Wales: Culture and identity
Work and difference in Wales

Dave Adamson
The concept the difference in Wales is by definition a very complex issue. Work traditionally has given particular occupational groups a very clear sense of identity. Perhaps the stereotype of Wales is the miner and work was almost the source of social and personal identity. It wasn't a job. You were a miner. And that was a very clear sense of social and political solidarity derived from that occupation. but of course that's a long gone industry and Wales is much more diverse in its economic activity far more different types of work now from the old heavy industrial base that we would have identified in the last century. And Wales now spans almost all the industrial classifications in terms of work that can be found in Wales and that clearly creates as much difference as it does connections.

People in different occupational categories have a very different experience of the world of work from the lifetime jobs of the mining industry perhaps the norm has now become highly casualised processes of labour where you don't have a job for life, you have a job for as long as that continues to satisfy a market. We have people holding in Wales portfolios of jobs in part time casualised work where it takes perhaps three jobs to make a living income and that creates a massive amount of difference in terms of the quality of life in terms of the experience of life people have in terms of their life opportunities. We also have a high degree of worklessness and that creates perhaps one of the most fundamental differences in Wales. In common sense terms the have's and have not's and to be a little bit more socially scientific about that we have people living in officialy defined poverty in Wales that is less than sixty per cent of average national income and we have currently around about thirty one per cent of children grow in a family where the family income is less than that sixty per cent of the average.
That's a very critical difference. It leads to a wide experience of life that we would now use the term social exclusion to describe where those people's education, their health, their housing, their access transport the very structure and nature of their life will be determined by that poverty. And that's a critical form of difference in Wales

Clearly there are policies that attempt to eradicate that poverty. We have had some success in the last ten years. We saw in fact child poverty reduce from about thirty three per cent to about twenty four per cent but within the last two years it's gone back up to about twenty-seven. And that's er serious set back to the kind of policies that we felt would help eradicate that that consequence of worklessness. What can you do about it? Well – you can try and diversify the economy. You try and develop new work opportunities. You try and link the unskilled with the new skills that emerging industries require. But this is incredibly complex to do. There are locational difficulties where the people out of work aren't where the new work opportunities are. This presents government, in this case the Welsh Assembly government, with huge challenges particularly as we are currently in a recession where the creation of work is is even more difficult than it was prior to that recession. We also have a significant skill shortage in Wales. The corollary of poverty is very poor educational attainment and it becomes a kind of self repeating cycle in that children from poor families do very badly in the education system and then themselves enter the labour market at a highly disadvantaged state and replicate the poverty that they experienced as children. So very major challenges.

Interestingly I think research looking at the pattern of work in Wales is actually quite rare. What we've tended to research if anything is the state of worklessness and I've been involved in a project recently looking at the very high levels of incapacity benefit in the heads of the valleys region. We've been doing that research really to try and identify what the barriers are to people returning to work. Now some of those are fairly obvious. Where there is an absence of work opportunities then people find it very difficult to return to work. But what we've actually found is that in many instances people are prevented from having the ambition

to return to work by very strong peer cultures where worklessness has been the norm. For the last twenty to twenty five years we've seen develop a culture that shapes the identity of people in in communities where there is a high level of worklessness so that they don't actually identify themselves as potential workers. They don't have the the internal vision if you like of what it is to work. They have very few people in their peer group who have had work experience and they have very few role models of people who actually have gone out and made a career for themselves in the outside world.

So we found in many of the communities we've looked highly depressed ambitions, particularly amongst young people in terms of what their work aspirations might be. And what we've also looked at is what you do about that and we've looked at a number of projects that attempt to bring people back from that stage of worklessness to a work ready state. And what we find is what's needed is some very, bespoke and personalised services to work with people to overcome a range of problems that might start at the one end of just simple low confidence from not being externally active outside the home to very serious problems of mental health including major problems with depression that have resulted largely from a long term unemployment and that support has to be sustained over anything up to three years to get someone from a state of worklessness to a state of employability.

Hugh Mackay
Dave talks about the relationship between evidence and argument in social Science.

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In writing the chapter on work the kind of research I had to do and the evidence I looked for varied considerably. One would obviously start with the conventional primary statistical sources like the census for example so if we want to look at change in occupational categories over time we might look at two or these censuses which would give us a thirty year period of change and we can see the changes in the industrial classifications as for example mining and steel working have declined and work in retail has increased considerably. We'd look in that body of evidence and see for example that the public sector in Wales is a huge employer and we can break that down into health and education and see some very direct evidence of the paths of work that would be evident in Wales. However primary evidence doesn't give us a personalised view of what the experience of unemployment is for example. So to do that we might want to interview people who have experienced unemployment for a long period of time. In the study of incapacity benefit we actually worked with some claimants who'd been unemployed for fifteen years or more and we were able to actually have a very personal view of that experience and its affects on individuals in their own perspective. So a very qualitative approach to research which gives the research respondent a very clear voice in describing their experience. Some social scientists might argue that's not an objective. The statistic on unemployment it's highly factual. We can trace it over time however I think you have to balance that very factual approach with a more qualitative approach that actually gives us an insight into the social impact of large scale social phenomena so at the level of society we may have a central concern with the unemployment rate but at the level perhaps of community or family we would want to explore with the individual the experience of that unemployment over an extended period of time which calls for a very different body of evidence.