



Woolworths and Wales: a Multi-Dimensional Analysis of the Loss of a Local Brand

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Sociological Research Online, 16 (1) 10
<<http://www.socresonline.org.uk/16/1/10.html>>
10.5153/sro.2284

Received: 22 Mar 2010 Accepted: 16 Jan 2011 Published: 28 Feb 2011

Abstract

In this paper we present a multi-dimensional analysis of the closure of Woolworths in Wales and the way in which the loss of this familiar high-street brand can be accounted for at a number of levels and within different social arenas. Primarily, the paper demonstrates how Woolworths is positioned as a symbol of a previous era of consumption centred upon community and place based notions of nostalgia and community. What is striking in the analysis is the similarities in the way in which Woolworths is mobilised as a symbol by the general public and elites; albeit with varying outcomes and affects. In presenting the analysis the paper demonstrates a processual framing as providing a fruitful approach to the combination of different approaches and fields of inquiry (sociology, geography, and political science) without diminishing their distinct contributions.

Keywords: *Recession, 'Credit Crunch', Community, Economy, the High-Street, Welsh Assembly Government, Woolworths, Consumption*

Introduction

1.1 Recent disruption in the global economy has heralded related organisational trouble for the cities and high-streets of the UK. Internationally, cities have, for some decades, been geared toward an unequal spatial organisation and relations with the fostering of consumption and the consumerist lifestyles that come with it at the centre (for example, Zukin, 1995). Consequently, this spatial organisation is characterised by of the centrality of display, experience and identity related 'lifestyle shopping' (Shields, 1992). Thus, the contemporary city can be interpreted as a spatial materialisation of the relation between market and social identities (e.g. Schouten, 1991; Bauman, 2002). This, of course, is not a new phenomenon in the evolution of the city; as Park (1925:9) observed;

The ancient city was primarily a fortress, a place of refuge in time of war. The modern city, on the contrary, is primarily a convenience of commerce, and owes its existence to the market around which it sprang up.

1.2 The city, then, has long been understood as a setting of differentiated and differentiating social organisation and interaction (Lofland, 2003). The character of this organisation in the contemporary metropolis has been written about elsewhere; the 'transnational city' (Hannerz, 1996), the theme-park like 'post-modern' metropolis (Sorkin, 1992), the way in which cities are increasingly branded (Morgan et al, 2004), the pre-occupation with security (Davis, 1990) and the prominence of spectacle and display (Hannigan, 1998 and Dicks, 2003). Underpinning the increased centrality of consumption and experience to the contemporary urban condition is, accordingly, the recognition (by sociologists, planners, and marketing companies alike) that the city is a site of interaction and that the urban landscape is no passive container of action; yet, in many accounts of consumerism we still find the 'cultural dope' (Garfinkel, 1967) taken in by all the city offers, passively accepting the hollow promises of the consumer society. Miller *et al* (1998: 185) criticise the '...more ungrounded speculations about contemporary consumption which have tended to see 'identity' as inherently plural and free-floating and 'consumption' as a hedonistic pursuit of a virtually limitless range of lifestyle approaches'. Others have argued that the relation between city, consumption, and consumer is somewhat more complex (Smith, 2009); as discussed by Thrift and Glennie (1993: 45);

...many new 'postmodern' consumer developments like shopping malls, redesigned city centres and the like are not shining spires, drawing consumers to them in a trance like state of desire like moths to a candle, but rather ways of encompassing the large numbers of different vocabularies of description employed by diverse social groupings. The power of these buildings lies in their ability...to speak to a number of these different vocabularies at once.

1.3 One particular way in which the relationship between identity, consumptive practice, and the appeal to a range of diverse social groupings is found in the invocation of broad population category devices such as 'community'. This device is, of course, to be found regularly in Web 2.0 forums and social networking sites which form key sites of targeted advertising and can also be found in the marketing material of several companies' and corporations' 'community initiatives' (McDonald's sponsorship of the English Premier League's 'Community Shield' being a clear example). In this paper we consider the relations of process and vocabulary between consumption, community, and commerce via an analysis of the closure of Woolworths in Wales and the subsequent 'community' and policy response. Indeed, the use of 'community' as a device to imbue a company with an outward facing ethos and identity was especially evident in the manner in which the high-street chain of stores positioned itself as a 'local' and 'community' brand.

1.4 In what follows we specifically consider the ways in which categories of 'community' and 'local' were invoked as symbolic constructions in both the positioning of Woolworths, by Woolworths, as a 'local brand'

and also within the responses to its closure by the general public and political elites. The response to the closure of Woolworths stores displayed many of the characteristics of 'place attachment' and the way in which people create, circulate, and invoke attachment to spatial configurations such as 'neighbourhood'. In the invocation of feelings of sentimentality, attachment, and community with regard to Woolworths it is, significantly, accounted for as a symbol of authenticity and, perhaps, as representative of a different form of capitalism to that of the 'faceless' multi-national chain store. It is significant too that Woolworths served as an enduring symbol of the high-street as opposed to the shopping mall or the out-of-town retail park and it is interesting to reflect that the company's decision to expand into out-of-town retail parks through its 'Big W' and larger stores was a key factor in its decline and eventual collapse. The question is, then, how is it that Woolworths comes to be positioned as associated with the local as opposed to the national and international?

1.5 In pursuing this line of inquiry this paper seeks to build upon themes developed within a recent Rapid Response section of this journal (Coomber and Letherby, 2009; Yuill, 2009; Bone, 2009) and takes the closure of Woolworths as a case with which to consider relations between community, locality, commerce and policy. In particular we consider whether the closure of Woolworths and other high-street casualties of the 'credit crunch' have entailed a potential reconfiguration of relations with and within 'traditional' spaces of consumption, locality and community.

1.6 The paper is divided into three sections. Firstly we consider the way in which what was a national retailer retained a symbolic meaning within the locales in which the stores were located and the subsequent reaction to their closure. In the second section we consider the 'national chain with a local identity' business model adopted by Woolworths, its unsuitability for surviving recession and perceptions of its closure from businesses within Wales. In the third section we briefly evaluate the response of political elites at the local, devolved and central levels of government and extent to which this response balanced the need to reflect public feelings towards the symbolic closure of Woolworths stores and the need to respond to job losses and the decline of the high-street precipitated by the 'credit crunch'. We conclude by discussing the way in which the multi-level, multi-method, approach of the paper provides a complex reading of the case of Woolworths and, further, a potential frame through which to understand and access locality as an intersection of economy, policy, and everyday action.

Context

2.1 The global economic downturn sparked by the collapse of the US housing market boom, fuelled by 'sub-prime lending' and the associated accumulation of 'bad loans' or 'toxic debts' by the banking industry, represents the most significant event for the UK economy since the early 1990s. Indeed, the economic circumstances were infamously characterised by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling, in an interview in August 2008 as 'arguably the worst they've been in 60 years' (Guardian, 2008). Although, in the UK, the recession was not officially identified by Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures until January 2009, the so-called 'credit crunch' clearly had a significant impact prior to this date. On the high-street in particular, the latter half of 2008 was characterised by regular reports within the media of household names going out of business, with casualties including established brands such as Woolworths, Adams and MFI. In addition the economic downturn, combined with the existing pressures of the growth of out-of-town shopping centres, supermarkets and internet shopping, led many to speculate on the future of the high-street. The closure of Woolworths stores in January 2009, alongside the queues of customers outside Northern Rock banks and the collapse of Lehman Brothers, provided one of the key symbolic moments of the economic downturn in the UK. On the one hand, the closure precipitated a highly nostalgic response from the British public and media and, on the other, highlighted the stark challenges facing UK government and businesses in responding to the economic crisis.

2.2 In order to analyse the varied responses to the closure of Woolworths at both the local, regional, and national levels, we operationalise three forms of qualitative analysis drawn from theoretical and methodological approaches that are seldom combined. What is presented here does not entail a truly 'mixed' epistemological position (and, indeed, we are highly sceptical of that possibility) but, rather, a demonstration of the way in which a collaborative and 'cosmopolitan' research strategy can lead to dialogue between disciplines (sociology, human geography, and policy analysis in the case of this paper) without diluting the contribution that each has to make in its own right.

Method

3.1 This piece considers the fate of Woolworths through three qualitative lenses, thus operationalising a multi-dimensional, rather than a multi-method approach (traditionally characterised as a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods (Bryman 2006; Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009)). We do not, therefore, employ these three devices for the purpose of triangulating results, nor do we apply these devices to a consistent sample. Rather, we employ them as a means of illuminating intersecting processes, narratives, and constructions of Woolworths and its closure. The three devices we utilise are, broadly speaking; an Interactionist analysis of web based materials, qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews, and policy analysis of documentary material.

3.2 The analysis of web based materials serves to demonstrate the way in which individuals, groups, places and objects come to have a meaningful existence in the ways they are acted toward in a social manner by others in interaction (Blumer, 1969, Housley and Atkinson, 2003). In this sense, the meaning that an object or institution such as 'Woolworths' has at any one point in time does not exist *in* the object itself, *a priori* to people's engagements with it, but, rather, is realised, modified, and invoked in everyday interaction. Internet materials are analysed as documents of the public response to the closure of Woolworths and as an empirical examination of Hobsbawm and Ranger's 'invention of tradition'. The use of informal, open ended interviews supports a consideration of meaning construction in that they were designed to explore and describe the experiences and central themes in the understandings of both subject and researcher in relation to the recession and Woolworths. Here the main task of interviews used within an interpretive approach is to unpack the meanings salient to and invoked by the subject, and to elicit data which we might understand to be more 'factual' (Kvale 1996). They serve to provide a picture 'on the ground' from the view of key informants and stakeholders. Finally the analytical framework draws on established conceptual frameworks within the public policy analysis literature to explore the processes of 'agenda-setting' and the development of alternative policy responses to perceived policy problems (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 2003). A key aspect of these approaches is the way in which policy problems and perceived solutions are identified, framed and portrayed in the policy-making process. Edelman (1977, 1988), for example, argues that the language and symbols employed by politicians and officials is key to the way in which policy problems and solutions are manufactured and manipulated. As Parsons (1998: 182) notes, the key function of policy analysis is to deconstruct policy discourses and examine the symbols deployed by policy-makers. Therefore the response of political elites may provide reassurance to the public on such issues as the collapse of Woolworths whilst, in actuality, little was done in response to the particular problem.

3.3 The three elements of this analysis thus provide a nuanced picture of three 'layers' of the positioning, closure, and subsequent response as Woolworths became a victim of the recession. Whilst the three elements are drawn from differing perspectives and traditions they combine to demonstrate the way in which categories of 'community', 'locality', and devices of nostalgia and tradition are invoked to position

Woolworths as a salient symbol of the impact of the recession in Wales and beyond.

Data

4.1 Within the multi-dimensional approach outlined above, the first stage involved materials gathered from the Woolworths 'blog' (<http://www.woolworthsblog.co.uk>) set up following the closure and from videos posted on YouTube by members of the public. Internet based, Web 2.0, data that are drawn upon here are, of course, of a different order than interview materials but, nonetheless, allow a certain level of access to the ways in which the closure of Woolworths was responded to in a symbolic fashion in which members of the public utilised available resources of interpretation and accounting.

4.2 In the second section we assess the impact of the closure of Woolworths from the perspective of a group of high-street traders from mid-Wales. Derived from a broader study of business and commercial activities in peripheral areas, the interview data gathered as part of this project referred to both the immediate and perceived longer-term impacts of the economic downturn, and positioned the loss of Woolworths in this context. Data extracts are drawn from a corpus of twenty five interviews, conducted between March and June 2009, with representatives of private sector firms ranging from small businesses with under five personnel through mid-sized subsidiaries of national chains and large scale, stand-alone enterprises with over 250 staff.

4.3 The third substantive section examines the response of political elites at different levels of government to the closure of Woolworths stores in terms of the two key policy problems identified by policy-makers: the associated job losses and the perceived decline of the high-street. The analysis draws on a range of documentary sources published in the run up to and immediate aftermath of the collapse of Woolworths, including plenary debates within the House of Commons and National Assembly of Wales, press releases and media interviews. The section draws on the approach put forward by Edelman (1977, 1988) and Kingdon (2003) in examining the political rhetoric and symbols operationalised by political elites within the context of concrete policy measures.

4.4 These three areas of analysis are integrated within a processual understanding of the relationships between interaction and symbolism, accounts of economic organisation, and policy discourse and response. In this sense, we suggest, that there exists a reflexive and constitutive relation between the various scales of action and organisation that we consider here, done so in direct relation to a common theme carried through the sections of the fortunes and perceptions of businesses, communities, and individuals in terms of risk and resilience (Brewer and Hunter, 2006). In short one is able to trace the 'career' of the nostalgic response to Woolworths and the brand's symbolic value through time and across the levels of activity we identify. In a broader sense, our treatment of the case of Woolworths' closure reflects an approach to understanding locality which treats this spatial category not simply as geographic location, collection of people, or policy construct but, rather, as an analytical site in which lived experience and interactions, structural factors such as the economy and shifts in the built environment, and policy responses and implementations intersect in producing varying outcomes and social formations (see Richardson and Jenson, 2003).

Woolworths in and of the Community: A Symbolic Symbiosis?

5.1 From the first store opening in Liverpool in 1909, 'Woolies' went on to become a familiar sight on high-streets and in shopping centres across the UK. Rapidly establishing itself as a household name and value-for-money brand, a century in business came to a close on 26 November 2008 when the trading of shares in the Woolworths Group plc was suspended and the Group's high-street retailing arm, Woolworths plc and the wholesale division, Entertainment UK Ltd, entered administration (Deloitte, 2008a). Although Woolworths has been characterised as victim of the 'credit crunch', it is important to note that the performance of the Group, and the retail division in particular, had been in decline for several years. For example, the Group's loss before tax for the half-year to 2 August, 2008 was £99.7 million as compared with £63.8 million for the same period in 2007, £66.8 million in 2006 and £36.2 million in 2005 (Woolworths Group plc, 2006, 2007, 2008). In mid-December the joint administrators for Woolworths plc, Deloitte, confirmed that a buyer for the retail business had not been found and that the 807 high-street stores would be closed in several stages. As a direct result around 22,000 permanent and 5,000 temporary and seasonal members of staff were made redundant (Deloitte, 2008b). We will consider some of the key factors in the demise of Woolworths and its relationship to 'the credit crunch' below but, certainly, the most striking features of the closure of Woolworths stores across the UK was the outpouring of collective nostalgia and sentiment.



Figure 1. 'Woolworths Local', Penarth High Street, South Wales.

5.2 As we shall explore in more detail in the following section, Woolworths, a national chain, enjoyed a brand identity that positioned it firmly as a local store for local people (Fig. 1). The construction and embodiment of this 'local' or 'community' identity and ethos is emphasised in the 'guiding principles' published by the company (Fig. 2). Drawing on *Gemeinschaft* characteristics of close ties, assistance and support, the guiding principles declare their particular vision of 'community': neighbourliness, employing local people, and helping to provide for future generations. These broader commitments were underpinned by several initiatives, such as the 'Woolworths Kids First Charity' launched in 1999 to support community projects, and the 'Woolworths Recycle' campaign aimed at old mobile phone handsets and used ink cartridges. In addition, these community-focused projects were combined with a commitment to training staff and sourcing products ethically (Woolworths Group plc, 2008).

In the Community:

We are active members of the communities in which we work. The following principles guide our approach to the communities that surround our operations:

- We seek to be sponsors of local and national causes, particularly those associated with children.
- We aim to behave as a good neighbour wherever we operate a business.
- We recruit our workforce locally from the communities that we serve and aspire to be an employer of choice.
- Whenever possible, we allow our colleagues to choose which charities or causes to support, allowing them to make a difference through fundraising or practical support.

Figure 2. Guiding Principles: Community
Source: Woolworths Group PLC (2009)

Guiding Principles – "How we do business" <http://www.woolworthsgroupplc.com/csr/pdf/guiding_principles.pdf> (accessed 25/02/09)

5.3 The sense of Woolworths being representative of something more than the sum of its parts is not simply produced in marketing or managerial rhetoric but, rather, in the lived experiences of those who imbue Woolworths with meanings which position it as a symbol of community and of community life. In this section we analyse some of the responses to the closure of Woolworths in the media and on publicly available on-line resources in highlighting the symbolic and 'imagined' aspects of community (see Anderson, 1983) invoked in response to the closure of Woolworths.

5.4 The public response to the closure of Woolworths made good use of on-line resources forming a partial and relatively temporary 'emotional community' (Maffesoli, 1996). A plethora of groups were formed on social networking websites such as Facebook. A website, 'Woolworths Reunited' was set-up to help former Woolworths employees to find new work and keep in contact with former colleagues (<http://www.woolworthsreunited.com>), and a documentary covering the resurrection of a store in Dorchester ('Wellworths') was aired (see Barkham, 2009). Elsewhere, a popular video on YouTube, created by 'Ellaskins' (2008), heralded a call for people to take up their cameras and record the final days of their local

Woolworths stores for posterity; receiving a number of responses with mixed results (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1LGPdLBVBI>). Posts on the 'Woollies Blog', (<http://www.woolworthsblog.co.uk>) established in February 2009 and which now even includes an 'E-museum', reveal a common nostalgic accounting of childhood experiences in Woolworths stores and an equally consistent accounting of the closure predicated by categories of community.

...The real reason a lot of us miss our local Woollies so much was that it was at the centre of the local community.

Blog Extract 1 *Dom* Feb 12th 2009 1:47am

When the store closed in my town centre, the town died, everyone used to shop at "woollies" all year round, always had helpful, friendly staff, excellent range of products and displays, every child in the UK was gutted when they closed

Blog Extract 2 *Debbie* Feb 11th 2009 09:34am

5.5 The 'Woollies blog' is housed on the same site which continues the brand as an on-line retailer. Selling familiar Woolworths brands such as the Ladybird clothing range, the website proclaims Woolworths to be 'the brand you grew up with' and identifies its mission statement as building 'on a 100 years of heritage with a little help from you' (<http://www.woolworths.co.uk> 18/02/09). Accompanying this appeal to consumers is a salient representation in the re-branding and 'virtual' re-launch of Woolworths depicting a father with son and daughter sat on the couch in front of a laptop presumably enjoying shopping in the virtual space of '@Woolworths.co.uk'. In this representation we see a move from Woolworths' brand position as a space and symbol of community in the form of its stores in the public sphere to the family doing their shopping together on-line in the domestic sphere.

5.6 Significantly, the construction and accounting for of Woolworths as having a role in the community beyond that of a retailer is evidenced in a large proportion of responses to plans to re-launch Woolworths in an on-line manifestation bearing the same brand name. Despite a positive response to the brand continuing in name, and markedly similar goods being available on-line, the accounts of the move from high-street to internet highlight the construction - if not the reality - of Woolworths as a space in which people could meet up, interact in 'a family environment', and 'get a bargain' in person: in turn supporting Fischer's (1976) structural organisation of the underpinning values associated with urban symbols and 'symbolisation', these are; familiarity versus strangeness, community versus individualism, and tradition versus change (Lofland, 2003). The interpretation of Woolworths as tied to notions of familiarity, community, and tradition stand against the unfamiliar, altered, and individualising experience of shopping at Woolworths on-line. This, again, can be read as a rejection of contemporary forms of capitalism. As summed up by one 'blogger':

Please please please reconsider re opening the stores on the high street Woolworths was more about the family environment than just a name... this key factor will be lost if it was on-line only Woollies is a name that belongs on the high street...you asked for our comments and many on your site have asked for high-street stores. Please do as the public ask I'm sure they will back your decision to keep it open and purchase from the new stores ... have on in every major town...people will flock to come

Blog Extract 3: *Eddie* Feb 11th, 2009, 12:43pm

5.7 Elsewhere, a contributor to Radio 1's *Newsbeat* internet chatroom had similar reservations, fondly connecting Woolworths to her adolescence and distinguishing the Woolworths store as a social setting quite unlike that of other national chains:

The memories I had of Woolworths were going in and getting pic n' mix, just browsing around and wasting some time. So it will never be the same. What's the point in going online when you've got Argos and other shops?

5.8 The closure of Woolworths gained a different status than that of other stores for several possible reasons; primarily due to its national recognisability, but also because of its symbolic position within the high-street and within the imaginary of the British community. Indeed, a recurrent theme in accounts 'mourning' the loss of Woolworths was not the display of a sense that something of necessity had been removed (although this factored) but, rather, that both a symbol of and, significantly, a setting where community happened had been lost. Here we see mundane categories of community, of shared values, of a shared nostalgic past, and of shared interactional settings, mobilised around the closure of Woolworths which, in itself, is taken up as symbolic of wider threats to communities and the stability of localities. Kasinitz (2003: 166), in discussing Gans' (1962) ethnography of a dense working-class community in Boston, notes that

Although the actual level of neighbourhood interaction is quite high, consciousness of the neighbourhood as a collectivity is still based to a large degree on media presentations and politics, and that consciousness is likely to become more sharply focused when the neighbourhood is under attack.

5.9 Clearly we are not comparing the significance of the closure of Woolworths to an urban neighbourhood threatened with demolition and or 'regeneration'; however, we note that, similarly, a collective sense of loss of community and place is mobilised at a time when the visible spaces and settings of community are threatened by economic organisational troubles. Thus, Woolworths is positioned as indicative of the more stable, material and spatial features being 'stripped out' of urban and rural locales, with its loss engendering fears of fragmentation and isolation. Furthermore, one may point to the way in which Woolworths, in this instance, is formulated with practices indicative of Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1992: 1) identification of practices relating to the 'invention of tradition'. Although the case may not hold the gravitas of the instances identified in the previous publication, we note that the public and, as we shall discuss below, elite invocation of Woolworths as a symbolic entity does share a number of characteristics:

'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.

5.10 In this section we have seen the way in which particular devices are mobilised in the construction of Woolworths as a symbol of community and as a nostalgic representation of a different form and space of (or perhaps better, *place for*) consumption. It is significant that the success of Woolworths at positioning themselves as a 'local' store is taken up by people in lamenting the passing of a brand which is identified as representative of a form of consumption associated with positive affective experience and, commonly, stages of life and rites of passage. In this sense, then, Woolworths is established, in the data discussed here at least, as a key component of the high-street and the store and the high-street as central to the wider associated community. In the following section we consider the business model behind this 'local national brand'.

A local national brand?

6.1 The positioning of Woolworth's high-street experience as one of collective sociability and unfavourable comparisons with the dissassociative world of online purchases were rendered as affective by the construction of 'Woolies' as a *place* – as opposed to *space* – of shopping. Juxtaposed with Argos, one of the largest general-goods vendors in the UK, the community persona which has come to characterize Woolworths broadly contradicts established attitudes towards national and multinational retail chains. Publicly traded, centrally managed, and with standardized business methods and practices, the company operated as we might expect of a modern capitalist enterprise in what Gibson-Graham (2006) has referred to as the 'mainstream' or 'real' economy. Set in opposition to 'community' or 'alternative' economic spaces shaped by sets of social relations which politicise the economic through reconfiguring everyday decision making and ethical praxis (for example, those 'fair trade' networks which seek to connect 'first world' consumers and 'third world' producers in the interests of global social justice), Woolworths was predominantly situated within the dominant system of 'international markets, competitive dynamics, and agglomerative tendencies that operate at the global scale' (Ibid, 86); an environment within which the organization prospered and ultimately failed.

6.2 In its attempts to remain competitive, Woolworths adhered to a business-model premised on a set of qualities most commonly associated with economic transactions mediated by the capitalist market, including rationality, efficiency and homogeneity (Ibid, 83). Employing technologies which pursued the goal of what Michel Callon has called "cold negotiation" (1998), including uniform pricing, self service and, latterly, internet sales, Woolworths was fully implicated in the drive to allay the potentially "hot" sociality of retail exchange through the application of economic calculation (Barry, 2002: 268 cited by Gibson-Graham, 2006: 83). While the company proved uncompetitive on these terms and folded in an increasingly hostile market place, a fate shared with a growing number of other brands including Mango, The Officers Club and Zavvi, the loss of Woolworths has been defined not so much as a loss to the mainstream economy but, significantly, as a blow to the community economy. Articulated through such concepts as place-attachment (see Amin, 2004), social inculcation (see Posner, 1997), and the re-circulation of value locally (see Hughes, 2005), it is doubtful that they are (or at least were) any more applicable in the case of Woolworths than for any of those other chains in major retail districts. In smaller towns and shopping precincts, however, the loss of Woolworths has been felt more keenly; both as an employer, and as a provider of goods not available locally.

6.3 If the failure of Woolworths as a business has been attributed to a loss of market share to major supermarket chains, lower-cost specialist superstores, the internet and an underlying failure to give people what they want (Burton, 2008), the picture is less clear in the case of small town outlets throughout the UK. Here an underlying belief that sentimentality towards Woolworths was not reflected in actual spending habits was challenged by Ruth Barnett, reporting for *The Sun* newspaper during the period of store closures:

'Loyal customers in places such as Penrith in Cumbria have kept their branches booming, but brand disloyalty in metropolitan areas, and the online shopping boom, have led to dropped profits ... While Woolies may have found a whole new audience with its high profile price cuts, loyal customers in smaller towns face a future where everyday items are hard to find without trekking to a suburban superstore'
(Barnett 2008)

6.4 Making a connection between customer loyalty and smaller towns, a connection which talks to notions of 'community' and of being socially embedded, it is a factor which is evidently assuaged (if not overshadowed) by supply and demand. This was apparent in a series of responses gathered during a recent project undertaken by WISERD on the cultures of the local economy in mid-Wales.

6.5 Gauging the reaction of local businesses to the credit crunch, this study considered those practises and processes which make small enterprises in peripheral areas more or less resilient to downturns in the economy. Including interviews with independent retailers from a number of market towns that had lately played host to the closure of a Woolworths branch, a number of respondents were of the opinion that this was not a death-knell for the provincial high-street, but was rather an opportunity for local traders and consumers alike:

"As far as getting hold of cheap toasters or kettles and whatnot its [Woolworths] going could present a problem to some local people. Especially those who don't drive or use the internet for the purpose of buying things – like the elderly. But I think that other, existing *local* business can take advantage of this, and perhaps a few new shops will open up as well. And remember, local people like to get their shopping from smaller, local independent shops run by local people if it is not too much hassle. It makes them feel good about themselves".
(Shop owner, retail sector)

6.6 That local communities form a closer attachment to small scale, independently owned and operated outlets, was a perspective shared by the majority of interviewees; a number of whom suggested that this attachment was in many ways a product of knowing what the customer wanted, and of being able to respond to demand in a manner unavailable to national retail groups:

"We know exactly what is going out of the door and how much is coming in, whereas bigger companies like Woolworths, they're just interested in turnover. The smaller guy knows that ... put it in the window, a certain item will make so much money and be bought by one of a number of regular customers. If something is going to make less, or not sell, you won't touch it ... Chain stores, while they no doubt do their homework and know what sorts of things sell, they bung them on the shelf in all the stores across the country ... [and] what sells well in Birmingham might not sell well in Bangor or wherever else. That is where the smaller retailer can survive and adapt better ... they are part of the community and not dictated to by a head office 200 miles away, or even the other side of the world"
(Shop manager, retail sector)

"When times are getting a bit hard, financially, there are options available to small local businesses which are simply not there for bigger chains. Sure, we can't compete with the big boys in terms of buying in bulk, but we know what people will buy and at what price. Also, owner-operators often have the advantage of being able, for example, of cutting staff costs by doing more shifts ourselves, and we don't have so many issues in terms of sorting out holidays, pensions or so much health and safety stuff"
(Business manager, hospitality sector)

Foregrounding adaptability and the capacity of small scale retailers to cater to changing local and regional needs, statements such as those above unsettle accounts of Woolworths as a nationally operating 'local' store.

6.7 Undoubtedly important as a longstanding employer and provider of general goods in multiple localities, the degree to which Woolworths could ever be socially embedded within given communities was necessarily undermined by centralized national management. Restricting the organizations' capacity to effectively react to the changing requirements of specific neighbourhoods and the branches therein, this

calls into question both the 'value' and viability of national retailers on the high-street vis-à-vis locally-owned, locally operated enterprises. Although this should be tempered by an appreciation of the flexibility of small businesses on account of less stringent employment practises - practises which can be both beneficial and detrimental for employees (Kickul, 2001, 2002) – these (albeit exploratory) findings question the appropriateness of state-sponsored intervention on behalf of high-street chain stores. Suggesting that smaller retail outlets might be more sustainable and answerable to community needs, the policy response to the loss of Woolworths and the impact of the credit crunch on the Welsh retail sector more generally will be discussed at length below.

The Response of Government: Tea and Sympathy

7.1 The response from central, devolved and local levels of government to the closure of Woolworths stores reflected both the symbolic value given to the company by the public but also the practical constraints for government in dealing with job losses within the retail sector in a period of economic recession driven by global forces. At a national level, for example, the Prime Minister Gordon Brown, pledged support for Woolworths employees over the Christmas period and the Deputy First Minister and Minister for the Economy and Transport, Ieuan Wyn Jones, emphasised the Welsh Assembly Government's disappointment in losing 'a mainstay on our high-streets' (BBC News, 2008; Jones, 2008). To an extent these types of statements reflect the process of reassurance identified by Edelman (1988), they reflect the symbolic value of Woolworths to the British public, and they reflect government's concern in terms of job losses and the decline of the high-street. The policy debates around the closure of Woolworths centred on two key issues; firstly, the need to provide effective support mechanisms for the estimated 27,000 Woolworths employees who would be losing their jobs and, secondly; the need to respond to concerns that the number of empty or vacant shops within town centres and high-streets was rapidly increasing in the face of an extended economic downturn.

7.2 The response of the UK Government and the Welsh Assembly Government to the job losses associated with the closure of Woolworths focused upon existing employment services rather than tailored policy instruments, such as the Taskforce approach adopted in the wake of the closure of the MG Rover plant at Longbridge in 2005 and the job losses announced by Corus in February 2001 (Bailey *et al*, 2008; Fairbrother & Morgan, 2001). Central Government's response was led by Jobcentre Plus, although it is worth noting that other measures, such as the Pension Protection Fund (PPF), provided support for former Woolworths employees. The response of Jobcentre Plus was outlined by the acting Chief Executive of Jobcentre Plus, Mel Groves, in a written answer to parliamentary questions:

Our support for Woolworths' staff began with deployment of our Rapid Response Service (RRS), which meant, for example, that staff in almost all of Woolworths' stores were offered support before they closed. We issued over 8,000 packs to enable people to make claims for benefit, and in many instances provided on-site advice on benefits. Our advice and support on jobsearch has also been available to Woolworths' employees, both in the run up to store closure and afterwards.
(Hansard, 2009)

7.3 The RRS, was established by Jobcentre Plus in April 2002 specifically to deal with organisations facing 'significant redundancies' where existing provision proved insufficient. The service included several key components, such as Skills Transfer Analysis to identify transferable skills and training needs, Job-Focused Training to put in place required training and an Action Fund to address personal barriers to employment or training (Jobcentre Plus, 2009). The response of DWP and its primary delivery agency, Jobcentre Plus, suggests that efforts may have been made to adopt a coordinated multi-level approach, focusing on engaging at the national level with the administrators and tailoring support to local demands and needs (Hansard, 2008).

7.4 The Welsh Assembly Government has been proactive in engaging in employment policy although it has no statutory competence within this policy area (Cole, 2006: 74). For example, in the Welsh context the key programme used to respond to the Woolworths job losses was the Redundancy Action Scheme (ReAct), set up in 2008 by the Welsh Assembly Government in partnership with Careers Wales and Jobcentre Plus. The scheme, partly funded by the European Social Fund, provides a package of measures designed to get redundant workers a new job 'as quickly as possible' (Welsh Assembly Government, 2009). In addition the Welsh Assembly Government organised a series of All-Wales Economic Summits, which brought together business, unions and community representatives and led to the launch of the ProAct pilot scheme in January 2009. Unlike the ReAct scheme, ProAct was designed to provide support for businesses to retain skilled workers facing the threat of redundancy by subsidising training and wages and was clearly tailored for the manufacturing rather than the retail or service sectors.

7.5 The response to the closure of Woolworths in Wales and the UK, can be contrasted with the policies pursued by government in responding to potential job losses in the manufacturing sector. The threat of job losses at MG Rover and Corus, for example, were identified as key policy problems which effectively recast the policy agenda and received substantial resources and political capital. In contrast the response to the closure of Woolworths stores and similar job losses within the retail sector precipitated by the 'credit crunch' centred on expressing sympathy for newly unemployed workers and providing support via existing policy initiatives. These contrasting responses by political elites, although unsurprising, provide a useful way of understanding the key factors which may explain how the policy response to the closure of Woolworths was framed.

7.6 Firstly, although the estimated 27,000 job losses created by the closure of Woolworths, including approximately 22,000 full-time workers, far outweighed those of MG Rover (8,500 job losses at the plant and wider supply chain) and Corus (3,000 job losses), they were distributed across 807 high-street stores and distribution centres in the UK. Therefore the impact of the closures could be perceived as having far less of an impact as the Longbridge plant closure on the West Midlands economy and the Corus closures on the South Wales steel communities. In addition workers within the manufacturing sector have traditionally been able to draw on organised, trade union coordinated campaigns to highlight the threat of job losses and the potential impact on local communities. Therefore the pressure placed on political elites by community and pressure groups was likely to have been far less within the case of Woolworths and the retail sector more generally. However, it could be argued that due to the location of many Woolworths stores in small or medium-sized towns, the redundancies and closures could have a widespread, cumulative negative impact on communities. For example, many of the sixty-one Woolworths stores in Wales were located in small towns in rural or post-industrial areas and therefore were likely to be among the largest retailers and employers on the high-street.

7.7 Secondly, the response of government may have been shaped by the contrasting characters of the manufacturing and retail sectors and their relationship to the wider economy. In contrast to the relatively well-paid, full time, predominantly male employees with a variety of skill levels at MG Rover and Corus, Woolworths had a higher proportion of part-time, lower paid and lower skilled workers who could potentially find work within the wider retail sector (Fairbrother, 2001). In addition maintaining and supporting a competitive manufacturing sector has been identified by the UK government as being 'central to the future success of the British economy' (DBERR & DIUS, 2008) and, in contrast to the retail sector, government has a long history of intervention and support in the manufacturing sector in cases of market failure. These

assumptions were reflected in comments made by Rhodri Morgan in January 2009 in response to a question as to whether stronger powers would allow the Welsh Assembly Government to do more to safeguard jobs and protect town centres:

Proper powers are not the powers of a God that would allow you to say, 'Okay, you can have Woolworths, which started 100 years ago', and, with a snap of the fingers, 'Woolworths will be with us for ever more'. Some retail groups go into long-term decline. Woolworths had been losing market share to Wilkinsons and other hardware producers for years. You cannot have growth in new hardware and general goods stores, like Wilkinsons, without it having an impact on Woolworths. Woolworths did not respond and, as a result, it died. It is very sad, but it is not the Assembly Government's fault; it is Woolworths' management's fault. They were absolutely pathetic, to be honest. Everybody was in love with Woolworths because that was the first shop that you went to as a child. That store group had fantastic brand value and they just frittered it away. That is absolutely pathetic.'
(Assembly Record, 2009)

On the one hand, Morgan's response reflects the symbolic value attached to Woolworths by the public but on the other, it is indicative of the limited options available to government in responding to major job losses in the retail sector in the pre-existing policy context.

7.8 The second issue highlighted by the policy debates around the impact of the closure of Woolworths on communities focused on the potential implications of the 'credit crunch' upon town centres and high-streets. The loss of high profile shops, such as Woolworths, heightened fears that 'the credit crunch' would decimate long established urban and rural high-streets and the increase of vacant or empty shops could undermine these important sites of interaction in which community can often be at its most visible. The Local Government Association (LGA), for example, conducted a survey of local authority leaders in England in February 2009 and 85 per cent stated that economic downturn had led to an increase in empty properties in their town centres. A further 65 per cent stated that these properties had a significant or moderate impact (LGA, 2009). Cllr Margaret Eaton, Chairman of the Local Government Association, argued that empty shops were turning 'clone towns into ghost towns' and 'signal a local economy in decline ...become a hotspot for anti-social behaviour and drag down the feel of an area' (Ibid). The issue of vacant shops was identified as being a feature of many town centres in Wales with Holyhead and Milford Haven being identified as having the highest proportion of empty shops in the UK (Experian, 2009). More specifically the then First Minister, Rhodri Morgan, argued that the closure of Woolworths had a key influence on town centres within some Valleys communities and small towns because it acted as an 'anchor tenant' in less-well off areas (Assembly Record, 2009).

7.9 The LGA proposed a series of reforms, including a cut in VAT on the refurbishment of empty shops, an extension of small business rate relief and new powers to allow councils to take over management of empty shops to provide community services if no new tenant could be found (LGA, 2009). In response to this agenda the UK government introduced a range of measures outlined in *Looking after our town centres*, published in April 2009 (DCLG et al, 2009). The plan included a simplification of processes enabling the temporary use of vacant premises 'which allowed local councils to introduce Local Development Orders (LDOs) without specific reference to policies outlined within Local Development plans (Ibid, 29). Furthermore, local councils and communities were encouraged to explore using empty shops in different ways, such as providing space for local artists, learning centres, job clubs and small retail enterprises (Ibid, 31). These cross-cutting initiatives were supported by a range of departments and were proposed as adding value to policy areas such as community regeneration, culture, learning and skills provision, and community safety. The Culture Secretary, Andy Burnham, for example, argued that by 'transforming otherwise empty town centre premises into hubs for culture and creativity, we can regenerate both the physical space itself and the hope and ambition of all those that have a stake in them' (Ibid, ii). Therefore the vacant spaces of high-street stores that failed to survive the 'credit crunch', such as Woolworths, potentially led to the creation of alternative spaces of community set outside of market relations and away from sites of consumption.

Discussion and Conclusion

8.1 In this paper we have demonstrated that the case of the closure of Woolworths stores, the outpouring of nostalgic responses invoking the imagined community, the branding of a national chain as a local store, and subsequent responses to the potential 'death of the high-street' acts as a significant example of the way in which community, and locality, are imagined, negotiated and invoked both in response to the closure of Woolworths and as an integral part of its business model. We note that the positioning of Woolworths as 'local national brand' is the product of a reflexive relation between localised meanings attributed to the store and the circulation of these meanings as a resource by the company itself and vice versa.

8.2 In identifying and discussing on-line accounts of Woolworths' demise we are not so much concerned with identifying whether or not people's accounts of their use of the store matched their shopping habits. Rather, we have identified the types of categories invoked and mobilised by members of the public in discussing the closure of Woolworths. Respondents in the interviews conducted, via drawing attention to the acutely economic factors which were seen as bringing about the failure of this particular store, were able to justify and rationalise their own (often changed) business models, and characterise the loss of Woolworths as an opportunity. As a contrast to the more grief-ridden, community-orientated narratives of loss, these accounts were predicated on a perceived lack of connection between the store and the local population. In so doing, these accounts undermine calls for state-sponsored financial support of Woolworths as an essential and irreplaceable commercial anchor. Following this observation it is especially notable that the rhetoric of the public statements of politicians invoked similar categories of community, locality and loss despite the reality of the scope of the policy response diverging considerably from these statements. Events such as the closure of Woolworths and the impact of the wider 'credit crunch' on the high-street can provide the stimulus for the creation of 'policy windows' which provide the opportunity for policy innovation and change (Kingdon, 1984). Yet, as discussed above, the extent to which perceived policy problems drive policy change or simply a reframing and manipulation of symbols and political rhetoric remains open to question. Thus, Woolworths the brand finds new meaning as a symbolic device standing for a particular ideal of economy, community, and consumption both within the laments of the general public and within political rhetoric.

8.3 Beyond the closure of Woolworths being representative of the economic downturn more generally, the significance of the case lies in the identification of practices of social construction (of the three orders identified in the paper) in which 'Woolies' is seen to represent a return to something old and something valuable, a symbol of something stable, in a time of organisational crisis. This process reflects a component of wider processes of regeneration in which the hegemonic construction of the project must, necessarily, incorporate particular constructions of the past and the identity of the locality even if the actuality of the regeneration project differs from this particular construction (Smith, 2009). Indeed, similar laments to that which is lost in the process of industrial decline are found in accounts of residents, accompanied by similar concerns for the loss of community within the era of neo-liberal capitalism, counterposed to a time when labour, commerce, and community and locality were more closely related in the industrial era in the UK.

8.4 The economic crisis saw growing concerns around the closures of businesses and rise of empty shops was accompanied by utopian visions of the high-street being reclaimed for uses akin to the early Grecian rendering of the 'good life' (Sennet, 1976). High-streets across Wales and the UK saw temporary art exhibitions in empty shops, new workshop spaces opening up, and even a kitchen staffed by Jamie Oliver and his trained members of the public. At the time the severity of the crisis was unknown and there were predictions that the economic climate would precipitate localised reconfigurations of the way in which the high-street, and associated urban and rural communities, were managed and organised. The vision of a restructured, inclusive, alternative high-street at the centre of communities has not come to fruition. In many instances the market as well as the physical spaces left by the closure of Woolworths and other stores has been filled by the growth of discount stores and 'pound shops' (Experian, 2010). Yet, given the key role attributed to Woolworths stores in smaller rural and urban communities, we argue that the case of Woolworths provides fertile ground for a further consideration of the impact of the economy upon Welsh localities and the stability of community and such cases provide a key substantive focus in the context of devolution when matters of identity and citizenship are contested alongside attempts to position Wales itself as a brand (Housley, Moles and Smith, 2009).

8.5 In addition to the substantive topic, over the course of this paper we have demonstrated the possibility, and contribution, of a multi-dimensional, interdisciplinary, approach to the analysis and extension of a particular case in the context of the credit crunch. We intend this paper to be read as representative of the beginning of a longer and broader project in which the issues raised here in relation to the closure of Woolworths in Wales are explored further in a systematic study of a range of Welsh localities and communities. In a broader sense, we suggest that this form of multi-dimensional approach to the circulation of local knowledge and the construction of community and locality at different scales and within various framings provides a point of access for some of the organisational troubles faced by the contemporary metropolis and its citizens. The tangible 'added-value' of interdisciplinary work of this kind is, we feel, found in combining each contribution in such a way that the whole equals more than the sum of the parts, whilst each part is valued in its own terms. Here we suggest an approach toward social complexity in which the stock sociological dualisms such as 'micro-macro' and 'local-global' are viewed as emergent from a processual model of concerns relating to scale, situated action, and social organisational aspects. In this sense, one can envision a programme of work in which sustained ethnographic work in a number of high-streets is combined with stakeholder interviews, policy analysis, and emerging GIS methodologies in which the changing fortunes of Welsh communities, tied to the changing face of the high-street, is mobilised to empirically document the processes at play in formulations of rupture, resilience, and repair in the devolved territory.

Acknowledgements

This publication is based on research supported by the Wales Institute of Social & Economic Research, Data & Methods (WISERD), which is funded by the UK Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) (grant number: RES-576-25-0021) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW).

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