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

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Abstract

We use the concept of habitus to illuminate the autobiographical narratives of participants from disadvantaged backgrounds in mid-twentieth century rural Wales who were successful at university. The participants' constructions of their habitus and aspirations drew upon a number of themes that intersected with their ideas of Welsh culture. Images of Welsh culture, history and national identity played a significant role in their accounts. The participants' 'aspirational habitus' involved a rich blend of images and symbolic resources and a sense that they had a right to be at university. This has implications for how we conceive of habitus and its role in guiding people from rural to largely urban intellectual cultures. The participants' experiences were made possible by virtue of the isolation of their rural communities and the corresponding significance of their social milieu, which consolidated their value system by attaching considerable significance to educational achievement.

Introduction

This article uses Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' to illuminate a sense of national culture encouraging educational aspiration. This was done through exploring the narratives of 10 participants between the ages of 49 and 72 who grew up with disadvantage in rural Wales. Their biographies demonstrate how their sense of culture, history and national identity were bound up with their success at university.

Previous work investigating people who were from disadvantaged groups who accessed higher education has deployed the concept of habitus (although that term is not always used) to illuminate the sense of difference felt when the students contrasted their own backgrounds with the atmosphere encountered in higher education (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Reay 2004a). Habitus has been elaborated to include aspects relating to embodiment, agency and the interplay between past and present,

and individual and collective phenomena to make sense of cultural behaviour and experience (Reay 2004b). Bourdieu defines habitus as the 'system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment or as classificatory principles as well as being the organising principles of action' (Bourdieu 1990, p. 13). One's habitus is an individually operationalised set of expectations and understandings based on the collection of experiences one encounters that shape one's sense of the 'rules of the game'. Habitus is a 'generative schema', consisting of systems of durable, transposable dispositions (Bourdieu 1977, p. 85) which are implicated in the reproduction of social order. According to Sulkunen (1982, p. 108), the 'habitus of a group or class defines a symbolic order within which it conducts its practices – in everyday life as well as in the feast'. Through their practice of a particular kind of habitus, a social group may gain cultural capital. This conveys legitimacy, itself reinforced by educational, cultural and artistic institutions. One's habitus is the product of one's individual history but also of the whole collective history of family and class (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 91). Bourdieu attempts to theorise how material conditions of social class and economic inequality could be manifest in culture and in the individual's socio-psychological organisation:

> [T]he social order is progressively inscribed in people's minds. Social divisions become principles of division, organizing the image of the social world. Objective limits become a sense of limits, a practical anticipation of objective limits acquired by experience of objective limits, a 'sense of one's place' which leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded. (Bourdieu 1984, p. 471)

Habitus is not entirely about restriction and exclusion. We use it to explain how our participants from rural Welsh backgrounds who experienced economic disadvantage on a regional and individual level successfully entered and navigated their way through university. Their habituses developed in a particular historical context spanning two generations who grew up in the mid-twentieth century. We use the concept of habitus in a flexible, non-deterministic sense, as facilitating the growth of individuals into new circumstances as well as trammelling them within familiar ones (Reay 2004a).

We extend Bourdieu's (1977) concept and speak tentatively of an 'aspirational habitus'. Our participants from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in rural Wales describe how the sense in their families that education was valuable culminated in their going to university. This was more than 'aspiration'. Educational values were embedded and remembered as being held by people in the wider community who had little formal education. Habitus was not always a mindset or style of life that clashed with the ethos of a university education. Some participants seemed to have been prepared for university, despite growing up in considerable economic disadvantage and having no family tradition of participating in university education. We describe how the interviewees grew up feeling that members of their family and community had been unfairly denied a university education and with the expectation that they would enjoy that privilege. Some of these participants explicitly subscribed to ideas of the Welsh being a cultured, literary people with a hunger for education. In contrast with much of the literature relating to economically disadvantaged people entering university, our participants felt that they had the right to be there.

We attempt to elucidate the experiences shown by 10 individuals from Wales possessing the putative aspirational habitus that may have enabled them to succeed at university. This was explored by means of interviews with the participants, all of whom grew up in Welsh-speaking communities. The effects of Welsh culture and the sense of history represent a relatively unexplored aspect of habitus, 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 image of Wales is that of a nation that valued education, producing 'preachers and teachers', despite debate as to whether this notion is a romantic invention (Morgan 1986). The stereotypical image of the Welsh orientation to education is reflected in the founding of the University College of North Wales (now Bangor University), where in the late nineteenth century scholarships were funded by subscriptions raised from the local quarrymen and working-class farmers to educate their own children (Williams 1985). Academic achievement despite rural hardship is emphasised in the biographical narratives of Welsh literati such as Kate Roberts (1891–1985). There are frequent accounts of overcoming hardship through education, such as in the story of John William Thomas, ('Arfonwyson'), (1805–1840), a quarry-man who became the supervisor at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich. Smiles (1884) gives accounts of self-taught labourers from North Wales attending evening classes and subsequently entering universities. The perceived tradition of valuing literary and cultural achievement is manifested in the popularity of Eisteddfodau. These competitive festivals of the arts, in their present form, owe much to the revival of interest in Welsh-language culture in the nineteenth century, but much of the ceremony alludes to images of an imagined rural past with druidic overtones. The focus on poetry and music corresponds to the high profile of bards (poets) in popular Welsh history.

Wales consists largely of relatively disadvantaged, often rural, communities. The late twentieth century has seen a progressive decline in industrial and spiritual life (Evans 2000). Although participants described something distinctive about 'Wales' and the 'Welsh', life in industrial urban south Wales is considerably different from life in Snowdonia. However, as Jones (1992, p. 330), observes: 'the Welsh have for centuries sustained an identity ... despite ... a recent history that has witnessed massive immigration and integrationist pressures'. 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'.

For many, there is still a distinctive sense of identity, history and associated habitus (McCall 2001), which structured family life and persisted through geographical move-ment and intermarriage. Our participants grew up in Wales at a time when many in Wales still perceived an existing 'Welsh culture' infused with religious 'nonconform-ism' – a group of theologies dissenting from the Anglican Church (Larsen 1999), which owed much to the Methodist movement (Jones 2004). Through the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, the centrality of chapel life to many Welsh communities amounted to what Chambers and Thompson (2005) call 'non-conformist hegemony'. From the nineteenth century to the present day, identity politics in Wales involves multiple socio-spatial identities and 'manifold borders or

boundaries that give form to these identities' (Jones and Fowler 2007, p. 91). Identities and their related boundaries, spaces and 'territories', may be meticulously constructed, narrated and maintained at local and community level, and represent a way of sustaining knowledge and cultural capital.

There have been challenges to the notion of a 'Welsh culture'. Jones (1982, p. 55) refers to 'the propagandists of Welsh culture', maintaining that during the late nineteenth 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 has been long-lasting and powerful. We explore its contributions to the habitus of the participants and how they felt it constituted a distinctively 'Welsh experience', informing educational aspirations:

> 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 diversifed, is in turn at the basis of all subsequent experiences ... and so on, from restructuring to restructuring. (Bourdieu 1992 [1972], p. 134).

Although Welsh society changed greatly in the late twentieth century (Chaney *et al.* 2001; Jones 2004), the idea of a Welsh culture has proved robust. Images and ideas of Welsh culture, as well as national identity and the cultural construction of Welsh history, infuse the aspirational habitus described and are of sufficient significance to warrant further study. This study explores the contribution of such images to notions of habitus and the participants' orientation to education. Bourdieu's formulation of culture differs from the definition of the term usually found in anthropology or cultural studies. In these disciplines culture is taken to be reflected in ordinary life (Williams 1958; Hall 1986). Bourdieu, on the other hand, uses 'culture' to denote the phenomena which a society sees as being 'the best that has been thought and said, regarded as the summits of achieved civilization' (Hall 1986, p. 59). Culture is the thought, action and artistic production that a dominant group sees as the most valuable, enabling Bourdieu to reinforce the idea that culture is a form of capital. The everyday practice of ordinary people is habitus that becomes culture inasmuch as it is imbued with value. Habitus represents an attempt to move away from homogenised, bounded notions of culture, or even class culture, sub-culture and identity (Hall, 1980; Clarke *et al.* 1997), offering a way out of such static notions. The participants transformed their lifestyles yet their habitus represents a core of continuity.

Some historians (e.g. Jones 1982; Manning 2002, 2004) have pointed to the way that Welsh culture involved an active reconstruction of the past and a carefully crafted sense of history, foregrounding the role of matters such as work, language, piety, the arts and scholarship. The insight from Bourdieu is that by recreating and reconfirming this sense of history, people add value to and create the kind of culture that can compete with the more prestigious varieties flourishing in universities and that can permit the holder to make a smooth transition from childhood to being a student.

It is with this conception of habitus and culture in mind that the present study was undertaken, with a view to exploring how people from rural communities believed their experiences as youngsters related to their feelings about university and subsequent career development.

Table 1: *Profile of the participants in this study*

Name	Gender	Age	University attended (for first degree)	Current occupation
Arwel	man	56	University of Sussex	University senior manager
Eifion	man	58	University of Cambridge	Senior academic
Eryl	man	54	University of Wales, Cardiff	Pharmacist
Geraint	man	60	University of Oxford	University senior manager
Ceinwen	woman	54	University of Wales, Aberystwyth	Academic
Gwen	woman	54	University of Wales, Bangor	Academic
Gwion	man	49	University of Wales, Aberystwyth	Lawyer
Ivor	man	60	University of London	Writer
Huw	man	72	University of Wales, Bangor	Retired further education lecturer
Manon	woman	59	University of Wales, Bangor	Academic

Method and participants

Seven men and three women were interviewed. Although this is a small sample size, large samples cannot be meaningfully used in qualitative work of this nature. Despite the age and gender differences, themes and issues were repeatedly mentioned and described in the same context, using strikingly similar language. Participants had all 'succeeded' in the university system, described themselves as 'Welsh', spent their childhoods and adolescent years in rural Wales and considered Welsh to be their first language. They included people from north, south and mid-Wales. All the participants came from economically disadvantaged social groups or families where no immediate family member had entered university before. The disadvantage was economic – a number of participants felt that they had culturally rich backgrounds, despite (sometimes very severe) economic hardship. The participants were aged between 49 and 72, thus spanning two generations. The generational differences between them contribute to their habituses, as well as the expected difference in their life experiences (see Table 1 for the profiles of participants.)

The participants initially approached were known to the authors and were then asked to introduce other people who might be willing to participate. This produced a high proportion of academics, but since the study looked at features of participants who were successful at university, academics are an appropriate group to study. Nearly all the participants were known to one author, so it was possible to use these relationships as informal validity and reliability checks to strengthen the analysis, ensuring that the themes and issues identified resonated with the broader patterns of values in their lives. The interviews provided a snapshot of the participants' understanding of their academic success, but the relationships between the author and many of these participants allowed participant validation to be carried out. The themes identified were challenged against the interpretations of other researchers and against participant's observations over a period of time.

Our participants had passed through the education system before widening university access was widely debated. Most were of a generation where people from disadvantaged backgrounds were for the first time able to afford to enter university.

At this time, universities were dominated by privileged social groups, so we were interested in how these disadvantaged participants from rural Wales experienced university. The 'Welsh factor' interested us because so much history and imagery associated with Wales is linked with learning and erudition. We wondered if the construction of history and imagery that has contributed to national identity in Wales had also found its way into the participants' sense of their own identity, and whether, in line with Bourdieu's formulation, this had contributed to their stock of cultural capital. Did this, we wondered, affect the ease with which they were able to assimilate capital in the form of educational experiences beyond their home community.

The interviews for this study consisted of an open-ended approach, adapting the autobiographical interviewing method of Chamberlayne *et al.* (2000) who explored patterns of biographical continuity and change and interrelationships between the personal and the social. Many of these authors' participants were also from marginalised groups who had sometimes joined very different, more dominant groups.

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. A power relationship between interviewer and interviewee raises the question of whether such an interview can ever be truly participant-led, but the participants here were positioned more powerfully than is usual in that they were mostly known to the interviewer and had all established successful careers.

The analysis was carried out in line with Chamberlayne *et al.*'s (2000) recommendations, whereby the interviewer identified influences, themes and consistencies, particularly in terms of influences upon the individual pertaining to the desire to attend university. These themes were then examined for commonalties across gender, religious denominations and region of upbringing. These records then formed a further layer of data that were analysed. The analytical technique was eclectic, drawing on phenomenography and biographical analysis. The term 'narrative' is used loosely here, literally meaning a respondent's story, after Richmond (2002, p. 1) 'based upon their recollections and statements about their own feelings and perspectives'. As Redwood (1999, p. 674) states:

> the form of the analysis often appears to be a largely intuitive process. What is common ... is an emphasis on temporality – time and place, plot, scene and the multiply-placed voice of the researcher.

Results and discussion

Four recurring themes arose from the data. Although our participants spanned two generations, were of both genders and had a variety of life experiences, four themes were referred to repeatedly in the context of motivating them to aim for a university education. These were the influence of religious nonconformity, the concept of going to university as a proxy for others, the lack of other opportunities in economically deprived communities and their exposure to 'cultural capital', even though they lived in an economically disadvantaged community.

We see how the participants encountered these themes in the Welsh rural context and how cutting across these themes is their concern with Welsh culture. This was felt to have informed the process of attending university and yielded a further dimension of analysis, in terms of whether participants explicitly subscribed to its existence and its influence, or whether it was present in an occluded form, in the sense that the participants mentioned aspects of life and influences that would be unusual elsewhere in urbanised areas of the UK.

It can be seen from the participants' comments that images of culture and images used in the cultural construction of Welsh history may make additions to constructions of habitus. As noted above, the idea of a Welsh culture that stretches back through the centuries has been undermined by many historians who have argued that much of it was invented in the nineteenth century (Morgan 1983; Jones 1992). The revisions and counter revisions of commentators on Welsh culture and history make it difficult to discern what the tenor of life might have been for people before the late nineteenth century. What are significant are the popular notions of Welsh history and culture that many people of our participants' generations espouse. While they may not be consistent with historians' accounts, they serve to add value to the presumed tradition, incorporating images of the glorious past used in the cultural construction of history, of Bards and of labourers with intellectual tastes. This culturally enhanced image of the past was adaptive and useful when people were aiming for university and when they sought to manage their identity as people who deserved institutional recognition and the award of academic degrees. Welsh 'culture' will be discussed as a 'link', after considering the other themes.

The influence of religious nonconformity

Nonconformity emerged in Wales during the late seventeenth century, becoming a very powerful influence and then declining in the 1950 and 1960s (Davies 1993). Davies (1993) notes the emphasis on 'self-culture' in nonconformity, constituting an interest in education that was aligned with religion itself. The cultural and educational role of chapel communities in Welsh life can usefully be illuminated by means of Bourdieu's (1986) extensions of the notion of capital to explain cultural and symbolic affairs. Cultural capital is concerned with knowledge, skill, education and related advantages that can lead to higher status in society, closely approximating the accretions of knowledge, aspirations and spirituality which have been claimed to be central to Wales's identity (Philips and Harper Jones 2002). The influence of the chapel was mentioned by nearly all participants. Participants recollected the 'educational' and 'self-improvement' ethos of the chapel providing an encouraging culture:

> Eryl (man): 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 ... before you got to college you had done it before and chapel was really important in that.

Other quotes reveal a very direct assistance from the chapel:

> Ceinwen (woman): I could read and write before going to primary school. We were taught to read and write in the Sunday school.

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

> Arwel (man): 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.

The early religious experiences of the participants played an important part in acquiring a love of learning and an intention to go to university; a 'cognitive habitus', in Nash's (2005) sense of the term. The chapel exposed them to people in roles for which an education was needed, such as ministers and teachers, who played a significant part in these communities. Such experiences are implicated in the kind of habitus the participants describe themselves acquiring as children.

Going to university in proxy for others

Some of the interviewees were acutely aware that they were among the first generation, or were the first member, of their family to attend university:

> Geraint (man): Going to college on behalf of the generation previously, who hadn't been able to go to college – you're almost ... a proxy for other people ... they had felt a certain frustration at not being able to take advantage of university ... I expressed it in what was a very poor poem ... but the fact that I wrote it clearly meant something.

> ... the thought of, for example, failure at university would have been horrendous ... you'd be letting down a whole generation of people for whom you were there as this proxy.

These participants also stressed that previous generations and other members of their family had the ability to gain entry to university but their financial circumstances had prevented this:

> Ceinwen (woman): 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 ... they were very, very good mathematically ... they were all aware that they'd missed out on that university education ... an uncle ... a carpenter ... he never had the opportunity to go to university, ... he sacrificed that so that his younger sister could go to university ... my father always said ... they all should have had a university education ... after my grandfather led that strike and subsequently became unemployed, university education or even secondary school education was out of the question for them.

Like Samuel Smiles' 'men of industry and invention' (Smiles 1884) Ceinwen's account of her family history is populated with characters who are described as being full of potential, yet were prevented through family commitments or poverty from gaining a university education – she was the first family member to go to university. Ceinwen gave an interview full of references to the educational and intellectual ambitions of members of her family, classing them as part of 'the Welsh intelligentsia', yet described the sheer grinding poverty that the whole family endured

that resulted in none of them achieving the education that they felt they could and should have benefited from.

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 previous denial of opportunity to be the motivation behind their family's desire to see them enter university.

Motivation towards university because of lack of other opportunities in deprived communities

A number of interviewees attributed their aspirations to attend university to lack of other opportunities, as a result of local socioeconomic problems:

> Eryl (man): it was automatically assumed that I was going to university because ... in B— [a village mainly dependent on a dying slate industry] at that time, what else do you do?

> Geraint (man): there was that feeling that you should get an education to avoid the pit, avoid the quarry.

> Arwel (man): I knew ... plenty of slate quarry workers ... I didn't want to do physical labour ... I knew what it was ... I'd seen people physically digging ditches, I'd seen people coming home from work covered in slate dust and ... I very consciously didn't want to do that ... as a kid I'd suffered from ill-health ... the only way I was going to be able to do anything was if I used my brains.

Ambition fostered by lack of opportunity in mid-twentieth century Wales was chronicled by Jones (1960), showing how education providing escape and status for young people. While Jones (1960) could be accused of being over-credulous about the idea of Welsh culture, what is significant here was the sense that education would elevate those who undertook it.

The role of cultural capital

The notion of 'cultural capital' was formulated by Bourdieu (1986) who described non-economic capital taking three forms. It may be embodied in the form of a habitus involving self-improvement, objectified in symbolic goods or institutionalised in terms of university qualifications. Cultural capital of the first two kinds facilitates access to the third in that a commitment to education, forms of knowledge, speech and conceptual development facilitate academic success (Dumais 2002). Many of our participants attributed their success at university to acquiring the appropriate cultural capital.

One interviewee clearly articulated that his own acquisition of cultural capital may have led to his success at gaining access to university:

> Arwel (man): [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 and mid-1960s, this
participant follows Jones (1960, p. 102) who observed that 'during this period of
adolescence children are even more open to the influence of newspapers, the cinema
and the wireless'. New capital is acquired from wider culture.

Other participants alluded to the acquisition of cultural capital and cognitive
habitus:

> Ceinwen (woman): ... 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.... in
> general terms education was very highly regarded in the community ... literature was very
> important for my parents.

> Eifion (man): Although I came from what would be economically a very deprived back-
> ground, I think culturally and academically it was a very privileged background.

Although these people were not from affluent households, they acquired 'embodied
cultural capital', investing in self-improvement through learning, preparing them for
the acquisition of more institutionalised forms of cultural capital and prestige. Cul-
tural capital, following Bourdieu (1986) has an incremental quality – the earlier,
informal varieties and the establishment of an appropriate 'cognitive habitus' (Nash
2005) later lead to the acquisition of concrete forms. This invites the question: of what
sort of culture did the participants think that their experiences were a part?

Welsh culture

Many of our participants unequivocally attributed their success at university to aspects
of their 'Welsh culture'. This included the influence of religious nonconformity, but
some people clearly identified a Welsh culture that encouraged education and self-
improvement. The Eisteddfod was frequently mentioned. One described how success
in the Eisteddfod for her uncle had compensated for him not going to university:

> Ceinwen (woman): He sat the Eisteddfod exams to become a member of the Gorsedd ... for
> a man who had sacrificed a university education for somebody else, that was very, very
> important.

One participant who remembered his parents playing a leading part in what he called
'village life' (in particular the Eisteddfod and the chapel) believed that his parents'
involvement in such activities led to a collectively shared expectation by many in his
rural community that he would go to university. Another interviewee, growing up in
a town decimated by a dying slate industry, recollected:

> Eryl (man): The quarrymen were keen to get on ... that was part of the Welsh culture ...
> 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 in rural villages had intellectual tastes is present in Smiles' accounts of labourers reading the works of nineteenth century intellectuals. The theme of these accounts is that the quarrymen had unexpectedly highbrow interests. 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 'caban' (a sort of canteen) in the quarry, as being 'organised for educational, cultural and, at times, agitational activity'.

Other participants explicitly identified the value that the Welsh (and 'Welsh culture') put on education and the results of this:

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

> Eryl (man): So the culture you grew up with ... it was automatically assumed you were going ... it was the way of the world, expected.

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 (man): [E]ven 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.

What is important here 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 intellect alive despite their toil in the quarry or on the farm. The aspirational habitus contains images of a construction of history as well as images of culture, which contributed to the individual identities of some of our participants as well as a national identity. As Douglas (1986) reminds us, sometimes 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', Warmington's (2003) research in England also showed that some disadvantaged people aspiring to university perceived it as a means of escaping welfare dependency and marginalisation and some Scottish research has shown that disadvantaged students see higher education as a gateway to desirable employment (Tett 2000). However, research in England has shown that young working-class people in urban areas hold negative images of university (Hutchings and Archer 2001) and that this social group does not always value higher education socially or economically, making it a 'risky' and 'costly' choice for those in large conurbations (Archer and Hutchings 2000).

One participant here stressed repeatedly that there were 'no barriers' preventing him and his disadvantaged peers going to university: 'we could get out of this trough – we did'. However, one interviewee remembered that 'there was a great deal of "it's not for people like us"', echoing Bourdieu's (1990, pp. 64–65) notion that habitus defines the boundary between what is thinkable and unthinkable. Statistics relating to university entrance during this era will confirm that many people believed 'it wasn't for the likes of them'. The impression is that of a community whose members had an embedded aspirational habitus toward education *per se*, yet due to past economic circumstances they were denied a university education. When this became a possibility, many members of the community enthusiastically embraced the idea of university education. Some participants remembered being encouraged by schools and teachers to 'do well' at school, even though they thought that their teachers may not have expected them to go eventually to university because 'we were not that sort of family'. It is as if the adults were trying to enlist the children into the kind of aspirational habitus which prevailed in educational settings.

More distant members of their social group formed a historical backdrop to the participants' stories. 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 possible. Such academic successes seemed to have been highly regarded in these rural communities and encouraged the respondents.

Many of the narratives revealed a politicisation that, despite past oppression, the participants had every right to a university education. This seems to have motivated and enabled many to cope with the social difference encountered at university.

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. Some scholars have disputed this notion that Wales was a classless society. Jones (1982, p. 55) described this as the 'main ideological achievement' of the late nineteenth century middle-class nonconformist elite.

The Welsh language may have prefigured Bourdieu, containing a concept similar to that of 'habitus' – '*buchedd*', or 'way of life'. Jenkins (1960) chronicled the concept of '*buchedd*' in some detail in a village in Cardiganshire. Jenkins' describes one group having a *buchedd* corresponding to the background of many 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 '*buchedd*' itself may also be part of the mythical past, fabricated by middle-class nonconformists (Jones 1992). Its power lies in the fact that it is a piece of the cultural capital puzzle – an image which aspiring youngsters can carry with them into the world of the university. Perhaps this reflects the 'Thomas Maxim': 'If men [sic] define situations as real they are real in their consequences', (Thomas and Thomas 1928, p. 572). What is important for understanding culture is that which people think is real and this should be remembered if the social reality of Welsh experiences is to be deconstructed.

Entering university in proxy for older family members was alluded to by many interviewees. This may resonate with experience elsewhere in the UK for these generations who attended university at a time of expansion and may account for our participants' construction of family histories of people who always had the potential to enter university 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 were somehow unable to translate this into an institutionalised form. This also reconciles hardship with the sense of having a rich cultural heritage – the latter was always there, but merely occluded by the lack of opportunity.

The participants often subscribed to the idea that it was 'Welsh culture' that assisted their entry to university. They identified aspects of Welsh culture that favoured their acquisition of cultural capital, which then facilitated their acquisition of more institutionalised forms through university education (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 and thus problematised the very notion of Welsh culture.

All participants' stories were striking in that they revealed none of the sense of alienation often reported by present-day students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Poverty and oppression were remembered, but the participants felt strongly their right to be at university. They had deeply embedded educational aspirations and many remembered being encouraged toward educational achievement from a very young age, hence our use of the term 'aspirational habitus', rather than simply 'aspiration'. Their habitus enabled them to feel that they had a right to a university education and to feel comfortable in the university environment, despite being aware that their social backgrounds were very different from that of their peers at university. The participants' habitus seemed to have a transformative aspect reminiscent of Richards's (2005) sense of 'advancement', and 'investing' in the self associated with education. This facilitated their move into the middle classes after university as they adopted new professions and lifestyles, yet retained a continuity with their core.

Our participants' experiences were made possible by the isolation of the communities – social activities and opportunities for collective experiences of identity were organised through chapel, Sunday school, family and education. This lent a particular tenor to their experiences. It was relatively easy for the aspirational aspects of culture to prevail over hedonistic ones, as the value of piety, education and culture was adumbrated by the adults in the community. The relative isolation of the communities in question and the corresponding significance of their social milieu allowed this value system to be consolidated, rather than diluted.

Despite the intimations of an aspirational habitus in our participants' accounts, they remembered that only a small proportion of people would attend university. The idea of a Welsh aspirational habitus pertains to the wider community's images of culture and history. 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). Rather than rehearse a romantic evocation of Welsh history, we advocate attention to the operation of images of history, culture and national identity in constructing habitus and orientations to education.

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