Lives Beyond Suspicion: Gender and the Construction of Respectability in Mid-twentieth Century Rural North Wales

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Abstract

This article explores and extends the field of historical rural sociology using the idea of respectability via a biographical study of 20 older adults from North Wales (UK) for whom the performance of respectability represented a form of social, symbolic or cultural capital. It entailed the active negotiation and management of barriers between differing constituencies of opinion, generations and family members. Key to this situated respectability in practice was the notion that harsher systems of exclusion for transgressors were located elsewhere, rather than in the present or immediate community. The sense of the past evoked by participants highlights an historical, diachronic dimension to respectability. A particularised, carefully constructed image of the past was present in participants' evocations of respectability, providing a way of talking about identity and historical progression, as well as a means of managing potentially contentious events to preserve the dignity of the people concerned.

Introduction: situating 'respectable' Welsh womanhood

In the decade since Skeggs famously placed the issue of respectability on the sociological agenda (Skeggs 1997) the notion has been applied fruitfully to a number of social phenomena, including the practice of femininity in school (Allan 2009), cleanliness and the transformation of the labouring classes in the nineteenth century (Crook 2006) and the construction and maintenance of social distinction in rural Ireland (Muldowney 2008). Skeggs's insight that 'respectability' was used by working-class people to accrue some symbolic value to their otherwise devalued and vulnerable class position has inspired us to extend the notion further, to show how the construct may be of value to rural sociology and how it is imbricated with the past. To do this, we examine selected data from a biographical narrative study of older adults in north Wales.

This article is based on biographical narrative interviews with 20 people who lived during the middle years of the twentieth century in the region of Wales known as *Y Fro Gymraeg* (the Welsh language area, mapped by Aitchison and Carter 2000). It is a region that has been described as 'in retreat for centuries but still at the heart of debates about Welsh national identity' (Day 2002; Bryant 2006, p. 126). At this time, the region was socioeconomically disadvantaged due to the declining fortunes of farming and quarrying, as well as suffering from long-term depopulation. The majority first language was Welsh and the region was deeply imbued with the legacy of religious Nonconformity. The chapel, not the established Anglican church, was at the centre of Welsh rural life and typically chapels were aligned politically with Liberal and radical politics. The influence of Welsh-language Nonconformity was such that even in the 1960s when religious observance itself was declining sharply, a distinctive culture derived from Nonconformity pervaded the region (Madgwick *et al.* 1973). This was manifested by a suspicion of mass culture such as popular music and dance; disapproval of activities involving gambling, such as whist drives or bingo games; and public houses having to close on Sundays. Some scholars (Jones 1982; Manning 2002, 2004) contend that the culture of rural Wales has involved an exceptionally active reconstruction of the past, foregrounding the role of the Welsh language, piety, the arts and scholarship, as well as the centrality of work in the primary sector of agriculture and extractive industry, to such an extent that sometimes these have been seen as synonymous with Welshness itself.

Bourdieu's work has been used previously to help elucidate the distinctive features of the history of this region (Baker and Brown 2008, 2009) and, following Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, it can be argued that the accumulated labour of creating and reconfirming this special sense of history enabled people to add value to their personal identity and collective cultural capital, in ways that allowed them to compete with the more prestigious varieties of cultural capital flourishing in urban areas of England (Baker and Brown 2008, 2009). The crafting of a respectable identity involved the appropriation of psychosocial and physical attributes that reflected pre-occupations with deviance, transgression, moralization and economic productivity. Emmett (1964) provides an account of the rural Welsh response to the values of 'ruling England', and other classic contributions to Welsh sociology similarly emphasise the distance between the religious and cultural ethos of rural Wales and the dominant norms of modern industrial and urban existence (Rees 1950; Davies and Rees 1960).

The popular idea of an intellectually high-minded, pious Welsh rural culture that stretches back across centuries has been undermined somewhat by rival interpretations that argue that much of this was invented during the nineteenth century (Morgan 1983; Jones 1992). What is significant, however, is not so much the reality of this conception as the prominence such sentiments held among the people we interviewed, showing the importance to them of this sense of a uniquely Welsh history and culture and the imbrication of history, identity and the quest for legitimacy. Although it may not be consistent with historians' accounts, the incorporation of images of erudite Bards and preachers, and ordinary folk with refined intellectual tastes serves to add value to a presumed tradition, in the construction of a glorious and still relevant cultural past. The processes at stake here echo the role that critics of

colonialism such as Frantz Fanon (1982, p. 210) have ascribed to the creation of a sense of history and of a mystical past.

These images of the past were often central to the sense of social value and cultural capital evinced by participants (Baker and Brown 2008). According to Bourdieu's formulation, social capital includes the resources accrued through group member-ship. It is 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu 1986a, p. 248). Rather than being held by the individual alone, it is based instead on relational processes of interaction leading to constructive outcomes.

In addition, Bourdieu proposed a separate category of cultural capital, concerned with painstakingly acquired knowledge, skill, education and related advantages, which in some circumstances can lead to a higher social status. It is these resources that approximate most closely to the accretions of knowledge, aspirations and spiri-tuality that have been claimed to be central to Welsh identity (Philips and Harper-Jones 2002) and that have culminated most recently in the designation of Wales as the 'learning country' (National Assembly for Wales 2001).

Allied to this, Bourdieu saw matters of morality as being very closely bound up with what he termed 'symbolic capital', or the power of consecration (Bourdieu 1980, p. 262). Symbolic capital serves as a kind of credit that social actors or groups may have as a result of having legitimised their social position. This may arise because of their successful conversion of cultural or economic capital. Morality, in this view, is grounded in social practice and habitus rather than in any pure moral philosophy (Bourdieu 1986b). Thus Bourdieu sees moral convictions, customs and judgments as being established through convention and, in a move curiously reminiscent of Foucault (1975), as instruments of discipline, normalisation and repression. Bourdi-eu's notion of symbolic capital helps us to explain how moral convictions, habits and judgments guide people in pursuing meaningful lives and in distinguishing between right and wrong, good and evil and, perhaps most importantly for our purposes, between different social groups or forms of conduct.

In Bourdieu's formulation, symbolic capital exists, grows and is recognised through intersubjective reflection. Like social capital, it is based on mutual cognition and recognition (Bourdieu 1980, 1986b). This is how it acquires a symbolic character to become symbolic capital. Indeed, for social capital to become effective at all, differences between groups or classes have to be transformed into classifications that make symbolic recognition and distinction possible. As symbolic capital, distinctions – for example, between the respectable and the less respectable or between one chapel community and another – are 'the product of the internalization of the structures to which they are applied' (Bourdieu 1985, p. 204).

In connection with this, Bourdieu saw strong moralities as hallmarks of less powerful, more working-class and downwardly mobile social groups. As he saw it, the working class 'refers often explicitly to norms of morality or agreeableness in all their judgements' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 41). In this view, those placed at the bottom of social hierarchies yet striving for respectability are apt to subscribe to moral conservatism in religious and sexual matters. The middle classes, by contrast, are inclined instead toward a moral system that is more psychologically minded and focuses on personal

needs. On the other side of the coin, Skeggs (1997) notes how the middle and upper classes often identify the working classes as dangerous, polluting, threatening and pathological. To Skeggs:

> Respectability is one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class. It informs how we speak, who we speak to, how we classify others, how we study and how we know who we are (or not). Respectability is usually the concern of those who are not seen to have it. (Skeggs 1997, p. 1)

Respectability means belonging, being included and accepted, being treated with respect, acknowledged and recognised as an individual. In the case of Wales it seems that respectability has been managed through particular kinds of historical sensitivity. On a social level, moralities and striven-for respectabilities may serve as means of discrimination, stigmatisation and exclusion. In the course of social life in Welsh village and chapel communities, people orientated and positioned themselves not only in a moral but also in a social space and, although distinct, these became thoroughly intertwined with one another (Davies and Rees 1960).

The dominant notion of respectability and educational success in Wales was itself established in reaction to earlier historical events, in which, curiously like the working class, the Welsh were labelled 'unrespectable' (Williams 1985). In 1847 Commissioners appointed by Parliament presented a notorious report on the state of education in Wales (Jones 1978; James and Davies 2009). It provoked a furious reaction (Davies 1994; Roberts 1998) and came to be known in Wales as the 'treason' of the Blue Books (Derfel 1854). Ever since the Blue Books declared that eight out of 10 Welsh women were 'unchaste and insensible to female virtue', there has been a special relationship between femininity, morality and piety in Wales. It was as if the nation was still smarting at this criticism well into the twentieth century and seeking to negate it.

Aaron (1994) and Bohata (2002) have argued that the durability and power of the image of respectable Welsh womanhood could be seen as a legacy of cultural imperialism, as exemplified by the educational commissioners. Aaron (1994, p. 189) notes that

> In colonized and post-colonized societies this type of conservative retention of repressive behaviour patterns inculcated by the colonizing culture, after that culture has itself abandoned them, is, apparently, a common trait

while Bohata (2002, p. 647) comments that 'the idealized Welsh woman, inspired by England's middle-class angel of the house, would represent Welsh respectability long after English women had abandoned their haloes in favour of bicycles'.

Wales has held a marginalised status in relation to its economically and politically dominant neighbour England (Bohata 2002), and has developed what Hechter (2000) terms the 'peripheral nationalism' of a culturally distinctive territory resisting incorporation into a more powerful neighbouring state. Welsh people have therefore often had to struggle to appear worthy of respect. Thus we would anticipate that the issue of respectability would be particularly acutely felt. Moreover, we might expect that it would be engendered in and through the social networks that contributed to community and kinship ties and hence to social capital in rural Welsh life (Rees 1950; Davies and Rees 1960). Early community studies of rural life in Wales have

highlighted the importance of distinctions based on respectability, between different 'lifestyle' groups (Jenkins 1960; Day and Fitton 1975) but so far these have not been understood in terms of capital accumulation. The data presented here represent a unique opportunity to revisit accounts of rural life in the light of recent developments in the theory of respectability itself to see how the concept can be further enhanced.

Methodological approach and data sources

Our study used an adapted version of Chamberlayne *et al.*'s (2000) biographical narrative interviewing technique to explore patterns of continuity and change, and the interrelationships between the personal and the social in the lives of our respondents. The participants are asked a generative question and allowed to talk freely, with interruptions only for clarification. Our generative question was 'Can you tell me about your life from childhood onwards, particularly your memories of women's and men's roles?' The interviews were undertaken as part of a wider study exploring gendered identity. Thus, participants were aware that we had an interest in gender and frequently talked about their memories and perceptions in this light.

The 20 participants represent a subgroup of a panel recruited by the researchers to explore life stories and oral history in *Y Fro Gymraeg*. Recruitment initially began through the authors' own social networks and was spread through personal contacts and social organisations to which the participants belonged in a variant of respondent-driven sampling (Heckathorn 1997). While the sample contained many who had worked in the education system in later adult life, all participants had spent their childhoods and adolescent years in rural *Y Fro Gymraeg* and considered Welsh to be their first language.

Since the participants were known to at least one author who had met them several times over the course of the larger project, it was possible to use these relationships to undertake 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. Ongoing relationships with many of these participants allowed participant validation to be carried out. The core theme identified in the present article, namely respectability, was challenged against the interpretations of other researchers and against participants' observations over a period of time.

Those interviewed were aged between 53 and 84 at the time of interview in 2007 and came from varied backgrounds. Their parents included a cross-section of occupations typical of Welsh rural society of the times: predominantly farmers, farm workers, quarrymen, housewives and domestic servants, but also the occasional minister, publican, miners, and teacher as well as a doctor. While many had some firsthand experience of hardship and deprivation, several felt that they came from backgrounds that were culturally if not materially rich. The views of our participants gave some confirmation to the suggestion made by Hoggart (2007) that social class hierarchies devised for an urban English experience do not map easily onto the situation in Wales. Many maintained indeed that the class structure in Wales differed from that prevalent in England and resorted to distinctions linked more closely to demarcations based on way of life, or in Welsh terminology '*buchedd*' (Jenkins 1960; Day and Fitton 1975; Day 2002), than class *per se* (see Table 1).

Table 1: *Participants' details*

Participant's name (all names are pseudonyms)	Gender	Age at time of interview	Occupation	Area of residence in Wales when growing up	Parents' occupation
Euros	Male	82	Retired university lecturer	West	Nonconformist minister; housewife
Lowri	Female	84	Retired university lecturer	North-east	Nonconformist minister; housewife
Geraint	Male	63	Retired senior academic	North-east	Butcher; housewife
Cadi	Female	80	Retired farmer	North-west	Farmer; housewife
Arsula	Female	79	Retired factory worker	North-west	(Father died when Arsula was young); mother's work unknown
Dewi	Male	60	Factory worker	North-west	(No permanent father); cook
Dafydd	Male	62	Retired teacher	North-west	Farmer; housewife
Lloyd	Male	54	University lecturer	North-east	Farmer; housewife
Haf	Female	80	Retired teacher	North-west	Quarryman; teacher
Angharad	Female	61	Housewife	North-east	Farmer; housewife
Ceinwen	Female	53	University researcher	West	Miner; teacher
Eirlys	Female	60	Cleaner	North-west	Quarryman; housewife
Alwena	Female	59	Retired primary head-teacher	North-west	(Father died when Alwena was young); Domestic servant
Nona	Female	62	Magistrate and housewife	North-west	Doctor; housewife
Elsi	Female	63	Retired teacher	North-east	Farmer; housewife
Gwerfyl	Female	59	Teacher	North-west	Market gardener; housewife
Eunice	Female	54	Teacher	North-west	(Father was nonconformist minister who died when Eunice was young); housewife
Gwenda	Female	61	Retired university administrator	North-west	Manager; housewife
Harri	Male	64	Retired university lecturer	North-west	Publicans (tenants)
Erin	Female	53	Farmer and carer	North-west	Farmer; housewife

Due to the gender focus of the project, 14 of the interviewees were women, but six men who had comparable experiences growing up in the same, or similar, communities were also interviewed. This provided a richness and diversity of accounts and enabled a degree of triangulation to take place such that the narratives could be compared for points of consistency and – more interestingly – divergence. Nearly all interviews lasted at least an hour, some much longer. The interviews were participant led, with the interviewer seeking clarification and elaboration to establish the salient influences upon the interviewee. Power relationships between interviewer and interviewee raise the question of whether interviews can ever be truly participant led (Riach 2009) but here the participants were positioned more powerfully than is usual, nearly all possessing their own 'social capital' and many of them having established positions in professional or community networks.

The analysis was carried out initially in line with Chamberlayne *et al.*'s (2000) recommendations, whereby in discussion with the rest of the team, the interviewer identified influences, themes and consistencies. These themes were then examined for commonalties across gender, generations and religious denominations. Records of these discussions formed a further layer of data which was analysed. The analytical technique was eclectic, drawing on phenomenography and biographical narrative analysis. As Freeman (1997, p. 395) puts it:

> The project at hand is therefore ultimately a reconstructive one; it is a project of exploring lives in their various modes of integration and disintegration, formation and de-formation, and, on the basis of what is observed, piecing together images of the whole.

Some themes and issues were mentioned repeatedly and all participants displayed some recollection of how people's conduct was subjected to social norms of propriety.

Results and discussion

As told in the participants' narratives, respectability could be exercised in a north Wales community through many activities. It might involve money management and the avoidance of debt, cleanliness, the kind of clothes worn and the management of actual or implied sexuality. Yet respectability, moral guardianship and lives beyond suspicion required far more than this. At the outset it appeared to us that, far from being a static morality, the exercise of respectability required a vigilant social acuity and constant, complex negotiation.

Regulating respectability

In literary representations of Wales, as well as in popular culture, notions of women being excluded from chapel congregations and socially ostracised if they became pregnant outside marriage (Collier 2006) or due to the scandal of purported sexual relationships (Evans 1997; Llewellyn 1939) were common. Yet our study participants' recollections of this were equivocal and suggested a more subtle and sometimes contested picture. Exclusion was not necessarily imposed in an authoritarian manner nor was it necessarily permanent, once the *casus belli* had been resolved.

Lowri, a minister's daughter, remembered her father's 'church discipline' in the 1930s, such that a couple were asked not to come to the chapel due to their ongoing premarital relationship. However, subsequently they married and were accepted back in, so the process of exclusion had more in common with a cooling off period for the benefit of the injured parties who might be offended than with permanent banishment. As Lowri also remarked, people excluded themselves if there was any likelihood that their actual or imagined conduct might attract disapproval. Thus, rather than a repressive authoritarianism, a picture emerges of a consensual disengagement during periods of people's lives that could have been morally contentious or that had upset other congregation members. This disengagement might be seen as a means of managing potential conflict. In a small community the parties involved in problematic situations would very likely have been someone's husband, daughter, wife or best friend and if they had gathered together in one place, tempers might easily have frayed. Emmett (1964) makes similar reference to the implications of people in rural communities knowing one another in detail yet leaving potentially contentious matters unsaid in her concepts of 'belonging' and 'not knowing'.

In the lifetime of our participants, however, things were changing.

> Geraint: The period of people being thrown out of chapel because they were pregnant is before my time ... I'm talking about the fifties ... I suspect that there would have been people who wouldn't have gone to chapel, eliminated themselves, whereas in the previous generation they'd have been thrown out. I can see that if someone had done something like that it would have been quite tricky. They'd have censored themselves.

A further account of shifts in attitudes and practices was provided by Eirlys, who also remembered the 1950s:

> Eirlys: Well, when I was young, 16 or 17, my [future] sister-in-law got pregnant and they wrote her out of the chapel, the Methodists, they took her name out of the book. But my chapel wouldn't do that.

Eirlys went on to relate that when this woman was excluded from the Methodist chapel she attended the Anglican Church instead – 'she was accepted in church'. Perhaps in this case the exclusion reflected family sensitivities as much as those of the broader congregation:

> It was her own father who did it because he was the deacon and he was so old fashioned he just wrote her out ... I think they would have done it [anyway].

Eirlys perceived that pregnant unmarried women had been treated harshly by society in the past 'but not in my time':

> They said to her, 'You're not a member anymore', so she says' 'Tough'. Well, what did we care? We was young. I think they were a bit too narrow-minded.

As this account suggests, distinctions were drawn between different religious denominations. Chapels were seen to be more austere in their approach than the Anglican Church. This process of distinction between different groups of people sometimes involved geographical and spatial boundaries as well. Arsula recalled

hearing that the rural areas were more apt to be socially conservative than towns and that rural chapel communities were 'bad' to single women with children. The people were 'narrow-minded in C__ [town in north Wales] but more in the country'.

Thus, in our data, the core of social and sexual conservatism was often represented as being somewhere else – in another community, a different chapel, out in the countryside or 'before my time'. The out-group is seen as somehow more primitive and harsh (Stephan and Renfro 2002). Nevertheless, the standards of conduct that chapel communities were believed to sanction cast a shadow over the childhood and young adulthood of the participants.

Skeggs (1997) has proposed that the ideas about respectability held by a community mediate positionings and responses to sexuality. Respectability, in this view, is a discourse of normativity. It represents a way in which actual or implied sexuality, poverty or deviance is evaluated. It enables distinctions to be drawn, legitimated and maintained between groups or families. Among our informants, respectability and the taboos surrounding sex did more than this. Sometimes they enabled certain topics to remain unspoken. Most interesting in this regard are accounts of how accidental pregnancies were managed, where, despite rumours of a severe response by some congregations, very often participants recalled the matter being resolved so as to preserve both notions of morality and the dignity of those involved. Eirlys again provided a story:

> And I remember my other sister-in-law, she got married in white, but she was pregnant, but her father didn't know; she never told him. And he found out, but because the baby was nearly due when she got married and he was so thick that he didn't know and he even went to the Minister to tell him, 'Well, look you've married my daughter and she's pregnant', and he made a big thing. And the Minister turned around and said 'It doesn't matter whether she was pregnant or not, I'd have still married her. If I'd have known, I'd have still married her'. He was more modern, you see. Times had changed. It was a Methodist chapel, the same chapel, but later [in 1964, about 8 years after the 'writing out' [described above]. But that was just my father-in-law's ways. He was, well he thought he was, a religious man. And he was a deacon, you see. And that's how they used to do it in his time. But people didn't care whether she was pregnant or not, did they? What did it matter? But to him it mattered. No, of course they didn't care, it was just his way, very old-fashioned. Lived in the dark ages as far as I was concerned ... her father had written her off and I think for a while she didn't like her father. Now, my father would never have done anything like that; kicked anyone out of chapel.

Despite these intimations of social change where the purportedly rigid mores of the past were subject to renegotiation, there were a number of accounts of more severe responses to pregnancies. Cadi recounted how a girl and boy at school with her in the 1940s became romantically involved, culminating in the girl's pregnancy. The boy stayed at school, whereas the 'girl disappeared to have the baby'. Eventually she returned alone. 'I think it was given away or something. She still lives around here'. Such was the residual stigma and perceived need for discretion attached to this event that Cadi said she would not tell the researcher the name of the woman concerned in case the researcher knew her or came across her in the course of the research. The processes of separation and discretion provided a means of managing the morally

problematic situation and enabled the perceived problem to be negotiated with little overt conflict.

There are some intriguing implications here. The code of silence surrounding manifest or suspected violations of the mores of respectability may have been facilitative as well as repressive. Cadi making a point of how revealing the name of the person concerned preserves their dignity, but also conveys the message that this is a matter that demands discretion and enlists the listener's co-operation. Keeping quiet about matters such as pregnancy, even where one's own father was concerned, enabled a degree of harmony to be maintained in family and community life and lay at the heart of this moral guardianship that deflected confrontation and allayed suspicion.

The value of this discretion was underscored by Cadi's description of other cases where knowledge of women's circumstances leaked out and confrontations ensued. Regarding another pregnancy: 'I remember chapel being nasty ... it was just one or two of them wasn't it ... I remember one woman – it was about a man – "She should be thrown out of chapel" '. Such censorious views, even if expressed by a few congregation members, could lead to exclusion by the rest of the congregation and its leaders anxious to avoid further confrontation and conflict. Cadi believes this woman was indeed chucked out – 'I heard about it happening'.

This is reminiscent of Skeggs's (2004) point that the pursuit of respectability and normality enables normalcy to be both a kind of capital within the field of the family and a form of symbolic capital that represents accumulated privilege in other fields. Being respectable could even be thought of as a capital in itself, in Bourdieu's sense, authorising and sustaining one's own and one's family's position in social space. This could lead to some particularly convoluted arrangements. Angharad, born in 1939, described her situation as follows:

> It's a little bit complicated actually – I was brought up by my grandmother but I didn't know until I was, oh about 10 years ago. I thought I had two sisters but one was my mother, you see. They never told me anything until my sister, I thought it was, died. So, you know, I've been brought up by my grandparents. She [her biological mother] married afterwards and had another child.

Angharad's family had kept this secret successfully for over 50 years. Angharad spontaneously mentioned this, but out of respect for what was clearly still a sensitive issue the researcher did not probe further. Perhaps the circumstances of her birth were still shrouded in mystery, since Angharad did not mention a biological father. At the time of her birth, presumably there would have been a number of people in the family and elsewhere who were aware of who her mother and possibly her father really were, but this had been kept from her, presumably in the interests of preventing gossip and any stigma attaching to her or the rest of the family.

The accumulated labour involved in maintaining this deception and the complex, multiply-layered social realities that resulted can be thought of as social capital. The social networks in Bourdieusian notions of social capital are networks whereby it was possible to maintain boundaries between purity and danger in the sense proposed by Douglas (1966). Moral guardianship involved management of the divisions between social realities such that morality appeared to be maintained.

People inhabiting positions that were of low value in terms of the broader UK socioeconomic system could give themselves value and 'authorize their existence as valuable people through the practice of respectability' (Skeggs 2004, p. 25). Participants' descriptions of the nature of life in villages in north Wales at the time they were growing up suggest that moral boundaries and the codes governing respectability could be applied flexibly in specific cases. As Skeggs (1997) found, the idea of respectability was not coterminous with material wellbeing or being middle class. It was possible to be 'respectably poor' and win appreciation for one's efforts to keep up appearances in the face of economic hardship. Alwena, whose widowed mother was very poor, was conscious of the family's marginal status, although they tried hard to maintain a position among the respectable poor. Alwena's account emphasised that her mother was honest and hard-working, a good mother who put her children first and never left the children on their own.

Whereas people might be reluctant to accept 'charity', assistance that involved work was more palatable, as a sense of fair exchange could be maintained. While homeless, Dewi's mother was offered free accommodation in return for cleaning their chapel. Respectability, then, could be a collective effort. As more recent studies of respect among the poor have shown, this may facilitate giving a more positive account of oneself among those whose circumstances have taken a turn for the worse (Hoffman and Coffey 2008) and sustain a sense of dignity.

Embodying the family honour

Scholars of self-presentation have noted that much care is taken to regulate the way in which women present themselves in their everyday lives (Goffman 1959; Sawin 2002). Achieving a pristine and unselfconscious state of respectability was clearly no easy feat for women in patriarchal societies beset by problems such as poverty, bereavement, domestic violence or unwanted pregnancy. In the accounts presented here it appears that, as they performed their respectable selves, women in north Wales sought to achieve a state in which their respectability became naturalised beyond any doubt – beyond suspicion – thus supporting their right to be involved in village or chapel life. This recollects Trosset's (1993) argument that Welsh ethnolinguistic identity must be actively appropriated and performed, displaying qualities of self-sacrifice and equality, and particular kinds of emotional expression.

Part of this naturalising process involved caring for others. As well as one's immediate household and children, caring for relatives represented a duty through which symbolic capital could be gained; disdain was expressed toward those who were seen to be less diligent in their caring duties. Eirlys's mother cared for a number of elderly relatives and Eirlys recalled how her mother used to express disgust at families who put the elderly in homes, saying that 'I would carry my mother on my back'. Eirlys felt the same way: 'I think I would have done the same'. Displays of care and nurturance, while they perform an important practical role in providing care for the elderly and infirm, have a symbolic quality too, augmenting the social image of the carer and her family.

The maintenance of respectability and the process of creating the associated capital was a complex, strategic and resourceful practice. The focus on appearances

– of propriety, self-sufficiency and doing well – meant that this might best be viewed as the augmentation of symbolic capital. This could be seen especially where matters of money and possessions were concerned. Eirlys said, when speaking of her mother:

> She was very disciplined with money … she never owed anything … she wanted a three-piece suite once and her friend bought one on credit … my mother didn't.

Eirlys's mother 'feared' debt, so decided that she would save up for hers:

> Oh, and about 12 months had gone and her friend said, 'Did you get your three piece?' and my mother said, 'No'. 'Well, there you are', she said, 'I've got mine and I've paid for it. Have you saved the money to buy one?' And she hadn't, had she, so she didn't get her three piece [laughs]. Can you imagine, it was horrific. The things we had to do without, absolutely do without.

The 'doing without', however, had to be kept private lest it affect the family's reputation in the broader community. As regular attenders at church and Sunday school they were conscious of the need to have clothes that would enable them to command the respect of the rest of the congregation: Eirlys remarks, 'Some days we couldn't go because we didn't have nice shoes'.

From the participants' reminiscences it can be seen that many distinctions were made on the basis of clothing. In poor families the wearing of second-hand clothes seems to have been accompanied by particular feelings of shame:

> Alwena: A parcel would come of clothes and they were horrible clothes. You know, for us girls there would be jumpers with collars on, like the boys wore. And I remember having boots passed onto me from this parcel, they were too big but I had to wear them. They were winter boots and I remember going to collect a girl that lived next door … and she remarked on my boots to draw attention to them … I've never forgotten that … it was very hurtful … I didn't mind that I had to wear them, things like that, that you were different, but my mother always had to buy us new clothes for best … and we had hand-me-downs from my cousins.

Hand-me-downs and charitable packages of clothes, by the fact that they were not freely chosen and in the fashion of years before, were apt to make the wearers feel especially devalued in the economy of respect. They might attract unkind remarks from other children and detract from one's ability to maintain the performance of a socially valued individual. Yet at the same time, despite appearances of poverty, Alwena was keen to stress the widely recognised underlying respectability and virtue of her mother:

> If you spoke to anyone in this district who knew my mother – honest, hardworking woman who put her children before her.

Nevertheless there were opportunities for managing the impression other villagers and local tradespeople had of the family.

> Alwena: My mother used to send me to B__ [town in north Wales] … she didn't want to go to the butchers in B__ [town in north Wales] and ask for a scrag end or something because everybody else would have baskets and be asking for a leg, she'd have to be asking for the cheapest cuts of meat.

If a child went to buy cheap meat it would not be so shameful as if the adult of the family did so. In this account there was no mention of any actual disapprobation from others, just the imagined stigma of not being able to buy as much or of such good quality as others. The maintenance of a respectable image for the family could involve the deployment of considerable ingenuity to prevent the limitations of their resources being disclosed to everyone all at once. Hoffman and Coffey (2008) emphasise the lengths people will go to in order to maintain this sense of dignity and self-respect and to ensure that they will be recognised as worthy of respect by others.

Conclusion

Respectability and symbolic capital

In a good deal of sociology, respectability is seen as strongly contoured by class, the wealthier and more hegemonic sections securing respectability for themselves (Proudman 2005). For Veblen (2001)[1899], respectability overlapped with 'pecuniary repute'. Respectable behaviour is 'emulated and disported' by the powerful and those who aspire to power and influence. Having examined how morality, respectability and moral guardianship were exercised through participants' accounts, it is possible to raise some new critical points on the concepts and begin to explore how they may be interpreted within a broader theoretical framework.

As one might anticipate from prior theorisations of the notion, to some extent respectability in this study involved emulations of elite conventions, particularly where this concerned clothes worn to chapel or to school, or the kinds of shopping one was willing to undertake in view of neighbours and local tradespeople. Respectability was a means of enforcement and women were centrally involved in its maintenance and ultimately, its transformation. It can be thought of as capital: through diligent performance of a particular kind of identity, one could accumulate a symbolic capital for oneself and one's family.

As several respondents mentioned, their lives straddled a time of social change, both in terms of the mores of respectable conduct and the roles ascribed to women in chapel communities and broader society. It was at this time that women were beginning to assume roles (albeit rarely) as deacons (Brown and Baker 2011) and consolidate their contributions to educational and economic life (Baker and Brown 2009).

Respectability brought potential female sexuality to the fore, yet this was very rarely sex itself. It was to do with one's clothes, one's shopping list, the occasional small signifiers of status or luxury, care for children and elderly relatives and, rarely, it might involve the management of a premarital pregnancy. With each of these criteria, as we have seen in participants' accounts, there were ways in which the matter could be resolved so that the potential for conflict or confrontation was minimised and the *buchedd* sustained.

Perhaps the best opportunity to understand the exercise of respectability is to see it as a diligently accumulated facet of symbolic capital which, if one played the game appropriately, led to the favorable regard of others. The practice of respectability also

might serve to create and sustain social capital through the creation and maintenance of networks of social relationships. Respectability involves intersubjective bonds powerful enough to exclude some people from religious congregations and send others miles out of their way to purchase cheap meat.

Respectability involved much more than simple rule following. It involved being able to participate in, make legible and beguiling and even manipulate social realities in a way that increased one's own and one's group's status, as well as being able to manage social problems, police boundaries between the respectable and the scandalous and avoid conflict. Distinctions drawn between the different zones in the conceptual landscape could even separate members of the same family, such that some were kept away from news of pregnancy or matters of maternity, even those whom it directly affected. The more overt forms of hostility toward transgressors were more threatened than real, seen as a relic of the past or a characteristic of other people's congregations or communities. This contrasts with Muldowney's (2008) work, where social distinctions concerned with employment status placed the lines of demarcation between families. Our data reveal barriers between particular factions within the family or between specific family members in the furtherance of respectability. This resonates with Williams's (2005) notions of hybridised or situational identity in Wales. It is as if one's identity as member of a family or congregation relied upon this ability to compartmentalise social life and the self into different narratives of identity that could be deployed in different circumstances. Moreover, this process involved protecting one's respectable identity against potential challenges, so as to insulate the respectable individual from actual or implied moral criticism.

A key feature to emerge in the present study is the historical dimension to the notion of respectability. Whereas others such as Veblen (2001) or Skeggs (1997) have explored the operation of respectability in the lives of people at the time of their writing, here the sense is more strongly of the work done to secure respectability in the past. Like the image of Welsh history detected by Jones (1982, 1992) and Morgan (1983), or the 'imagined nation' of Curtis (1986), our participants have a strong sense of their past and how their and their community's history has shaped their experience. The management of respectability relies both on distinctions made at the present time and a collectively held image of history. This is significant in that it adds a diachronic element to respectability, formed through the accumulated labour of the past as much as by learning the rules of the social game in the present.

Note

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