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Biographical Essay
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When you look at eighty-two years of life what do you see?

Birth
Death
Drought
Hardship
Post-war austerity
Education
Mate ship
Endurance...

But what is there to document what you discover?

Certificates
Photos
Awards
Children
Grandchildren
And memories-
Memories of a life worth living...

Wrinkled, once hard working hands scratch away the peeling paint of the table on the verandah.
Where and when were you born I ask?
And so the story begins.

My Grandfather Robert Ridge, 'Bob', was born in Bourke on the 31st of October 1927. Too young to have been troubled by the depression or to enlist in WWII as his brother did, Bob narrates a life focused on family relationships, the true Australian spirit of mate ship and endurance, education, and belonging to a certain time and place in a close-knit rural environment.

Thus, Bob is a man of many personal tales and tributes with his biography spanning a range of topics. Even though Bob's biography recounts a life full of personal tales and tributes, 'No man is

an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main' (Less H 2009, p. 13). Every individual exists in accordance with external parameters.

In the following account my own interpretation of Bob's life trajectory will be analysed through the process of considering the influence of social, cultural and economic capital. Sociologist Annette Lareau agrees with this choice of analysis, stating that: 'The complexity of an individual's life is revealed through an examination of the different forms of capital (social, cultural and economic)' (Lareau 1987, p. 80).

According to Bourdieu; Cultural capital in its embodied form consists of ideas and knowledge people draw upon as they participate in social life (Bourdieu 1986, p.243). Essentially this is the habits and dispositions that individuals have developed over time.

Bob's reservoir of cultural capital, his social identity, can be referred to as his habitus. A person's habitus orders the way they act as human beings and is shaped by cultural and social influences (Bourdieu 1977, p. 49).

Bob's father became a single parent after the death of his wife in 1937. As they lived isolated area, Bob's father was the sole adult influence in his life from the age of ten. His father's unwavering values were pivotal in determining the ideas and knowledge that would contribute to Bob's cultural capital.

Bourdieu furthers this observation by referring to the argument that cultural "habits and dispositions" can be transmitted from one generation to the next (Bourdieu 1984, p.12). Philosophers Berger and Luckmann agree with Bourdieu by raising the idea that an individual's own habitus is formed with regards to influential others. That is: "the self is a reflected entity, reflecting the attitudes first taken by significant others towards it" (Berger and Luckmann 1966, p. 123).

During the interview Bob spoke with admiration towards his father, Bill Ridge. According to Bob, Bill was a: "Wonderful father" (p. 3).

Bob's respect for this figure meant that cultural 'habits and dispositions' (Bourdieu 1984, p.12) which were exercised by Bill would readily be adopted by his son.

We see the manifestation of his father's influence in Bob's love of literature.

"we'd do a lot of riding around the place on horse back ...in these trips riding around the paddocks, he (Bill) was a great lover of poetry, Banjo Patterson's poems and he used to recite

poetry, and I read a lot of poems and learnt a lot of poems then that I can still remember, and I can't remember what happened yesterday!" (p. 5)

His father had instilled in him a belief in academia and the value of literature. If we regard cultural capital as the bank of ideas and knowledge from which we can draw upon in our social life (Coleman 2008, p. 24), then it was in these early years that Bob's love of learning was established.

At age fifteen Bob went to school for the first time in Dubbo and later delighted in making his father proud when he graduated from Sydney University with a Bachelor of Agricultural Science in 1951. He chose not to have a financially rewarding career in science, deciding instead to return to his cultural roots as a grazier. Later as a married man and father of four, Bob's sense of duty and service embedded in his habitus saw him use his education for the greater good of the community.

"I always did try to put something back in to the community by bringing up the extra knowledge I had. It was good for the community to have someone with an education like that; most of the ones who were out there hadn't had an opportunity like me. I was forty one years on the rural land boards and eleven on the NSW meat industry authorities and thirteen on NSW country racing, then there were the local sporting committees and things like that. I might be talking myself into it, but I feel that I did put something back. I always did try and bring more into the community" (p. 13).

Until he retired seven years ago Bob had lived always on the same sheep grazing property one-hundred kilometres north of Bourke. Here, he was exposed to cultural influences in his daily life. Philosopher Otto Weininger states that it is in the home that cultural capital may be acquired via exposure to a given set of cultural practices (Weininger 2005).

The value of hard work is an example of a cultural practice bestowed upon Bob throughout his life. His family's lifetime tenet was to always work your hardest, try your best and never leave anything undone.

While we are considering the nature of Bob's habitus at this point, it is important to draw upon a relevant aspect of societal context. The term 'Aussie Battler' generally refers to working class Australians and is a symbol that united much of the population around this time (post WWII). The idea of the Aussie Battler is a discourse that emphasizes stoicism and persistence in the face of adversity, as characteristically Australian traits (Page 1980, p. 50). The generic description of such a man seems to align with Bob's habitus. That is, the emphasis placed on hard work in Bob's culture meant that he encompassed the traits of the typical 'Aussie Battler's' way of being.

“A lot of people are just prepared to say ‘oh well it’s hopeless we can’t make money’ and leave it,” (p. 14) observes Bob. The adversity that Bob refers to in this comment regards nature’s influence (drought and flooding). He goes on to imply that a sustainable life on the land could not coexist with this victim’s attitude.

Later in Bob’s life, the motivation to persevere through obstacles was still apparent in his habitus.

“1965 and 66 were the least rewarding years, in twenty months it only rained two and a half inches...On Sundays, we’d cut scrub for the sheep, then go to cricket; you’d bat right through an innings and still be running singles at the finish, in hot weather too” (p. 14).

Hardships inherent in life on the land influenced the creation of a cultural disposition of resilience. As is stated above this seems to conform to society’s perception of the ‘Aussie Battler’. The Ridge family’s firm belief in the morality of answering hard times with energy was an integral aspect of Bob’s habitus and his reservoir of cultural capital.

Through analyzing features of Bob’s own cultural capital we come to see habits and dispositions that were learnt and legitimized. Each feature of his habitus contributed to the formation of his embodied cultural capital. However, as Bourdieu opines: ‘it is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms’ (Bourdieu 1986, p. 242). Each form of capital is inextricably linked.

Social capital contributed to determining Bob’s position in Australian society. For John Field (2003: 1-2) the central thesis of social capital theory lies in a sense of belonging and the concrete experience of social networks, this is the recipe for inclusion (Smith 2009, para. 3). Inclusion in certain groups of society results in a network of connections that can effectively be mobilized. This mobilization is the crux of social capital (Bourdieu 1986, P. 249).

A particularly important instance of social inclusion is evident in the interview not because of what Bob said but more because of what he didn’t feel the need to mention. Several times Bob skirted the opportunity to discuss social class and the effect it had on his life. In fact when asked, Bob directly stated that he believed social class had never really affected him, and that he existed in an egalitarian society. Bob identified himself with groups in society through a placement and consciousness of oneself amongst those whose outlooks he shared.

A recent work on inequality in Australia that attempts to integrate theory, individual experience and empirical reality is Craig McGregor’s *Class in Australia* (1997). In relation to the role of class, McGregor claims:

‘It is impossible to understand the lives Australians live without reference to class...even if you’re not personally aware of class, what happens in your life is radically affected by it.’
(McGregor, C. 1997:17; emphasis in original)

By referring to McGregor’s opinion that classes did exist we must assume that this was so in Bob’s life as well. Therefore it seems plausible that he would have belonged to the group (or class) of Australians who socially connected due to their belief in a lack of class (egalitarianism).

Bob’s belief in egalitarianism correlates with research compiled on similar individuals at the time. As Elder opines in his book entitled ‘Being Australian’:

‘Posting egalitarianism as a central characteristic of Australian-ness obscures class inequality, while paradoxically making class central to stories of being Australian’ (Elder 2007, p. 47).

The explanation of this paradox lies in the generalization that members of the Australian working class felt that class divisions did not affect them. In fact, it was this very thought that spurred the creation of their own particular class as a group of Australians who believed in egalitarianism. Bob’s inclusion in this particular group is a form of mobilized social connection, a key feature of social capital.

Running parallel with the existence of the Aussie Battler who relishes his egalitarianism, Bob’s social identity is also founded upon a sense of belonging to a particular time and place. Bob paints a picture of a time when to exist as a grazier was a different concept to its meaning nowadays. Bob recounts that:

“To be a grazier, or even a landholder was one of the top occupations, even probably, society wise they would have matched it with doctors and all that sort of thing...”

‘But that’s all changed.’ (p. 8)

He agrees.

“I mean the price of wool’s gone up and down and there’s money in other things now, so there’s probably not the prestige placed on landholders that there used to be” (p. 8)

They (the Ridge’s) were the third generation of the family running stock at Tuncoona, a difficult block of land along the flooding Warrego river and out to sandy fragile soils. They had learnt to expect good times financially only at random. Hard work was a matter of pride and did not necessarily guarantee dollars. Bob was not a member of the upper class economically. However, being a woolgrower allowed a certain sense of pride and belonging to an established unit. As Alec Morrison accurately depicts:

‘For most of our history the only thing we did better than anyone else in the world was to grow wool – sheep and station life helped define our national character and how we saw ourselves...nationwide these people shared a common lifestyle, common attitudes, and a

common dedication to work. There was something distinctive about the style of a station man.’ (Morrison 2009, p. xi).

Like believing in egalitarianism, his position as a woolgrower was an aspect of his cultural disposition that facilitated inclusion in a certain social group.

Social networks inside larger societal groups were areas in which interaction in Bob’s life occurred. Sport is an example of this. As Bob acknowledges, it was one of the only entertainments for isolated people in his era. Sport allowed for social interaction, whilst also illustrating egalitarianism. In fact, “In the Australian story of egalitarianism, sport features as the key place where equality is practiced” (Elder 2007, p. 98). Bob referred to an example of this equality when he explained that the cricket team consisted of: graziers, aboriginals or anyone from the town (p. 9).

The importance of the connections made through sport is illustrated throughout the interview. Bob can still recite the line up of the 1946 Dubbo High School football team, what they are doing now and how they’re connected with other members of society!

‘Don McGinnes, he was on the wing, he was a professional runner. Actually, he’s connected to Don LeLeivre, you know Don LeLeivre, he married Don’s sister’ (p. 7).

Economic capital exists as the third analytical tool in this examination of Bob’s life. As is outlined above, Bob as an Australian woolgrower had social networks within which cultural habits and dispositions were learnt and legitimized. Bourdieu opines that economic capital is essentially at the root of these forms of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986, p. 252).

While we have established that pastoralists as a group may have been seen as ‘upper class’ in one sense, we have also noted that this was not necessarily due to wealth. It is clear that Bob usually believed that the next man was as good as himself, regardless of their economic situation. More important in his judgment process were aspects such as: honesty, integrity and personality. This attitude is inherent in the ideas, knowledge and beliefs, which formed his cultural and social habitus.

In ‘When Wool was King’ Alec Morrison says: “The Australian wool industry has seen boom times and busts, wars and droughts, political upheaval and market manipulation’ (Morrison 2009, p. 7). Bob agrees stating that: ‘There were hard times and there were good times’ (p. 4). Later, Bob continued to describe the nature of his economic capital: ‘there was never any surpluse of money. We used to go out still. And we raced horses...it wasn’t as an expensive job as it is now’ (p. 5). The fact that Bob relished the comparatively small economic pleasures in his life is in sync with further work by Elder.

Elder believes that by defining themselves in the societal group of the mainstream Aussie Battler, figures such as Bob were in fact subjecting themselves to structural inequalities. Essentially this meant that they would not have access to some aspects of society which they may have been able to be involved in had they striven for a larger degree of economic success (Elder 2007, p. 85). This implies that there were aspects of society that were not available to Bob upon his acceptance to exist amongst the group of content working class Australians.

Although this argument seems logical, it is important to note that economic necessity with regards to happiness is relative only to its bearer. That is, societal theories and constructs do not possess the ability to define aspirations. Logistically, Bob falls neatly into the group of those studied for Elder's results. However, Bob's story does not present any of the angst around the 'what- may- have- been' scenarios that is implied in Elder's study.

Bob implies that Economic capital only existed in order to continue with the same aspects of cultural and social capital that had always existed in his family. They just made money to have enough. The desire for an excess of economic capital did not define Bob's habitus.

As our interview drew to a close the western bay window threw light across the wooden table, immediately propelling me into a reflective mood. I now had an hour and a half of recorded audio regarding my Grandfather's life. However, an individual life is not something that can be defined. It can only be subjectively analyzed in an attempt to produce an account of a selection of aspects.

This led me to consider a recent conversation in which Trudie Leigo, a curator of Aboriginal Art described societal perception of the works: 'People might have a superficial understanding of what's in the work, but they will never ever appreciate a painting to a full extent' (Leigo, 2010, pers. comm., 8 April). I believe that this description fits the understanding of a life. Although I have attempted to sketch Bob's character looking at aspects of social, cultural and economic capital, we will never understand the true emotion or the layered background.

It does not tell us how he felt when his mother died,

It does not tell us how he felt when his wife was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis,

It does not tell us how he felt while he watched sheep dying standing at a trough.

Above is a glimpse into a selection of themes that characterize Bob's narrative of his life trajectory.

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