Wales: Culture and identity
Place and belonging in Wales

Graham Day
I think when you begin thinking about Wales as a place and the kinds of place it consists of you are struck by the very marked differences between different areas, different parts of Wales and the histories they've been through and their current situation. You'd probably say this about any country that there are spatial geographical variations but I think in Wales they are particularly marked and also I think people are very aware of them.

So it has been said often that Welsh people are very attached to place, very interested in belonging. They have a strong sense of belonging. And very often the first question you get asked by someone in Wales is where are you from and who are you connected with within that place. And I think people try and make those connections so they place you socially, partly by seeing where you are from. And living as I do for example in North Wales you can't help but notice the difference between say the slate quarry villages, which grew up around a particular industry, and the landscape is marked by that industry and the whole nature of the place really reflects the industry people worked in. The industry's largely gone now but the remains are still there and the social effects are still there and I think people in those communities have a very strong sense of identity. They're aware of the past. They're aware of themselves as coming from that place and in North Wales they are usually very strongly Welsh speaking in those places. And they're quite different from nearby communities, villages, which are more to do with farming, in the atmosphere of the place, the feel of it, the nature. And this has implications for the current development of those places because you see for example when migrants move into the area they are much more attracted to their former kind of rural agricultural villages than they are to the quarry communities.   And so you get a difference in the kind of development of the population now reflecting some of these past experiences and the legacy of what was there before.

If you broaden that out and think about Wales as a whole, although it is quite a small place in global terms, these differences are very marked across the geography of Wales. So you know if you travel from one end of Wales to the other you go through quite diverse countryside. You meet a range of different kinds of population settlements and you begin to see there are actually big regional variations, parts of Wales that have been heavily industrialised in the past and the legacy and remnants of that and other parts that have never been industrialised that are basically rural. So you get a contrast between rural and industrial or rural and urban on the large scale. But also within those there are then smaller contrasts like between the North Wales countryside and if you move a little bit inland the Snowdonia National Park, which is an area of more or less wilderness; mountains and little population and a different kind of local authority set of regulations that govern what people can do within it. And I think that gives you a kind of beginning to understand the diversity of Wales as well as its compactness.

I think one of the linking themes that I'm very interested in is the idea of community. I think community connects place to social relationships to people and so it brings together the geography through to sociology if you like. The social sciences can come together within the idea of community. And there is actually quite a long tradition of community studies in Wales, which are very effective, well-written insights into people's lives in particular places. One example which I've used an excerpt from is Isabel Emmet's work on Blaenau Ffestiniog. She takes this former quarrying town and she writes about it from the outside perspective – how outsiders see it. And then she moves inside to say what it's like from the inside and she says it's a strong community with a very clear sense of its identity. It's very strongly Welsh speaking. And in the particular excerpt I use part of that idea of community is that people have grown up more or less spending their whole lives together and so that they know one another intimately – you can see why the sense of belonging is so powerful in that kind of

situation. And it still is the case that Blaenau Ffestiniog is a relatively self-contained, somewhat isolated place where a large number of people spend most of their lives living alongside people they grew up with and understand and know extremely well. And I think Isabel Emmett writes beautifully about this and gives you that inside/outside perspective on it and it tells you about the nature of the community and says a lot about the nature of Wales. I don't necessarily agree with everything she says but she does give a very good way of getting in to the issue of what makes Wales the place it is.

Hugh Mackay
                Is that kind of study limited in any way?

Graham Day
The point often made about community studies is of course that they are case studies of something and it's never – not always clear exactly what it's a case study of; that they may be one off unique kind of situations so Blaenau Ffestiniog may be a special place with it's own special history and circumstances. And you may be able to generalise from that to say anything about other places. Now I don't think that's necessarily the case. It is a bounded study. It's a limited study.

It's a bounded study in the sense that it takes Blaenau Ffestiniog the place, the if you like the administrative limits of that town as its focus, as its context for study and then looks within it. And it only tries to tell you in some depth about how things work inside those limited boundaries. It doesn't necessarily say this is the case everywhere in Wales but it says here are some lessons you might draw from looking at the nature of how one community works that might enable you to understand better the nature of community elsewhere.

Where does it stop being applicable? Where does something else become the case? Where does the different idea of Welsh-ness appear? And that's connected to other places or other parts of the country.

I think that everyone who lives in Wales or knows Wales will be able to formulate some kind of statements about the variations of these kinds of differences of this sort. They all have impressions of different parts of Wales and how they vary and how they differ. If you like everyone could describe these kinds of differences they could offer you examples of why they might say someone living in this place may be different from someone who lives in a different kind of place. So at a basic level, because we all have to function in society, we all have to be able to describe these kinds of variations and differences. We have to understand how to live with them. I think where social science then moves on from that is to say that in order to organise that descriptive knowledge, these impressions, to make them clearer, to be able to analyse them, to be able to critically look at them, you need to conceptualise them. You need to have some kind of guiding ideas that grasp that massive impression that you might have and organise it for you. For example everyone might be aware of how people living in the countryside experience things rather differently from people living in the towns. For example there are fewer people around. If you interview people in the countryside they very often say the great thing about this is it's peace and quiet and it's very safe. And in a way what they are doing there is offering a generalisation about the countryside and contrasting it to somewhere else.

Now we could put a label on that, a concept if you like, and say they are talking about the rural and they're contrasting it to the urban and what they're saying is people in urban situations have less sense of security, have more hustle and bustle. It's a different set of experiences. So there you've got the beginnings of a conceptual framework. So okay rural/urban these are ways of organising these differences. How valuable are those concepts in keeping those impressions orderly and enabling us to think more critically and harder about the distinctions we are making. - And then I think the next step you would say is well as a social scientist can we gather a bit of hard evidence that would actually kind of cement these notions that we have, these concepts, rather than just relying on you know what might be vague and everyday impressions. Let's go out and look seriously for evidence about rural/urban contrasts. I mean is it true that crime is more threatening in cities than it is in the countryside for example. Is there some statistical backing for that? And once we do that and

we say it's supported by evidence in some way we are on the way to beginning to say now we can explain by these connections. We can begin to say well these things happen in urban districts because ---- whatever other relationships we've identified there whereas they don't happen in the countryside. So you can move through from description I think to explanation by the use of concepts.