

The Course of the Fishing Life

Social contexts inevitably influence entry into the occupation and how fishing lives are shaped by the unfolding of non-fishing identities

Temporal perspectives can help us understand what it means to be a fisher – including the importance of social contexts for entering the occupation and how non-fishing identities shape the unfolding of fishing lives.

Recent studies have observed difficulties in recruitment of new generations of ‘fishers’ in many fisheries around the north Atlantic. Such recruitment challenges have raised concerns about the future sustainability of the fishing industry in these places. Previously, there had not been enough research on understanding the temporal dimensions of the lives of fishers and how fishing lives are embedded in intergenerational contexts of linked lives which shape the opportunities and constraints of existing and prospective fishers.

Responding to these gaps, a recent study published in *Sociologia Ruralis* considers the potential of a life-course approach in helping us to better understand how fishers accumulate, utilize and share capital(s) in getting onto and moving along the ‘fishing ladder’. The study found that the life course can start from different initial positions (both familial and non-familial) and take different shape – influenced by life events such as partnership, parenthood and retirement as well as the presence or absence of successors. This article attempts to provide a summary of this recently published paper.

By interviewing fishing families in the small-scale fishery of the Llŷn peninsula in North Wales (UK) (see Figure 1, page 32) – a mixed

fishery primarily focused on lobster and crab, with seasonal and occasional targeting of scallop, whelk and sea bass – researchers at the University of Liverpool and the University of Exeter sought to understand how prospective fishers can enter the occupation category of ‘fishers’ and what types of capitals (social, cultural and economic) are needed to become established as legitimate members (‘good fishers’) of the fishing community.

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By taking a temporal focus, the study reveals how the lives of fishers and their families change over the life course, shaped by life events such as parenthood, retirement and marriage. Whilst the paper reported on here focuses on the life course of fishing men, there has been attention elsewhere on understanding women’s relation to capital in the fishing field.

The word ‘fishing ladder’ was used as a metaphor to illustrate how fishers move along the life course. Although the metaphor of a ladder presents an image of a uniform and linear process, the article argues these are far from linear processes. As such, the use of a rope ladder – unstable and rocking – highlights the fact that the shape of the ladder may vary but that does not prevent us from observing general patterns in the flow of capitals.

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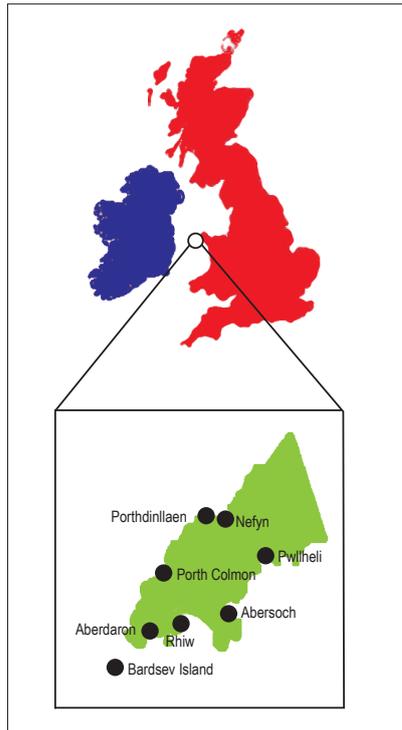


Figure 1: Map of the Llŷn peninsula, North Wales, United Kingdom

The study found that prospective fishers could enter the fishing career 'ladder' from different initial positions (see Figure 2) and these positions had different relations to capital (economic, social and cultural capital). The first pathway – sons of fishers – could relatively easily access social capital in the form of fishing gear and vessels (social capital) owned by their fathers (or the social networks of their fathers). These prospective fishers could also access the knowledge (cultural capital) of their fathers and associated networks. As sons of fishers had access to the material context and place-specific knowledge needed to fish, they could use these resources in experimenting with fishing and develop their own 'hard-won knowledge'.

The second pathway identified was young prospective fishers who grew up in the local community. For these individuals, their position was such that they did not have access to the material and social contexts without being invited to these spaces by existing fishers. In order to get invited, the research revealed that they needed to more actively show an interest, being

present in onshore fishing places and simultaneously developing knowledge (cultural capital) and social relations within the fishing community.

Through interviews, it became clear that it was important for these prospective fishers to be seen as young and 'innocent', as it was frequently reported that there is a culture of secrecy within the community, in particular, towards those established 'older' fishers who were seen as competitors. If successful, these young local prospective fishers became invited on fishing boats and continued learning the skills and the 'rules of the game' of fishing. Both the familial and non-familial contexts, however, presented challenges in accessing enough economic capital to afford their own fishing boat, gear and licences.

A third pathway was identified for 'older' fishers who had, through previous work, accumulated enough economic capital to purchase their own businesses. These fishers, however, did not necessarily have the necessary cultural and social capital to be accepted as legitimate members of the fishing community. Nevertheless, through displaying the qualities of being a 'good fisher' – that is, demonstrating the skills of fishing (cultural capital) as well as complying with the unwritten rules of fishing in this area – these fishers could become trusted (enabling access to social capital, for example, in the form of support at sea in case of need) and eventually become known as legitimate members of the fishing community – that is, being a 'good fisher' (see Figure 2).

Later in the life course, fishers (re)negotiated their fishing identities in relation to the lives of others, within transitions such as parenthood as well as with older age. Parenthood posed the challenge of needing a more secure source of income which, in the area studied, resulted in fishing careers taking on two differing directions.

First, some full-time fishers decided to temporarily go part-time and took up an additional occupation. Important for these fishers was that they wanted to have the option to go back to being full-time fishers in the future when familial circumstances had changed.

The second route identified was that fishers intensified their businesses to secure a more stable income. The significance of these findings was that fishers respond to changes in family circumstances to adapt their businesses and fishing practices. As such, the study revealed that socially constructed meanings of parenthood – in this case, specifically, fatherhood – had significance for the unfolding of fishing lives and the shaping of fishing practices.

Being a self-employed occupation, fishing does not have an institutionally defined retirement age. Instead, retirement, for the fishers spoken to, was defined in relation to physical capabilities and often a process of ‘force’ caused by pain and injury. Interviews revealed that fishers preferred to ‘remain in place’ by continuing fishing at an older age.

Whilst their older age and decreasing bodily capabilities, to some extent, stopped them from going fishing, their reputation built around

good fishing at a younger age could help them to remain good fishers, although their actual involvement in the fishery was decreasing. In this context, again, it was observed that the notion of linked lives with other generations became important. Those fishers who had sons (successors) could remain in the fishery for longer as their sons could substitute their bodily capital, allowing the older generation to keep fishing at sea.

The presence or absence of successors of fishers at an older age also became important in another significant way. It was observed that older fishers who had successors more frequently reported they engaged in voluntary v-notching of lobster, which was a practice performed to safeguard the future lobster stock in the area. Such findings reveal that those who wish to encourage fishers to adopt more sustainable fishing practices had to broaden their focus to include intergenerational contexts of linked lives between generations.

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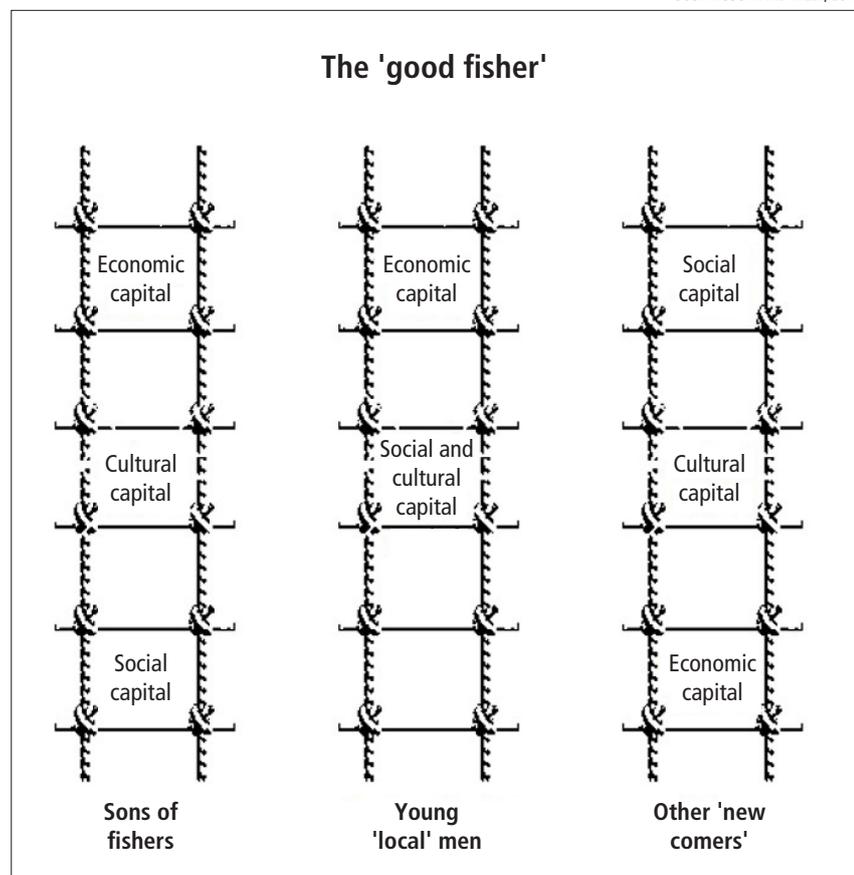


Figure 2: The different trajectories in which prospective fishers, from different initial positions, accumulate fishing capital to become 'good fishers'

Conclusions

The life course approach reported on here highlight how different social contexts allow individuals within the fishing community varying access to different forms of capital, which, in turn, shapes how they are able to access the fishing ladder and position within the fishing community. Although familial connections offered the most clearly defined route onto the fishing ladder, this was not the only pathway.

collective and spanning across several generations."

To conclude this article, we would encourage others to use the life course approach to investigate the temporal dimension of fishing lives in other geographical contexts to gain a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be a fisher. 

Policies that seek to change or regulate fishers' activities too need to recognize that decisions are often collective and spanning across several generations

Capital may be accumulated in different ways, and at different points across the life course, to allow non-familial access. Examples presented in this paper remind us that fishing life courses – or the 'fishing ladder' – are not necessarily linear or uniform. Different points of entry may be taken onto the fishing ladder at different stages in the life course. Also, movement along the ladder may progress at different rates, with life transitions such as parenthood, differentially shaping fishing activity and the ways that fishers develop capitals.

The study argues that the life course perspective helps us to understand how moving along the fishing ladder is closely choreographed with the life course(s) of other fishers. The recognition that decisions by fishers are made in the context of linked and unfolding life courses has relevance to recent attempts to introduce more sustainable fishing practices as the study observed that fishers' willingness to engage with practices such as v-notching was closely dependent on the presence of a fishing successor.

The study concluded that "the life course approach highlights the need to shift the scale of focus – both in policy and academic research – away from a singular concern for the individual fisher. Policies that seek to change or regulate fishers' activities too need to recognize that decisions are often

For more

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/soru.12181>

The fishing lifecourse: exploring the importance of social contexts, capitals and (more than) fishing identities

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0743016716301103>

Exploring the socio-cultural contexts of fishers and fishing: developing the concept of the 'good fisher'

<https://arxiv.org/abs/1608.08066>

Social Capital in Fisheries Governance

<https://maritimestudiesjournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1007/s40152-018-0102-z>

Women, capitals and fishing lives - exploring gendered dynamics in the Llŷn peninsula small-scale fishery (Wales, UK)