**PODCAST 1: What does ‘working class’ mean and how are working class people excluded?**

We are fortunate to have a brilliant array of independent film and exhibition in the UK, but one significant issue within it, as well as the film industry and the arts in general, is the lack of accessibility and inclusion for people who were raised working class and are seeking jobs in the industry or would simply like to attend independent cinemas as a leisure activity.

Hello! I’m Dr Leanne Dawson, an equality, diversity, and inclusion consultant, author, and academic. In this podcast I will give a brief overview of equality, diversity, and inclusion, before discussing the UK’s 2010 Equality Act and how omitting class or socio-economic position from the Act leaves working class people without the legal protection that other categories have. I will then consider some of the issues with defining working class; how class intersects with other aspects of our identity; the cultural, social, and economic barriers that put many working class people at a disadvantage; and, finally, some anecdotes about how working class people are excluded from, or made to feel uncomfortable in, independent cinemas.

Equality is about ensuring equal opportunity, but although the term is important especially within the law, there are many issues with and limits to equality. Opportunities could be presented as equal but starting points and the playing field certainly are not. Someone raised working class and in poverty, who attended a state school on free school meals has not had the same opportunities growing up as someone raised middle class and whose parents had enough resources to allow them to attend a private school and multiple extracurricular activities.

Because we have not all had equal privilege and opportunities, we need to employ a diversity lens. Diversity takes account of the differences between individuals and groups of people. In some cases, this means giving people what they need to level the playing field, rather than pretending we all have equal opportunities. In independent cinema we absolutely need to do more to level the playing field for working class people.

Inclusion means creating an environment and a culture that accepts and welcomes, rather than simply tolerates, people for who they are. This leads people to feel engaged and like they belong. Inclusion means we don’t act in a tokenistic capacity but that, in the context of class, working class film, filmmaking teams, audiences, and colleagues are as much a part of your organisation, and at all of the same levels, as middle class ones.

There are a range of protected characteristics under the UK’s 2010 Equality Act: disability; pregnancy and maternity; age; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; race; religion and belief; sex; sexual orientation. Although there had been some discussion about including it, class or socio-economic position have clearly been left out of the Equality Act.

So while the categories under the 2010 Act are afforded a range of legal protections relating to different forms of harassment, reasonable adjustments, and positive action to attract them to and support them in the workplace these do not apply to class.

Some issues with working class inclusion are caused because people debate how we should to define class and, let’s face it, the term ‘working-class’ groups many different experiences together: growing up in an inner-city council high rise is very different to a rural childhood in poverty; while having parents employed in working class trades and bringing sufficient money home is different to growing up in extreme poverty with parents on benefits and not always being able to have basics like food. And there are many people who were raised working-class, but who now have significantly greater cultural, financial and other privileges.

And when I mention poverty, it’s really important to distinguish between middle class people who choose to work in the arts and say they’re skint, but perhaps have the safety net of financial support from family and strong networks to be able to get a job easily, and working class people who truly know the meaning of being skint and having few opportunities. Although in the current climate, many people, not just those who were raised working class, are having to tighten their purse strings significantly so the tips in the podcasts will be of use far beyond working class people.

We also need to consider intersectionality: a term coined by law academic Kimberlé Crenshaw, to describe how aspects of our identity do not operate in a vacuum, but rather intersect with each other. We must be aware that being Black, indigenous, or a person of colour, or having a disability, for example, makes poverty more likely because of systemic racism, racial capitalism, ableism, and the benefits system.

By taking a holistic approach to inclusion and accessibility, we address all intersections of each individual as well as all individuals.

Despite intersectional and geographical differences, there are often — though not always – some common factors for those of us raised working class. French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu wrote about socio-economic position several decades ago, but his divisions of Social, Economic, Cultural, and Symbolic Capital are still of use today.

Social capital comprises the people we know: our family, friends, colleagues, and networks. When you go to a state school and you are raised by manual laborers or people on benefits on a council estate, you don’t have the same networks or opportunities as someone whose parents are doctors, CEOs, film directors and so on.

Economic capital is our money and finances and includes income, assets, and inheritance. So, again, a middle-class parent having enough money to, for example, afford private education and all of the extracurricular activities as part of that, as well as money to take their children to experience a range of culture is very different to someone who doesn’t even have enough cash to put food on the table. Economic capital is also relevant to a secure future: money for pensions, help with mortgage deposits and home ownership.

Cultural capital is the cultural knowledge we have, as well as our tastes. For example, knowing about film, having read a lot of books, being able to play an instrument.

We can’t ignore the fact that economic and social capital play a huge role in cultural capital:

Let’s say a colleague, who was raised working class, doesn’t get the classical music references in a film that other colleagues pick up easily and spend time chatting about. Some colleagues may look down on this supposed gap in knowledge, but think about why some colleagues get the references quickly: perhaps because their parents had the money to pay for piano lessons and the networks to make the music classes happen. Not to mention the space and finances for a piano to practice at home.

Cultural knowledge is cumulative so we need to remember that those with more socio-economic privilege are starting at a different point to those with little.

Symbolic capital or power is the outcome of the conversion of other forms of capital: our reputation, qualifications, and such like. Again, the more privilege we have, the greater these privileges are likely to be.

Even though, in theory, anyone can walk through the door of an independent cinema, feeling like you belong there, in addition to being able to afford a ticket, is what truly gives some people access while others are excluded.

In independent cinemas and spaces of supposed ‘high culture’, it is white people who are middle class or even more privileged who dominate, simply because of the situation they, perhaps you, were born into.

Here are a few anonymised quotes from working class people who told me about their experiences of working in film exhibition in the UK.

*‘The posh people from elsewhere come in to run our cinema and don’t ever listen to what we working class locals have to say.’*

*‘The half decent and good jobs in film exhibition seem to go to pre-existing networks. It sometimes feels like you have to be good pals with or related to the people running the show to be able to get a job there.’*

*‘I didn’t have enough money to be able to watch all of the films that my middle class colleagues talk about. They sometimes look at me like I’m an alien. It’s stopped me speaking up.’*

*‘I don’t feel valued even though my experiences as a working class person could be valuable.’*

These are a shame, two-fold: it’s horrid that working class colleagues are made to feel that way simply because they were born into a less privileged situation, and it’s also really silly that their colleagues and organisations undervalue them, their knowledge, and their lived experience because they are key to making independent cinemas more inclusive.

We also know that diversity reduces risk. Groupthink often results in unchallenged views or sets up an ‘us versus them’ mentality, which marginalises individuals who disagree with the group. It is a common factor in bad decision making and ethical breaches, such as the global financial crash in 2008. If everyone in a position of power in an organisation is from a middle class background, for example, there is no lived experience and little knowledge of being working class, so although it’s not necessarily going to lead to a catastrophe like the global crash, it is going to lead to more homogenous thought and actions which exclude working class people, among others, often unintentionally.

To help your own workplace be a more diverse and inclusive environment, listen to the next podcast in this series on what you can do, now, and for free. There are also podcasts about broader measures, for organisations with some money for EDI initiatives whether large or small. And podcasts about welcoming working class audiences, inclusive programming and attracting working class colleagues.

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