

Habitus and Homeland: Educational Aspirations, Family Life and Culture in Autobiographical Narratives of Educational Experience in Wales

Sally Baker BSc (hons) MSc PGCE PhD

Abstract

This paper deals with the concept of habitus and uses it to illuminate the autobiographical narratives of participants who came from disadvantaged backgrounds in Wales, yet who succeeded in higher education (HE). Participants' accounts of how their habitus and their aspirations were constructed drew upon a number of themes, which intersected with the participants' ideas of 'Welsh culture'. Images of Welsh culture and history often played a significant role in their accounts, despite there being considerable debate amongst historians as to the veracity of such images. The participants' aspirational habitus involves a rich blend of images and symbolic resources which sustained them on their journey toward upward mobility, which has important implications for how we conceive of habitus and its role in debates about widening access to HE.

Key Words

aspirational habitus/higher education/Wales/widening participation

Introduction

This paper deals with three intersecting issues: widening participation in higher education (HE); the Bourdieuan notion of 'habitus', and the use of this to illuminate the sense of national or local culture encouraging educational aspiration. This was done through exploring the narratives of a group of people who grew up in Wales, whose biographies demonstrate how their sense of culture and history are intimately bound up with their participation in HE.

There is much contemporary interest in widening participation and breaching the barriers that some groups experience to HE. Previous work investigating the experiences and attitudes of 'non-traditional' students has deployed the concept of habitus, (although that term is not always used), to illuminate the sense of difference that was felt when the students contrasted their own backgrounds with the atmosphere encountered in HE, (Archer et al, 2000; Bamber et al, 2001; Grenfell et al, 1998; Reay, 2004a). The incarnation of 'habitus' most widely used in educational research derives from Bourdieu, (1977), which has been elaborated to include aspects relating to embodiment, agency and the interplay between past and present, and individual and collective phenomena in making sense of cultural behaviour and experience (Reay, 2004b).

I have deployed the notion of habitus to explain how people from disadvantaged backgrounds have successfully entered and navigated their way through HE (Baker, 2005; Baker et al, 2005). As Reay (2004a) argues, this involves taking habitus in a flexible, non-deterministic sense, facilitating the growth of individuals into new circumstances as well as trammelling them within those that are familiar. Previous work (Baker, 2005) suggested that we might extend Bourdieu's (1977) concept and speak of an 'aspirational habitus'. People from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in Wales described how there was a sense in their families that education was valuable and the culmination of this was to go to university. Habitus was not always a restricting mindset or style of life that clashed with the ethos of HE. Some seemed to have been prepared for HE before arriving, despite growing up in considerable socio-economic and regional disadvantage, having no family tradition of participating in HE.

This paper attempts to elucidate the characteristics or experiences shown by individuals from Wales possessing such an aspirational

habitus, that may have enabled them to enter HE. The aspirational habitus was explored by means of interviews with men and women, all of whom spent their formative years in Wales, who defined themselves as 'Welsh' and who had nearly all grown up in Welsh speaking communities. The effects of this culture and the sense of history brought with it represent an aspect of habitus that has not generally been explored by educational researchers, but its importance was noted by Bourdieu: 'the subject is not the instantaneous ego of a sort of singular cogito, but the individual trace of an entire collective history' (Bourdieu, 1990, p.91).

A pervasive historical and cultural image of Wales is that of a nation that valued education, producing 'priests and teachers'. There is debate as to whether this notion is a recent romantic invention (Kreider, 2002; Morgan, 1986). It is difficult to find information to sustain the stereotype, as university admissions data often doesn't provide separate statistics for Wales. In the recent years for which information is available, rates of participation in HE in Wales vary enormously between geographical areas. In the academic year 1997/8, Ceredigion and Monmouthshire had very high participation rates, whereas many areas located in the south Wales valleys, such as Blaenau Gwent and Caerphilly, had very low participation rates.

The 'stereotypical' image of the Welsh orientation to education is perhaps reflected in the founding of the University College of North Wales, where in the late 19th century, scholarships were funded by subscriptions raised from the local quarry workers and farmers, to educate their own children (Williams, 1985). Academic achievement in disadvantaged communities is emphasized in the biographical narratives of Welsh literati such as Kate Roberts (1891-1985). This sense of achievement and culture frequently involves accounts of overcoming hardship through education. The story of John William Thomas, ('Arfonwyson'), (1805-1840), who started his working life as a quarryman at Penrhyn Quarry, but became the supervisor at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, involves this sense of progress. Samuel Smiles in his 'Men of Invention and Industry', (1884), provides a chapter, 'Astronomers and Students in Humble Life', containing many earnest accounts of labourers from north Wales who taught themselves, attended evening classes, and eventually gained admission to universities. The perceived tradition of valuing literary and cultural achievement is also manifested in the popularity of the 'eisteddfodau' and the high profile of the Welsh bards in popular Welsh history.

Given its wide social and geographical variation, Wales consists largely of relatively deprived, often rural, communities. As Evans, (2000), reminds us, its economy has been re-structured beyond recognition with the progressive decline in industrial and spiritual life in the late 20th century. Although participants described something distinctive about 'Wales' and the 'Welsh', life in an industrial urban area of south Wales is considerably different to life in a mountain village in Snowdonia. What is important however, is that as Jones, (1992, p.330), observes, that: 'the Welsh have for centuries sustained an identity without the protective buttressing of a state of their own. The Welsh...have survived despite...a recent history that has witnessed massive immigration and integrationist pressures'.

The origins of this sense of national identity can be traced over the last century and a half. Jones (1992, p.332) argued that during this period a distinctive Welsh self-image was formulated: 'an identity rooted in a specific combination of social and economic conditions', although he does also observe that contemporary Wales is experiencing an 'unfamiliar pluralism' as the Welsh economic base, political tradition and cultural inheritance are altered and eroded. He concludes by describing Wales as a 'political unit' and stating that 'Wales is an identifiable place, but the Welsh are hardly a people with a distinct, shared and immutable identity' (p.357). Neither has it developed a distinctive institutional or civic life (Jones et al, 2002).

Despite the profound changes that Wales has undergone recently and the erosion of some of the images and identities that its people previously held, (Evans, 2000), what is distinctive is the sense of identity, history and associated habitus, (McCall, 2001), which structured family life and persisted even through geographic movement and intermarriage. Thus, this paper refers to 'Wales' and the 'Welsh'. Many participants whose formative experiences are explored grew up in Wales before the dilution of national identities, at a time when a Welsh 'culture' was still perceived to exist by many people living in Wales, based around labour in the extractive or agricultural industries and infused with an ideological spirit of religious 'nonconformism' – a group of theologies dissenting from the established Anglican Church (Larsen, 1999).

There have been challenges to the notion of a distinctive and enduring 'Welsh culture'. Jones, (1982, p.55), refers disparagingly to 'the propagandists of Welsh culture' and maintains that during the late 19th century 'the middle-class non-conformist elite, through the agencies of chapel and press, re-defined the idea of Wales in its own image...'. The

image created intersects with important elements of the Protestant work ethic (Furnham, 1990; Weber, 1958) and has been a long-lasting, and powerful notion which remains with many today. This paper will explore the important contributions of these ideas to the habitus of the participants, and how they feel it constitutes a distinctively Welsh experience which informed their educational aspirations. As Bourdieu says:

'The habitus acquired in the family is at the basis of the structuring of school experiences; the habitus transformed by the action of the school, itself diversified, is in turn at the basis of all subsequent experiences . . . and so on, from restructuring to restructuring'.

(Bourdieu, 1972, in Bourdieu et al, 1992, p.134).

Welsh society, as well as the principality's economy and civic life, have changed greatly as a result of late 20th century economic restructuring (Jones, 2004) and with the establishment of the devolved Welsh Assembly (Chaney, et al 2001; Deacon, 2002; Williams, 2003). Nevertheless, perhaps because of its relative autonomy from formal civic structures (Jones, 1992) the idea of a Welsh culture has proved robust in the face of changes in economic and political life. Although it is possible that this is a carefully crafted 'invention' (Morgan, 1983) containing some of the more sentimental notions of culture and images of the Welsh, it is a valuable subject of study in its own right. The images and ideas infuse the aspirational habitus that were described by many of the interviewees in this study and which was believed to have influenced them.

This study was conceived in order to explore the enigma of Welsh culture and see how it adds to the notions of habitus already present and to address the implications of this for some of the current issues in the widening participation debate.

Method and Participants

Twenty men and nineteen women were interviewed. They had all been (or were currently passing) through the HE system, described themselves as 'Welsh' and had spent their formative years in Wales. All the participants spoke Welsh and all but two considered Welsh to be their first language. The participants included people from north, south and mid-Wales and from urban and rural backgrounds. All the participants could be described, in contemporary terms, as 'non-traditional students', that is they either came from 'disadvantaged' social groups, families where no immediate family member had entered

HE before, or had entered HE as mature students. The participant's ages ranged from nineteen to seventy-two years. They were approached by a snowball sampling technique, beginning with people known to the author, who were then asked to introduce other people meeting the inclusion who might be willing to participate in the study.

The interviews for this study consisted of an open-ended approach, an adapted form of the autobiographical interviewing method of Chamberlayne et al, (2000) and Chamberlayne et al, (2004), with the researcher beginning with a single question and then encouraging elaboration. The interviews began with the question: 'Can you remember anything at all during your childhood, or school years, or even after, that you think motivated you to aim for university?' The interviews were participant led, with the interviewer seeking clarification and elaboration to establish the salient influences upon the interviewee.

Analysis was carried out in line with Chamberlayne et al's, (2000), recommendations, whereby the interviewer, (the author of this paper), discussed the interviews on a case by case basis with two experienced social scientists, identifying influences and themes and consistencies among these, particularly in terms of influences upon the individual pertaining to the desire to attend university. These themes were then examined for commonalities across particular age cohorts, gender, religious denominations, and region of upbringing. The records of these discussions then formed a further layer of data which was drawn upon for analysis.

Results and Discussion

Seven recurring themes arose from the data. These were:

- 1) The influence of religious nonconformity.
- 2) The concept of going to university 'by proxy'.
- 3) The presence of socially ambitious mothers.
- 4) Lack of other opportunities in economically deprived communities.
- 5) Influential schoolteachers or schools.
- 6) Peer pressure.
- 7) Exposure to 'cultural capital', even though living in a socio-economically deprived community.

Cutting across these themes is a concern relating to the formulation of how 'Welsh culture' was felt to have informed the process of attending university, and this yielded a further dimension of analysis, both in

terms of whether participants explicitly subscribed to its existence and its influence, or whether it was present in an occluded form, participants mentioning aspects of life and influences that would be unusual in other parts of the UK.

Gender trends these were not immediately apparent. Although some participants spoke of differential opportunities available to men and women in the past, they did not necessarily feel their own experience had occurred as a result of gender inequalities. More striking were generational trends, particularly concerning the role of nonconformist religious experience.

The Influence of Religious Nonconformity

In Wales, religious nonconformity emerged during the late 17th century becoming a very powerful influence, one that only declined in the late 1950/60's (Davies, 1993). Davies (1993) noted the emphasis on 'self-culture' in nonconformity, involving an interest in education and the alignment of this with religion itself.

The influence of the chapel was mentioned by many participants, particularly by interviewees over fifty years old. People recollected the 'educational' and 'self-improvement' ethos of the chapel providing a certain culture and encouraging them:

Eryl: 'The chapel was a major influence on my life and on certain members of the (school) class. The chapel encouraged reading, literary culture...it especially helped me when I had to perform and go in front of an audience, so that was part of the Welsh culture, so you had, before you got to college you had done it before and chapel was really important in that.'

Other quotes reveal a very direct pressure, or assistance, from the chapel:

Geraint: 'a person said to me in chapel 'you really should go to be a minister''.

Ceinwen: '...I could read and write before going to primary school. We were taught to read and write in the Sunday school. I remember the old lady with the blackboard and the chalk and we were taught the alphabet. I vividly remember the first lesson doing the letter A...'

Another participant felt less directly affected, but certainly sensed its presence in society:

Arwel: 'A great deal has been made and probably rightly, of the influence of non-conformity and RE and Sunday schools...in creating a literate, disputatious culture in Wales which lent itself in a sense to university education...I did go through some of that...felt that education was a good thing...it wasn't a crucial influence...but one was certainly aware that Wales did have a lot of teachers and preachers who had had an education whereas the other people in my community had not...'

There was a notable generational difference here – no interviewee under fifty years old mentioned religious nonconformity as an influence. Even a young evangelical nonconformist interviewed who felt that God had influenced his path, and who had attended a Christian college as an undergraduate, did not talk of religious nonconformity as influencing his academic ambitions, although it had clearly influenced his life in other ways.

The early religious experiences of the older participants were seen as playing an important part in acquiring a love of learning and a subsequent intention to go to university. The chapel involved them being exposed to people in roles for which an education was needed, such as ministers and teachers. In this way, the experience is implicated in the kind of habitus the participants describe themselves acquiring as children.

Going To University 'By Proxy'

Some of the older interviewees, (those over the age of fifty), were acutely aware that they were among the first generation, or often were the first member, of their family to attend university.

Geraint: 'In some sense, going to college on behalf of the generation previously, who hadn't been able to go to college – you're almost going to college as a proxy for other people.'

'...the thought of for example failure at university would have been horrendous...you would not be letting yourself down, you'd be letting down a whole generation of people for whom you were there as this proxy.'

These people also stressed that previous generations/other members of their family had possessed the ability to gain entry to university, but, (usually financial), circumstances had prevented this:

Ceinwen: 'My father always said he (his brother) was a brilliant mathematician and it was a crying shame that he'd never had that university education and the girls of the family as well, they were very, very good mathematically...they were all aware that they'd missed out on that university education... they were keenly aware they'd missed out...I had an uncle...a carpenter by trade and he never had the opportunity to go to university, in fact he sacrificed that so that his younger sister could go to university...'

The perception of this participant is that a number of members of this family were prevented from accessing HE because of poverty. The interviewee was one of the first members of the family to go to university.

The sense of a powerful mixture of emotions being passed down through generations is evident, with some family members feeling enormous pressure to succeed, having achieved the privilege denied to their forebears, and other family members feeling cheated.

Some interviewees perceived this to be the motivation behind their mothers' desire to see them enter HE – the mothers lived out their ambitions through their children:

Eryl: '...my mother had to go working to support – she was one of six and she was the eldest – I reckon she could have gone for further (sic) education given the opportunity. So that was a major factor in that my mother wanted us to go to further (sic) education if at all possible to make up for what she had to do without.'

The Influence of Ambitious Mothers:

Previous literature has demonstrated the importance of parental influence, particularly that of mothers, on their children's educational aspirations. Many interviewees mentioned that mothers, particularly, had been ambitious for them educationally and socially. Dyhouse, (2002), whilst focusing on the middle years of the 20th century, noted that maternal support and sacrifice was common for boys, especially those from modest backgrounds. This is borne out in comments of the older participants:

Arwel: 'I don't think I grew up taking in with my mother's milk some idea that I should go to university. What I did take in virtually with my mother's milk was this sort of tremendous aspiration she had that one should 'do well' at exams...there was great pressure on me from my mother to do well...psychological pressure...'

Eryl: 'Definitely my mother was a driving force...'

'We never discussed it, going to university, but there was positive pressure to do well at school.'

These comments are also consistent with Miles' (1999) observation that mothers were 'moral guides and inculcators of ambition', desiring upward mobility for their sons. This certainly seems to have been true for our older male participants, as was Miles' (1999) idea that if education could be likened to an infectious disease, 'women have acted as important carriers' (p.335). Previously, Jackson et al (1962) wrote about maternal influence in education, highlighting the importance of mother's support for working class entrants of grammar schools. Kelsall et al (1972) stressed the importance of maternal support for HE for educational success. Younger participants mentioned parental aspirations far less. They frequently perceived that their parents were supportive, but would have been so whatever path they chose.

Motivation Towards HE Because of Lack of Other Opportunities in Deprived communities:

A number of interviewees attributed their aspirations to HE to lack of other opportunities, as a result of the socio-economic problems of their locality:

Eryl: 'it was automatically assumed that I was going to university because ... in B-----, (town mainly dependent on a dying slate industry) at that time, what else do you do?'

Geraint: 'there was that feeling that you should get an education to avoid the pit, avoid the quarry.'

Ambition fostered by lack of opportunity in mid-20th century Wales was chronicled by Jones, (in Davies et al, 1962), education providing escape and status for young people. Whilst Davies and Rees could be accused of being overly credulous about the idea of Welsh culture, what is significant here is the sense that education will elevate those who undertake it.

Influential Schoolteachers and Schools

These were mentioned as a factor enabling access to HE by nearly all the interviewees. For some, it was a particular teacher, or teachers, being perceived as helpful. For others, it was the ethos of their school that fostered the aspirational habitus.

Two participants now in their fifties gave some idea of how powerful, as well as influential, teachers were for their generation:

Geraint: 'The headteacher would really decide for you...in a sense he would have denied access if he thought that someone wasn't suitable.'

'The headmaster told you what you would do...: "maths is your poison". And that was my careers advice.'

Arwel: (at primary school) 'The headmaster...moved me up a year...it may well have been really quite important... I probably found that very challenging and I probably reacted very well to that...so a teacher, at a very young age, I think was quite important as well.'

Less overtly powerful but equally influential teachers were also remembered:

Irfon: 'only really because of that teacher...absolutely fantastic...yeah, she was very encouraging.'

Gwen: 'I think, you know, what will have had a great influence when you're at school is your teachers...absolutely...as a class we greatly admired our music teacher and that would have been a tremendous spur for us...'

One interviewee recollected that although there was no academic ethos in his school in a very deprived area, the influence of one teacher had been pivotal in him entering an elite university.

The influence of teachers is reflected in much classic work concerning such adults acting as 'role models' inspiring young people (Cooley, 1982; Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1980). More recent literature also deals with role models or mentors for young people, often those perceived to be problematic in some way, and in this context there has been emphasis on gender and ethnicity (Zirkel, 2002). Disaffection of boys

(particularly boys from ethnic minorities) is often perceived to be diminished by the presence of male/ethnic minority male mentors (Odih, 2002; McAuley, 1999; 2000). Although the interviewees in this study who benefited from the 'mentoring' of their teachers were not perceived to be problematic pupils, a number of male participants mentioned the influence of female teachers. This is interesting considering present day ideas about the allegedly discouraging effect on boys of feminised 'soft' pedagogies and female teachers not being able to provide suitable role models for boys (McAuley, 2000), or research suggesting that gender matched mentors are more effective for young people (Zirkel, 2002).

The culture of a school was also important for some interviewees:

Eslyt: 'it's like the cycle of life really...if you do your 'A' levels, you go to university...if you'd said I'm not going to go to university, they'd have said what on earth are you going to do then?'

Although most of the younger interviewees maintained that university entry was dependent upon ability alone, in some cases they described how they perceived teachers equating social deprivation with low ability. The social prejudices imputed to some of the teachers of the younger participants were not noted in teachers of the older generation. Nash (1976) argued that pupils perceived by teachers to be middle or upper-class achieved greater educational success and that teachers attached importance to a pupil's social background. Trotman (1998) found some schools suffer a 'poverty of aspirations' for working-class pupils. Pugsley (1998) found this reflected in advice given and options made available for pupils. Cheng (1995) found that the characteristics of a school do influence the rate at which pupils stay on after the age of 16, even when adjustments are made for academic achievement. The social environment within which education takes place is important in the inculcation of aspirational habitus. A significant element in the social realm of the school involves the individual's peer group, to which we will now turn.

Peer Groups, Peer Pressure

Interviewees of both genders and all ages remembered an academic subculture developing amongst their peers which motivated them academically:

Arwel: 'one (influence) was my fellow students as it were at school...major influence within that was my closest friend...we certainly sparked each other off...'

'there was a number of people who went to university who, at that time, sort of encouraged each other...'

One female participant attributed her interest in university virtually entirely due to the fact that her friends were applying for HE:

Megan: 'my closest friends... from school onwards, had been to university and I think that had an effect on how I saw... I think that's what made me think...to go.'

These accounts echo formulations of adolescent psychosocial development stressing the role of the peer group, some even maintaining that a 'developmental task' of adolescence is to become a member of a peer group (Coleman et al, 1990; Erikson, 1968). Often, 'peer pressure' is discussed as problematic, propelling the hapless youngsters away from academic pursuits and towards trouble. Yet the quotes here suggest that an academically-oriented peer culture can propel people towards HE. In Bourdeuian terms, these peer group experiences help to provide what Reay (2004b, p.79) calls 'a feel for the game' which is usually characteristic of a middle-class educational habitus. Whilst some socially ambitious and attainment-oriented peer cultures may be exclusionary, these reminiscences stress the acceptance of this educational game found in the peer groups of the participants. There is a marked contrast here to much literature on gender related 'peer pressure' (Kenway et al, 1998; Mac An Ghail, 1994; Warrington et al, 2000) which frequently concludes that the effect on boys has been to promote a culture of 'laddishness' and low academic achievement. Our participants here, by their own accounts, were participating in a form of social life which enhanced their readiness to acquire cultural capital.

In addition to peers there were more distant members of the social group who formed an historical backdrop to the individuals' stories. Three interviewees remembered hearing about individuals in the community who had gone to university previously – the boy from the same terrace who had achieved a First some years ago, an actor from the same grammar school who had gone to Oxford, the milkman's son who was doing a PhD - indicating that such things were not impossible.

The Role of Cultural Capital

The notion of 'cultural capital' was formulated explicitly by Bourdieu (1986) who described non-economic capital taking three forms. It may

be embodied in the form of a habitus involving self-improvement; or objectified in symbolic goods; or institutionalized in terms of university diplomas. Cultural capital of the first two kinds facilitates access to the third, in that commitment to education, forms of knowledge, speech and conceptual development facilitate formal academic success (Dumais, 2002). Following a folk-version of this, many of our participants attributed their success in entering HE to acquiring the appropriate cultural capital.

One interviewee, well-acquainted with Bourdieuan theory, clearly articulated that his own acquisition of cultural capital, through an interest in politics, may have led to his success at gaining access to university:

Arwel: (An interest in politics is)...a very educative process...means you become a voracious reader of newspapers...a massive capital plus, a cultural plus...I listened a lot to Radio 4...plays by Arnold Wesker...so it was politics and also what in a sense flowed from that in terms of the mass media...finally there was reading...often ill at school... perhaps I learnt more sitting at home with a bad chest looking out at the rain and reading...and then talking to local people...who came into the house...I often feel that I learnt more in that informal way than I did formally at school and that does lead you to the kind of cultural capital argument...I think I would venture a speculation that actually what got me to university was the cultural capital which I had acquired largely by default...'

In describing life as an adolescent in rural Wales during the early/mid 1960's this participant follows Jones (in Davies et al, 1962, p.102), in describing the lives of secondary school children in a Welsh market town, observing that 'during this period of adolescence children are even more open to the influence of newspapers, the cinema and the wireless'. The door is opened up to new capital acquisitions from the wider culture. Other participants alluded to this phenomenon too:

Ceinwen: 'that political awareness was there and culture was tied in with that, so there was always discussions of politics, of philosophy.'

'books were everywhere in our house...it was taken for granted that education was one of the central parts of life.'

Although these people were not from affluent households, they seemed to be acquiring 'embodied cultural capital', investing in self-improvement through learning which prepared them for the acquisition of more

institutionalised forms of cultural capital and prestige. Cultural capital, following Bourdieu, (1986), has an incremental quality such that the earlier, informal varieties lead to the acquisition of more concrete forms in later life. This invites the question of what sort of culture, or perhaps more importantly, what sort of culture did the participants think, that their experiences were all a part of?

Welsh Culture

Many of the older participants unequivocally attributed their success in HE to aspects of their 'Welsh culture'. This was often tied up with factors such as the influence of religious nonconformity, but some people clearly identified a 'Welsh culture' encouraging education and self-improvement. The Eisteddfod, as the pre-eminent Welsh cultural event, was frequently mentioned. Three people felt that success in the Eisteddfodau as children had helped them academically, and one described how success in the Eisteddfod for her uncle had compensated for him not going to university:

Ceinwen: 'He sat the eisteddfod exams to become a member of the Gorsedd and he was sort of ordained, you know, the green robes...but for a man who had sacrificed a university education for somebody else, that was very, very important...'

Another interviewee, growing up in the 1960's in a town decimated by a dying slate industry, recollected that:

Eryl: 'The quarrymen were keen to get on...that was part of the Welsh culture.'

'I'm not a historian or sociologist but maybe the Welsh did want to learn and go further.'

Such beliefs are consistent with what Jones (1982, p.57) described as 'a certain mythologising about the cultural attainments of the quarrymen'. This sense that the quarry workers had intellectual tastes is present in Samuel Smiles' accounts of labourers reading the works of Lord Macaulay and other 19th century intellectuals. The theme of these accounts is that the interests of the quarrymen were unexpectedly highbrow. The quarry has been described as 'an important cultural centre where much music was made and innumerable verses were composed' (Jones, 1982, p.57). Jones (1982, p.57) also describes the famous 'caban' (a sort of canteen) in the quarry, as being 'organised for educational, cultural and, at times, agitational activity'.

Another participant identified the value that the Welsh put on education and the results of this:

Geraint: 'People who didn't go to university but were manifestly qualified to do so were not in Welsh culture.'

One participant of this generation had 'rebelled' against the notion of a Welsh culture and forwarded his theory as to why such an idea had grown up:

Ifor: '...even the so called 'culture' which was attached to it (Welsh manual labour) which is alleged to be high-minded and rather intellectual, was a rather sad way of trying to escape from the dreadful conditions...'

Despite this:

'...there was a sense of aspiration back then to get out of manual labour and the same tendency applies throughout Wales.'

Whether or not these accounts of the intellectual aspirations of the quarrymen are literally true is not the issue. What is important is that the habitus of the participants is freighted with evocative images of a centuries-old literary and musical tradition, a sense of how their forefathers kept their mercurial intellects alive despite their toil in the quarry or on the farm. The aspirational habitus, in line with Bourdieu's formulation, contains an image of history as well as an image of culture. As Mary Douglas (1986) reminds us, history has little to do with the past but 'everything to do with the present'.

General Discussion

Lest it be thought that the Welsh have a monopoly on 'aspirational habitus', research in England has also shown that disadvantaged people aspiring to university perceive it as a means of escaping welfare dependency and marginalisation, (Warmington, 2003), and some Scottish research has shown that (male) non-traditional students see HE as a gateway to desirable employment, (Tett, 2000). However a good deal of research in England has shown negative images of university held by young working-class people (Hutchings et al, 2001) and that this social group do not always 'value' HE socially or economically, making it a 'risky' and 'costly' choice, (Archer et al, 2000).

However, Hutchings et al, (2001), found that a small number of their participants did plan to go to university, despite the perceived barriers. They were often from ethnic minorities, who used discourses of upward mobility and sacrifice for long-term gain, and who came from families with a tradition of 'bettering themselves'.

One participant in the present study stressed repeatedly that there were 'no barriers' to him and his disadvantaged peers going to university: 'I'm amazed at how easy it was'; 'we could get out of this trough - we did'. Another participant also observed that 'culturally there was no barrier' and 'I don't think there was any of this notion 'oh you're going to university, you must be a snob''. However, one interviewee did remember that: 'there was a great deal of 'it's not for people like us', echoing Bourdieu's (1990, p.64-5) notion that habitus defines the boundary between what is thinkable and unthinkable.

One participant observed that there was not a class system in Wales when he was growing up, but a 'caste system'. He classed himself as a 'very poor Brahmin' – his family were 'subsistence' farmers, but he considered them 'very rich' culturally and educationally. However, it is worth mentioning here that some scholars have disputed this notion of Wales being a 'classless' society, Jones, (1982, p.55), describing it as the 'main ideological achievement' of the late 19th century middle-class nonconformist elite.

The Welsh language itself may have prefigured Bourdieu, in that it already contains a concept similar to that of 'habitus'. One interviewee talked extensively of the Welsh idea of 'bucedd', or 'way of life'. Jenkins, (in Davies et al, 1962), chronicled the concept of 'bucedd' in some detail in a village in Cardiganshire. Jenkins's describes one group having a buchedd corresponding to the background of many older participants in the present study – religious nonconformists with a pervasive respect for knowledge, from whom the disadvantaged but aspirational first generation university students allegedly came. The idea of 'bucedd' itself of course may represent a quasi-mythical past, artfully fabricated by middle-class chapel-goers (Jones, 1992). Yet its power lies in the fact that it is itself a piece of the cultural capital puzzle – an image which aspiring youngsters can carry with them into the otherwise alien world of the university. Perhaps this reflects the 'Thomas Maxim' : 'If men (sic) define situations as real they are real in their consequences', (Thomas et al, 1928, p.572). What is important for understanding culture is that which people think is real.

Both younger and older participants mentioned the importance of peer groups, schools and teachers in constructing the aspirational habitus. Some younger participants recollected that teachers equated social disadvantage with a lack of academic ability. This is consistent with contemporary accounts of disadvantaged people's alienation from education, whereas the older people's memories of barriers reflect a sense that HE was simply 'not for people like us'. In contrast to much contemporary theorising, a teacher's gender did not seem important in their effectiveness as a 'role model' to the participants in this study. Entering HE because of a lack of other desirable employment opportunities was spoken about by a number of interviewees across the age range, perhaps reflecting the long-standing economic problems present in many parts of Wales.

One striking feature of the data presented here is the generational differences evident, many of which are central to the notion of 'Welsh culture'. These differences were apparent in the accounts regarding the influence of religious nonconformity, the by proxy phenomenon, parental influence and the role of 'Welsh culture'.

The lack of reference to the influence of religious nonconformity by younger interviewees may reflect the growing secularisation of Wales. Although an adherence to Bible study and the debate of popular social issues remains among nonconformist congregations, the numbers involved in this organised religious observance are dwindling, so it could be expected that fewer young people would mention such an influence. We may speculate that younger nonconformists have kept the faith, but without the explicit allusions to a distinctive national 'culture' that has previously been associated with it.

No younger people mentioned the feeling of entering HE as a proxy on behalf of older family members, although this idea was alluded to by many interviewees over fifty years of age. This may have a wider resonance with experience elsewhere in the UK for this particular generation, who attended university at a time of expansion, and this may account for the cohort specific construction of family histories of people who always had the potential but for whom circumstances were not propitious. This variant of the aspirational habitus narrative, emphasises how 'our family' or 'our people' always had the 'embodied cultural capital', but somehow lacked the wherewithal to achieve the institutionalised form. This also reconciles the problem of hardship with the sense of having a rich cultural heritage – the latter was always there, but merely occluded by the lack of opportunity. Younger people felt that their parents would have encouraged them in any venture,

educational or not. This may reflect a broadening of aspirations among the younger generation's parents to include non-educational accomplishments. Nevertheless, there is continuity in the sense of an ongoing expectation of support from one's parents' generation.

Further intimations that the aspirational habitus may be differentiated along generational lines comes from the observation that it was participants over fifty years old who subscribed to the idea that it was 'Welsh culture', with its strong nonconformist work ethic, that had assisted their entry to HE. Participants identified aspects of Welsh culture, or *buchedd*, that favoured acquisition of 'cultural capital', which accrued to the participants and then facilitated their acquisition of more institutionalised forms through HE (Bourdieu, 1986). Two participants maintained that although the acquisition of 'cultural capital' had played a part in their attending university, they did not believe it had originated in Welsh culture, but instead problematised the very notion of a Welsh culture *per se*.

As the perception of the existence and influence of this Welsh culture disappears - it rarely plays a part in the narratives of younger participants - maybe the alleged 'Welsh aspirational habitus' will disappear, or change, too. If the Welsh aspirational habitus does, or did, exist, it would be ironic, if at a time of desire to send increasing numbers of less privileged students to university, aspects of a society or culture that perhaps may have supplied the 'cultural capital' that succeeded in facilitating access to a university education for some of the less privileged members of its community, once finances allowed, were to be eradicated. Although much research on widening participation has focused on 'barriers' preventing non-traditional students from accessing HE, scholars such as Archer are now looking at the 'aspirations' and 'identities' of such students, often from ethnic minority backgrounds, who have succeeded.

Despite the intimations of a Welsh aspirational habitus in participants' accounts, it was widely remembered that only a small proportion of people would attend university. Even today, despite an emphasis on widening participation, in many parts of Wales very few people enter HE. The idea of a Welsh aspirational habitus pertains to people's images of culture and history. Rather than offer a romantic evocation of Welsh history, I would advocate attention to the operation of images of history and culture in constructing orientations to education across the generations. In a sense, the targets of these aspiring people 'thus glitter in the eye of history as signs of the labourer's conception of the nature of society' (Reddy, 1977, p.84).

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