are said as much as what is said – enables the middle-classes to gain advantages. There is more evidence of this theory in the next section.

The middle-classes as bureaucrats

Lipsky's (1980) analysis of street-level bureaucrats provides a theoretical basis for assuming frontline workers are likely to reflect the biases of wider society when making decisions and allocating resources. With the middle-classes there is the added dimension that

many public service occupations are service, or middle, class (Butler, 1995). Therefore middle-class people might get preferential treatment as they are interacting with other middle-class bureaucrats who are likely to empathise with them (Gal, 1998). This would appear to be a key mechanism within this third causal theory. As one interviewee in Crozier's (1997) research explained, in terms of their relationship with teachers:

> 'It's not ... a differential relationship because of our own background ... professionals in our own right; so you know we do have a set of expectations about the standard of education that the school provides.'

> (Crozier, 1997: 194)

Because of this, there is (adequate) evidence that head-teachers or principals will support middle class parents within schools, particularly if they face challenges, as it is expected the parents will keep the school on its toes (McGrath and Kuriloff, 1999; Crozier, Reay et al., 2008). Further context is provided by research into Black and minority ethnic middle class parents (McGrath and Kuriloff, 1999, Archer, 2010). This shows that when faced with racism from service providers, these parents will use their middle-class identity as they are aware that this will

trump their race or ethnic identity to obtain the better service they expect.

Research in the health field, focused on the one-to-one interactions with professionals, demonstrates additional mechanisms which may produce advantage for middle-class patients. Studies from the UK show how health professionals take into account the social identity of patients when deciding treatment, particularly identities they can empathise with. Hughes and Griffith's provide the example of the husband of a potential patient who is a professor of pharmacology 'a big wheel in stroke therapy' and the work done by the consultant to provide some treatment, even though the patient is 'in a category that would normally receive a low priority for admission' (Hughes and Griffiths, 1997: 596). A less explicit benefit is identified in Hart and Lockey's research where midwives worked to help "Mrs Average" and managers were 'advocating for resources for women who were remarkably similar to themselves.' (Hart and Lockey, 2002: 487). Neumann et.al. (2009) demonstrates how 'clinical empathy' between practitioner and patient is likely to produce longer consultations, with more knowledge being exchanged and the patient being more enabled by the interaction (Mercer and Watt, 2007). Importantly,

empathy is produced in conditions of similarity rather than difference. If this is present throughout a bureaucracy, as Lipsky's (1980) study of street level bureaucrats suggests it will be, then this kind of behaviour implicated in the production of our fourth causal theory – that middle-class needs are normalised within policy and organisational processes.

Policies and organisational processes and the middle-classes

The final causal theory for which there is evidence is that policies and processes 'normalise' the needs of the middle-class and tend to cater for their needs. This is an important contextual factor for explaining the impact of the previous three theories and a causal theory in its own right. A great deal of the evidence here is from studies of those experiencing multiple deprivations, or from a working class background, experiencing barriers and difficulties accessing public services (Duffy, 2000; Dixon Woods et al, 2005). This is supported by (the limited) research on environmental services in the UK which points to the importance of wider, stigmatised views of deprived areas (in which environmental problems such as litter are seen as a product of a cultural/behavioural

pathology) as a mechanism which leads to such areas getting inadequate environmental services provision. The research contrasts the view that litter in non-deprived neighbourhoods litter is seen as normal, and deserving of adequate levels of service provision (Hastings, 2009a). How this normalisation is reflected in policies and processes is discussed below. Whereas the bias and changed organisational behaviour discussed in the previous sections is strategic and intentional, the type of bias produced by clinical empathy or the normalisation of middle-class problems professionals is socially embedded. Theoretically it would therefore be much more difficult to challenge through organisational policies, systems and processes (Lipsky, 1980).

At a macro-level, a larger body of evidence points to biases within resource allocation systems as another kind of mechanism which leads to the accrual of middle class advantage. Julian LeGrand's econometric analysis of expenditure under the Conservative Government in the UK (1979-1983) showed that those services most used by the middle-classes were protected from the expenditure cuts implemented as part of its austerity programme.(LeGrand, 1982; reviewed for this synthesis: LeGrand and Winter, 1986). There is similar, more

limited, evidence of similar expenditure patterns the US. Two separate studies on transport infrastructure (Boschken, 1998) and education (Colburn and Horowitz, 2003) demonstrate, on a state level, that areas with a higher concentration of high socio-economic status individuals spend more on high-technology transport infrastructure (light rail as opposed to buses) and education. In the latter case the relationship is slightly parabolic, as those areas dominated by people on very high incomes (over $75,000 per annum) have a reduced expenditure as people exit to the private schooling system.

As well as general patterns of expenditure, suggestive of unintended bias, policy analysis suggests a further mechanism in which some policies are explicitly tailored to the middle-classes or, through their implementation, benefit the middle-classes over other groups. The most apparent case of this is the move towards 'choice' in service provision in health and education. The evidence on schooling suggests a different facets to this. The qualitative evidence from England is adequate that middle-class parents have the most knowledge about the education market to get their children into the best school (Ball, 1993; Ball, Bowe and Gewirtz, 1995). Further, the

case study of Sutton Coldfield in the West Midland presented by Carroll and Walford (1996) demonstrated how wealthier parents can campaign to get policy changed when they do not get the school choice they want. Within the educational sociology literature there is debate as to the impact of the choice agenda and whether it has exacerbated spatial inequalities (see: Gorard, 1999).

Conclusion: what does the evidence base tell us about the middle-class and public services?

This synthesis had two purposes: first to collect evidence in a robust manner which would facilitate the explication of causal theories for how middle-class advantage might be accrued in relation to public service provision; and second, to assess the strength of the evidence base in this regard. With regard to the first purpose, it should be clear that the realist synthesis methodology has been useful for distilling distinctive theories which capture the links between key mechanisms and unequal outcomes in particular contexts. The 'programme logic' hypothesised at the outset was that middle-class activism (individual and collective) facilitated capture of the state's resources.

There is clear evidence that these forms of activism do indeed operate in these ways, and the review has allowed for a more fully articulated and nuanced account of the nature of this activism. It also points to evidence on the impacts of collective organising, complaining and coproduction, particularly in relation to schooling and land use planning.

However, an outcome of the review has also been to rethink the causal theories which lead to advantage. Advantage would appear to accrue not simply via activism, but as a result of a complex interplay between the activities and attributes of service users and providers as well as the broader policy and social context. The evidence we have means we cannot say any one of the four theories has more of an impact on service delivery than another. Indeed, we argue that taken together the theories suggest the existence of a *generally favourable* pre-disposition towards middle-class needs within public services. This is manifest in the micro-social interactions between users and providers, such as those which take place in a medical consultation. At this level, there is evidence from health, schooling, land use planning and environmental services that similarities in terms of the class characteristics of middle class service users and

providers (especially with respect to cultural and social capital) can lead to a prioritisation of their needs, or to differentials in the quality of provision. The pre-disposition also manifests in the broader structural mechanisms of policy prioritisation. Importantly, policy priorities provide a context which enhances the efficacy of the mechanisms which facilitate successful activism or micro-social interactions. For example there are policies which confer benefit on the middle-classes simply because they play to the strengths of middle class clients – examples include 'school choice' or the increasing emphasis on 'co-production'. All these effects are also operating alongside the basic ability of middle class people to buy into better services through purchasing housing in more affluent neighbourhoods (Cheshire, 2009). More complex, recursive effects are also evidenced however. Responsiveness to complaints can build a sense of efficacy or even entitlement. A land-use planning system which encourages engagement from middle class dominated parish councils, will mean that strategies and decisions are likely to reflect middle-class interests and future engagement is encouraged. Therefore it is likely that it is the interaction between all four causal theories which explains middle class advantage.

This focus on advantaged social groups and its interactions with public services provides a fresh perspective on the longstanding community activism and participation debate which has tended to focus on disadvantaged groups (for example, Hastings, McArthur et al., 1996; Matthews, 2012). The four theories identified here link to broader debates on the processes which determine who gets what public services, for example via voice and exit and the emerging literature on 'candidacy' (Dixon-Woods, Kirk et al., 2005; Mackenzie, Conway, et al., 2012). Our focus suggests that generally, it is the middle-classes who are the 'ideal' candidates for public services.

The second purpose of the review was to assess the strength of the evidence base. It should be evident from the earlier narratives on each of the four causal theories that the overall strength of evidence is uneven. It is strongest in relation to many of the specific mechanisms identified – indeed it appears that it is here that most research effort seems to have been focused. However, it is important to recall that we do not claim that the evidence base is sufficiently strong to have predictive power in relation to the theories overall or to any aspect of them – the evidence is that complaining in the 'right'

language *can* rather than *will* be important. We also note that research on the contextual factors which make particular mechanisms more or less salient tends to be limited. One exception might be the body of evidence which contextualises the promotion of active consumerism in relation to schooling and links this to the efficacy of the strategies deployed by parents to secure benefit for their children. However, even here the extant evidence falls short of fully articulating and evidencing a complete causal chain to differential outcomes, taking account of micro interactions and policy processes.

This fourth theory also highlights that the policy and political implications of this review are one of its main challenges. Evidence from the British Social Attitudes Survey suggests that is those people which our synthesis suggest will benefit most from 'choice' in service provision – that is, the professional and managerial middle classes – who are the most opposed to the extension of the policy because of their political views (Curtice, Heath et al., 2009). This suggests that even those who support a more redistributive state may be implicated in undermining its redistributive potential in their every day interactions with service providers (For example see: Crozier, Reay et al., 2008 for a discussion of this in

relation to middle class parental strategies for managing the schooling of their children in socially mixed, comprehensive schools).

While we would argue that a finding of the realist synthesis is that it reveals a substantial body of evidence which *points to* an advantaged middle class, it is also clear that much more evidence on outcomes is required. In particular, while individual studies reveal, for example, a tendency to prioritise middle class patients for cardiac treatment in one city, or identify instances of where school closures or affordable housing developments have been resisted, it is difficult to gain a sense of the scale or import of advantage enjoyed by the middle class from the research base as it stands. As with research into the inverse care law, the challenge is ascertaining both the 'strategy of equality' being employed by the national and local state, and the correct scale at which to measure any inequality in service provision (Powell, 1990; 1995;Powell and Boyne, 2001). A second deficiency is that the evidence remains limited with regard to demonstrating conclusive links between specific theories (activism, similarities between service users and bureaucrats), and actual instances of resource allocation and rationing. There is scope for substantial, innovative research on

such questions. Arguably, there is a need for more 'joined up' scholarship on equity in relation to public services. The emphasis within social policy thus far has largely been on outcomes – on the levels of equality or inequality within the system – and not on the means by which these unequal outcomes come about (Powell, 1995; 2001). Whilst the review evidences that studies on means as well as ends *do* exist, there is a need for substantial further research on what may be a significant social and policy problem.

Appendix – keywords searched

The keyword list was created as detailed in the body of the text. They were grouped into categories to input into the databases to produce the search results.

1 Who

"activists" or "elites" or "middle class families" or "middle class men" or "middle class people" or "middle class women" or "ruling classes" or "advantaged" or "low income groups" or "middle class" or "economic elites" or "political elites" or "lower middle class" or "middle class" or "working class" or "lower class" or "upper class"

2 Who (adjectives and related terms)

"social class" or "social status" or "social stratification" or "cultural capital" or "middle class culture" or "power

structure" or "social capital" or "social class" or
"socioeconomic status" or "status" or "class" or "class
interest" or "affluence" or "class analysis" or "class
politics" or "social background" or "social inequality" or
"urban poverty" or "social cohesion"

3 Residence

"residence" or "gentrification" or "school location" or
"school district size" or "school district spending" or
"school district wealth" or "neighbors" or "suburbs" or
"community" or "local communities" or "urban
communities" or "neighborhoods" or "neighbourhoods" or
"neighbours" or "communities" or "housing" or "relocation"
or "residential patterns" or "residential preferences" or
"residential segregation" or "cities" or "metropolitan
areas" or "residents" or "urban areas" or "towns" or "place
of residence"

4 What

"activism" or "community action" or "engagement" or
"citizen participation" or "community development" or
"community influence" or "community involvement" or
"community planning" or "community relations" or
"community role" or "parent participation" or
"participation" or "citizen participation" or "community
participation" or "political participation" or "social
participation" or "policy consultation" or "empowerment"

or "participative decision making" or "local politics" or "localism" or "agenda setting" or "community power" or "community research" or "family involvement"

5 To what/who (abstraction)

"public services" or "policy" or "policy making" or "public policy" or "public administration" or "local governance" or "governance" or "policy analysis" or "policy formation" or "government policy" or "government programmes" or "policy implementation" or "policy making" or "public sector" or "public goods"

6 To what/who (actors)

"policy makers" or "civil servants" or "councillors" or "district councils" or "local education authorities" or "local government" or "metropolitan councils" or "municipal government" or "schools" or "public schools" or "boards of education" or "school districts" or "city government" or "municipalities" or "municipal council" or "urban government" or "administrators" or "committees" or "councils" or "educational administration" or "governing boards" or "planners" or "public officials" or "social workers" or "teachers"

7 To what/who (policy domains)

"criminal justice policy" or "criminal policy" or "environmental policy" or "health policy" or "housing

policy" or "public health policy" or "regional policy" or
"social housing policy" or "social policy" or "urban policy"
or "community services" or "social services" or "local
planning" or "economic policy" or "educational policy" or
"city planning" or "social problems" or "environment" or
"facility siting disputes" or "planning" or "urban
development" or "urban renewal" or "zoning"

8 Where

"uk" or "england" or "england and wales" or "northern
ireland" or "scotland" or "wales" or "denmark" or
"greenland" or "iceland" or "nordic countries" or "norway"
or "scandinavia" or "sweden" or "usa" or "finland" or
"great britain" or "united kingdom" or "united states of
america"

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