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Aspects of Socio-Economic Success in a Labrador Village

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Article abstract

During the last generation, the people of southern Labrador have enjoyed increasing contact with a number of sources of external information and, consequently, have developed middle class Canadian and American consumer desires. The degree to which these desires can be satisfied only partially determines the status of families in the community studied. This paper concerns how the community limits the definition of “success”. First, I briefly sketch the history and development of the community since its settlement to show the nature of traditional and modern values. Then the current community concept of “success” is examined with respect to its material and social constraints.

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Aspects of Socio-Economic Success in a Labrador Village

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History and Development of the Community

Port Hope Simpson, the community which is the focus of this study, is located on Labrador's south coast about halfway between the southern tip of Labrador and Hamilton Inlet. Communities in what is now politically subdivided as the Eagle River District have unique features setting them apart from those of other regions in Labrador. The most outstanding feature is the settlement pattern. Most of its 2 500 inhabitants of less than a dozen winter settlements disperse to over 35 "summer stations" at the onset of the fishing season (*Decks Awash*, 1979:2). The practice of seasonal transhumance is as old as the communities themselves and factors which have affected other areas of Labrador such as commercial ore discoveries, or proximity to a military base, both of which bring a transient population, have not occurred, leaving this area little changed in over 200 years of White settlement. Also, there is no spatial division of the community into Inuit or Indian and Anglo-European settler sections as there is in the north.

Port Hope Simpson, located 26 miles up the Alexis River, is a relatively new community. First settled in 1934 when J.O. Williams from Cardiff, Wales began a timber operation to cut pitprops for British mines, Port Hope Simpson answered a need for wage employment caused by scarcity of fish and low prices in the depressed market (reportedly 85¢ per quintal - then 112 lbs.). The news spread by word of

mouth or notices posted in Newfoundland telegraph offices that the Labrador Development Company was hiring men for woods work in Alexis Bay which came to be known as Port Hope Simpson in 1941. The community developed around the woods operation. The Company built and operated a store, school and hospital, and "stud houses" were rented to employees. Informants estimate there were 600 employees and their families. Although there was a call in 1945 for 2 000 more men (*Evening Telegram*, July 7, 1945:3) the Company declared bankruptcy in 1947. Subsequently, about forty families left the community.

Small timber operations were run for Newfoundland markets at various times until 1962 when Bowater's of Newfoundland, Ltd. began a pulpwood operation. Due to a forest fire in 1959, a twenty-two mile haul road was built in order to reach profitable timber stands but, again, the operation failed and was withdrawn. No timber is cut for export today.

The size and permanence of Port Hope Simpson resulted in government financial assistance for the development of facilities. A subsidized air mail service was begun in the early 1950's. In the decade of the sixties, the main road and bridge were widened to take vehicular traffic; a government wharf was built; Newfoundland Hydro generating plant installed; and telephone service made available. In the seventies, medical services were vastly improved with a clinic permanently staffed with two nurses and periodic visits are made by a dentist, eye specialist, and public

health nurse. Two community council members were provided when it became incorporated. A television booster station was set up. About a dozen privately owned wells were drilled with government assistance and two school buildings were constructed.

In the post-Confederation era a welfare state was introduced. A welfare officer/social worker visits the community monthly. Unemployment Insurance Compensation (UIC) is paid to those qualifying by accumulating enough stamps for the sale of fish. A Canada Works Grant has provided paid employment for a number of 'winter works projects,' including a 'twine loft,' community hall, marine haulout, slipway, and brush clearing operations. As throughout the province, government bounties are paid to help defray the cost of building motorboats and longliners. Assistance has been given for the purchase of fishing gear.

The community facilities and benefits have the effect of retaining people. However, it is still a "winter community." Allegiance to the traditional fishery did not die with the presence of woods operations offering year round, long term employment. With the exception of only a handful of men, residents continued to make the annual move 'outside' to their summer homes. While many worked in the woods in winter, they still retained their identity as Labrador fishermen and did not convert entirely to wage labour to the exclusion of subsistence activities either as fishermen or lumbermen. The seasonal cycle is an intrinsic part of the lifestyle. Consequently, woods work was looked upon as supplementary income to a broader subsistence pattern. Today, there are only 9 households involved in sawmill work for local sales.

Port Hope Simpson Today

The winter population of 555 occupies 101 households in separate dwellings. The summer population dwindles to less than 100. Few men are engaged in only one economic activity or receive income from only one source. For instance, one fisherman operates a sawmill, collects UIC, and receives welfare at certain times of the year. Further, few heads of households are the sole supporters, sons being part of the fishing crew or single mothers receiving welfare payments while living with parents. 65 households are engaged in the fishery, 55 expect to claim UIC, and 65 receive welfare payments for one reason or another. Only a very few are engaged in other occupations. Table 1 indicates the number of households engaged in the various sources of income.

64 per cent of all households receive partial or continual welfare through the household head and/or other members. There are 81 potential recipients. 12 are unmarried mothers, 14 are seasonally unemployed nonfishermen, 9 receive long term assistance for

disability, 16 are able bodied constant recipients, and 30 fishermen receive periodic assistance. Most skip-pers of fishing crews who must buy their equipment apply for short term social assistance between the end of the fishing season in September or October and the arrival of the first UIC cheque around the first of December.

TABLE I

Fishing	65
Sawmill work	9
Carpenters, boat builders	5
Pool hall owners	2
Fur trappers	6
Store owners	4
Newfoundland Hydro employees	3
Gov't. functionaries, E.G. Wharfinger, community council members, dev. assn. member, road workers	6
Schoolteachers	13
Nurses	2
Number expecting to claim UIC	55
Partial and continual welfare recipients	65

In this area of high unemployment and under-employment, economic achievement is not the only criterion for social status. There is a sharp distinction between those families holding high status and those of low status, with seemingly few "middle ground" families. Yet, each group recognizes the community definition of success. People are regarded as either 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' by others as well as themselves.

The Success Model

Although the term 'success' is elusive and can never be precisely measured, it means more than simply holding a high status. Success is *attaining* that status so endeared by the community in spite of the fact that a number of prerequisites make upward social mobility impossible for everyone. A man is not judged in his own right, but against those who can directly influence him and give him advantages. A son is measured against his father. For example, a man who earns his living by fishing in the summer and collecting UIC in the winter is more likely to be thought of as a success if his father had been continuously on welfare than if his father fished, logged, owned a store, and ran a trapline. But whether success is measured intergenerationally by mobility of son over father or intragenerationally by a rise to higher respectability, success has to be recognized by other people.

As previously stated, economic success is not necessarily social success. Instead there is a combination of several social and economic traits which mark success. Some may be judged more important than

others, but no one is necessary and all are sufficient. A man is considered successful in Port Hope Simpson if he has a reputation of being a 'hard worker,' is independent of assistance either from the Government or from his peers, and maintains an economically viable family unit. He is known for his capability, skills, and knowledge pertaining to his occupation (s)—yet his work efforts are not restricted to specialized skills but extend to all seasonal activities commonly undertaken by members of the community. His first commitment is to the security of his immediate family and his loyalties to them extend beyond those to his work mates outside the family circle or to his compeers. He possesses the Christian virtues of temperance, generosity, perseverance, and honesty; he is sincere in both his religious and secular life.

Conversely, a man is not regarded as successful if he is not seen exerting the unspecified amount of work time or has the reputation of engaging in "idle" behaviour. If he has not become totally "involved" with the pursuit of the work ethic, he has not succeeded. He may indulge in excesses such as too much drinking, too much leisure, too much dependence on welfare, etc. Moreover, he is not hooked in to the communication network of the successful; he has no information to offer concerning the quantity of fish another has caught, new Fisheries regulations, nor can he discuss a fishing strategy; he has no advice to give. He may not have failed but he has not succeeded. In this sense, the opposite of success is not failure, but non-success.

I have been speaking of success in relation to men, specifically as heads of households. The household and individuals in the household tend to be judged according to the status of the primary provider. Wives are engaged in identical activities regardless of the socio-economic position of their husbands. Children do not gain status by the quality of their schoolwork so much as the degree to which they emulate the work output of their parents. Men of retirement age are excused from the full work regimen if they have been known as hard workers in their younger years, although most continue to work if they have in the past, even though "only playing at it;" their status has already been earned. Since success as I have defined it is a dynamic status, it is identified with those who are in a position to rise socially and economically. This generally limits application of the success model to men at a stage in the developmental cycle which permits them economic control over themselves and their households.

The degree of economic control that one has varies enormously. It is dependent on a number of materialistic variables such as the location of the fishing station, property and skills inherited, number of children eligible for membership in the fishing crew, and the connections one has to outside information

which would provide financial benefit. These variables are not subject to complete control by an individual. However, becoming successful is more than being in propitious material circumstances; it is mastery of a variable that is socially recognized as being controllable and that is the work effort expended toward making a living. Whether a man actually has control over his work effort is immaterial. Material circumstances may influence economic success, but work is what causes it.

The emphasis on work as a standard of evaluation in another Newfoundland community has been described by Wadel:

It is through his work, in the form of a job or self-employment, that a man earns his living and it is by earning his living that a man claims reciprocity in relation to society and independence in relation to his peers. Work gives a man the position of provider for his family, and work is the major legitimation for the acquisition of material goods. Work, then, puts a man in a complementary position: it gives him status in relation to the family, the community, the economy, and the polity. All these may be regarded as positive values and meanings of work (Wadel 1973: 108).

Community Factions

Since the social recognition of success is more than estimating relative economic position, becoming successful is a political process. There are, in fact, separate networks of interpersonal relations which act to keep the successful apart from the non-successful. Gossip tends to be directed toward individuals comprising a sub-grouping having common features, such as lack of fishing success, avoidance of work, dependence on the welfare system, or participation in a religious denomination. Such groupings may be termed "factions" according to the usage of Silverman and Salisbury who state "that it is that part of the political process within a community which is characterized by the interaction and confrontation of multiple non-corporate sub-groupings" (1977: 6).

Factions are organized around two principles; the degree to which the work ethic is embraced and participation in a religious denomination. Historically, the amount of physical work was directly proportional to his and his family's security. Thus, work is considered proof of a man's worth. Overt political positions such as Community Council members do not make a man automatically successful, nor are the positions coveted. The only two "desk jobs", excluding schoolteachers, are not prestigious. Schoolteachers and nurses do hold a high status, but it is a separate status from the rest of the community and was unattainable to local residents until recently.

However, work does not have to be restricted to the fishery or even to paid labour to be socially approved. The fact that residents are not occupation-

ally mobile suggests an explanation for the evaluation of a man on the amount of physical work he does, rather than what occupation he holds. As long as a man is seen contributing to his own and his family's independence, he is legitimated; independence is highly valued and has never been given up for the sake of steady wages such as that offered by woods work. The moral community has formed around the quality of independence. Whereas UIC payment has a positive connotation because of the work required to obtain it, welfare has a negative connotation because its concomitant of idleness poses a threat to the moral community. The income earned by a marginally productive fisherman is sometimes less than that of a welfare recipient. One man stated, "To tell the truth, I get more when I'm on welfare than when I'm at fishing." The fact that this is not the usual case does not lessen the effect knowledge that this can occur has on local ideology. The split in the moral community has developed into factions of those who 'work hard' and those who do not (cf. Wadel, 1973:111).

On one hand are the workers—labouring from before daylight to after dark during the fishing season, continuing minor work activities when they move "back to the bay," and taking pride in staying off welfare. On the other are men who do not exert the unspecified amount of work time and rely wholly or partially on welfare. People in this category do not socialize with the workers for the most part, and spend a larger portion of their time at "idle" conversation during "working hours," remaining around the house during the day, and sleeping later in the morning.

The line between workers and non-workers is not always visible in Port Hope Simpson because of the overlap in income and because of the availability of material products to both groups. In "outside" communities, however, a quick look at the quantity of salt fish bulk stored in the stages proves the contrast between successful and unsuccessful fishermen, although energies may be directed toward the salmon, herring or fresh fish market. For example, at the end of the season, one skipper and two other crewmen sold only 20 quintals of salt fish, whereas another crew of the same size sold 260 quintals plus 15 000 pounds of fresh fish, 1 000 pounds of salmon, and one barrel of herring.

Conflict between factions not only takes the form of gossip, but accusations of petty theft, theft of fish from cod traps, and destruction of fishing equipment. One man claims to have lost \$5000 worth of gill nets cut or stolen, which he attributes to the jealousy of "lazy men."

The unemployed express the sentiment that their lifestyle is less than ideal. One man who was on welfare typified others in his position when he said, "You're not so happy when you're on the dole as when

you're working." Others reflected a desire to achieve a sense of personal worth by conforming to the community work standard. Their situation is not always one of free choice due to a number of reasons. However, simply the lack of any possibility for finding immediate employment or intensifying employment is not regarded as an excuse of idleness if a man is physically capable (cf. Wadel, 1973: 109). Frustrations within this faction are manifested by alcohol abuse, petty crime (stealing and disorderly conduct), and physical abuse toward family members. These manifestations are almost wholly restricted to this group. The symptoms of depression and expressed sentiment that there must be a better alternative suggests a common work ethic, even though it is not universally embraced.

The other split in the community is between two religious factions and also has implications on status attainment. The presence of Pentecostal and Anglican churches, and Pentecostal and "Anglican" schools (the latter, in fact, run by the Vinland Integrated School Board) characterized the division of the community. There are 42 households where both husband and wife are Anglicans, 51 households in which both are Pentecosts, 6 in which husband and wife claim different affiliations, and 2 United Church families. This does not take into account affiliation of other household members. The Pentecostal preacher claims to have about 300 in his congregation.

Devout Pentecosts maintain social networks that are quite distinct from non-Pentecosts and frequent backsliders. Although business transactions are not confined to persons of the same religion (three of the four stores and owned by Pentecosts), little socialization takes place between the two, especially among adults, with the exception of households of mixed religions. Part of the reason is the feeling of the Anglican minority that they have been excluded. As one Anglican put it, "They think we're all sinners here," which, of course, is dogmatically true. Another reason is that strict adherents to Pentecostalism cannot participate in the activities that others engage in such as drinking or dancing.

The Pentecostal Church is very much more active than the Anglican Church. There is no resident Anglican minister and one comes to the community only for weddings or funerals, or perhaps an occasional service in winter. In contrast, the Pentecostal Church has two active resident preachers.

The Pentecostal Church offers a means to attain status. The service itself allows opportunities for individual recognition by members giving testimonials, leading hymns, and requesting prayers. Lay readers and instrumentalists hold desirable positions.

The congregation is made up of those who have been Saved and those who have not. Salvation may be achieved by a baptismal rite or by personal revelation. Although Church doctrine emphasizes a personal

relationship with the Saviour, those who are Saved become recognized by the congregation as well as the rest of the community as having attained that goal. Opportunities for status attainment in the Anglican Church are non-existent at present.

Conflict between religious factions is covert, most often taking the form of gossip directed at individual or denominations. Conflict has also been demonstrated when a Pentecostal woman refused to give to the Salvation Army on the grounds that funds would be used for alcohol, refusal by a store owner to cater to non-Pentecosts by carrying cigarettes, and refusal by some to attend the opposite faction's events held in the churches or schools.

Where religious factions and factions resulting from the work ethic converge is nebulous. However, it is reasonable to suppose that the Calvinistic work ethic has more of a motivating force on fundamentalist sects than it does on the Church of England. In fact, of the 65 households getting at least occasional welfare support, there are 41 heads of households who are non-Pentecostal and 24 who are Pentecostal. However, other variables influencing an individual's chances to achieve success make a direct correlation between religion and work circumspect.

The Pentecostal Church offers a chance to achieve success both spiritually and publicly, and while membership in non-Pentecostal denominations does not mean failure, there are no equivalent means to achieve status. On the other hand, the difference between workers and non-workers is the difference between success and non-success.

There is every indication that "divided houses do not fall" (Silverman and Salisbury, 1977) and that conflict has long been recognized as having a sociolo-

gical bearing on the unity of a community (to wit, Simmel, 1955). Indeed, the contrast between workers and non-workers makes more dedicated workers, and the contrast between religious factions makes more devout Christians. The problem, however, is that there is little chance for individuals to change their status because of economic and social restrictions. In every society there are different ladders of success and people are seen as occupying the various rungs in contrast to each other. My argument has been that in Port Hope Simpson, because of the severe social and economic constraints, there are only two ladders and the middle rungs are missing.

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