

# ‘A VERY DELICATE WORLD’:

## **Fishers and Plant Workers Remake Their Lives on Newfoundland’s Bonavista Peninsula After the Cod Moratorium**

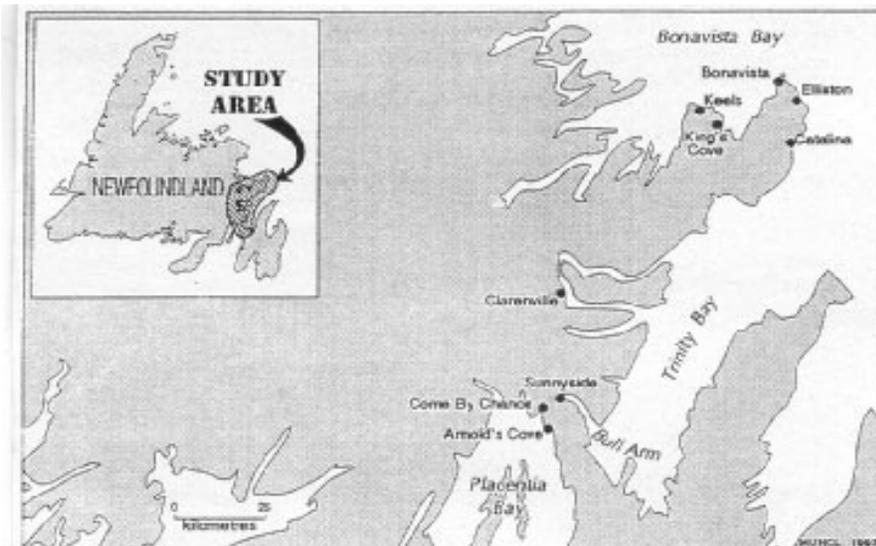
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*Abstract* In 1992, with the cod stocks exhausted in most of the northwest Atlantic, the federal government of Canada declared a moratorium on the fishery. Up to 25,000 rural Newfoundlanders were suddenly without work in a region with minimal economic diversification. For seven years, special state programs provided financial and educational support. In this context, what did people do? How can we understand their actions? I show that the crushing blows of outside forces were followed not by a restructuring of experience in which people drew diversely from what was available in their environment and sustained local life in new forms. I rely on four detailed cases (two men and two women) supplemented by reference to a much larger body of survey and fieldwork data collected in 1994-95. For each person, I review both their work in the fishing industry and what happened after the moratorium prior to interpreting this material sociologically.

### **Introduction**<sup>1</sup>

In 1992, with the cod stocks exhausted in most of the northwest Atlantic, the federal government of Canada declared a moratorium on the fishery. Up to 25,000 rural Newfoundlanders were suddenly without work in a region with minimal economic



diversification. This paper tries to unravel how people remade their lives on the Bonavista Peninsula, an area in northeast Newfoundland that was almost completely dependent on the fishing industry.

In earlier work, I reported on systemic aspects of both the ecological and social crisis on the Bonavista Peninsula (Sinclair 1996; Ommer and Sinclair 1999) as well as a preliminary analysis of people's responses in which the internal divisions that prevented a united collective reaction were examined (Sinclair et al. 1999). Here I argue that the crushing blows of outside forces were followed by a restructuring of life in which people drew from what was available in their environment and by their actions sustained local life in new forms. Thus, the paper attempts to capture the interplay of person and environment, both local and external.

My focus is on individual actors and the strategies they adopt in response to critical events in their environments. It is compatible with Pettersen's (1996) valuable account of coping strategies in households in a north Norwegian fishing region as they responded to depleted stocks. She identified four household strategies: expansion into other fishing activities; diversification of household income sources by greater reliance on women's paid labour; retrenchment and reduced living standards; and withdrawal into reliance on social welfare. Pettersen takes the household as the unit of analysis, whereas I focus on individuals because I am not convinced that the actions of the people I study are part of collective household strategies. However, each person in this paper is married and must take into account the positions and opinions of others in their households. By no means, do I suggest the household focus is irrelevant.

I draw mainly from 4 of 45 detailed life history interviews conducted in 1995, but also refer to our survey of 619 adults in 320 households that was conducted at the same time. The life history interviews included many people employed in service sector occupations (such as teaching, police, store clerks, cleaners, and motel operator), construction and transportation as well as those in the fishing industry. Several had retired prior to the moratorium. For this paper, I wish to focus on those who had been active in the fishing industry and to ensure that both women and men are represented. The two men took part in the fishery, one on a trawler and the other an owner of a mid-sized inshore boat. The two women worked in a large fish plant. These individuals are 'typical' only of limited sectors of the local society, but the compensation is that their stories allow insight into how individuals cope with major change. Although several others might have been included, these cases were especially rich in detail. Names and some inconsequential details have been altered to protect the anonymity of respondents. The cases will be presented with little commentary prior to an analytical discussion. For each person, I review both their work in the fishing industry and what happened after the moratorium to allow a better appreciation their lives changed.

## **The Setting**

The Bonavista Peninsula forms part of the northeast coast of the isolated island of Newfoundland. This is a harsh environment where the Atlantic Ocean pounds the outer coasts, soils are generally thin, the growing season short, and tree cover sparse until the inner part of the land mass is approached. Settlements are scattered around

the coast wherever some shelter might be found from high seas and winter pack ice. Without the fishery, there was little reason for any to dare live in these parts, even if land and seascape are often majestic and beautiful.

Apart from the high probability that some inshore fishers caught local bay stock, 'northern' cod constituted the core of the Bonavista peninsula's fishing industry. Other groundfish species were also important, especially to the deep-sea trawler fleet. There has been considerable debate as to why the cod fishery collapsed (Finlayson 1994; Felt and Locke 1995; Hutchings 1996; Hutchings and Myers 1995; Myers and Cadigan 1995). Historical records show catches of 150,000 to 250,000 metric tons (mt) from about 1850 to 1950 in the areas frequented by northern cod (Hutchings and Myers 1994). With the arrival of European trawlers and factory ships in the 1950s, landings rose to a peak of 810,000 mt in 1968 before declining to 139,000 mt in 1977 when Canada's 200-mile fishery zone was declared. Canadian landings then recovered to 270,000 mt in the mid-1980s, followed by several years of reduced catches. The moratorium was announced after government research scientists acknowledged that they had seriously underestimated fishing mortalities in the 1980s. By 2001 there was still no evidence of significant rebuilding of stocks, although a small cod fishery had been permitted since 1999.



*Cape Bonavista Lighthouse.*

The effect on the Bonavista peninsula was severe. Although some people found employment in alternative fisheries and processing (such as crab), the major plant in the area, which had employed over 1,000 people at times, was shut down. Almost immediately, the federal government introduced the Northern Cod Adjustment and Rehabilitation Program (NCARP) to provide financial support. NCARP was expected to help about 19,000 fishers and plant workers on the Atlantic coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador, but when replaced by The Atlantic Groundfish Strategy (TAGS) in 1994, the total number had risen to 26,569. TAGS included a scheme to purchase licences from fishers and stressed retraining of fishers and plant workers with the

objective of reducing the numbers dependent on the fishery. Income benefits averaged \$305 per week, although women, 36 percent of recipients, averaged only \$260 (Williams 1996:23). In October 1995, 27,854 people in Newfoundland and Labrador were receiving assistance. This number included 11,240 fishers (11.8percent women) and 16,614 plant workers (52.2 percent women). Those deemed most dependent on groundfish could stay on the program longer than those considered less dependent. Planned to run for five years with a budget of \$1.9 billion, TAGS still lacked sufficient resources. Despite protests, the government reduced income support in 1996, cut all funds for retraining, ended its licence buy-back scheme, and brought forward the termination date for the program by one year to May 1998.

The 1996 census shows that residents were much less likely to be in the labour force than in 1991 (Table 1). This is partly because there were more retired people in 1996, some young people had moved away, and others were not looking for work because they had no hope of finding any. That is why unemployment rates for men and women remained similar or even declined. Household incomes dropped sharply in Catalina, the town most dependent on fish plant employment, but held up remarkably well in Bonavista town, where most stores and services are located. Nevertheless, in 1995, close to 90 percent of our interviewees agreed with the statement that, 'This area has experienced serious economic harm as a result of the cod moratorium.' This was often reflected in their personal experiences. Thus 78.4 percent of fishing industry workers and 42.1 percent of those in other occupations reported that they had lost income as a result of the moratorium (Sinclair 1996).

	<b>Bonavista</b>		<b>Catalina</b>	
	1991	1996	1991	1996
Labour force participation - men	63.9	51.1	72.3	54.2
Labour force participation - women	46.5	38.6	58.9	45.2
Unemployment rate - men	52.6	43.5	50.0	51.1
Unemployment rate - women	44.7	39.7	47.2	40.5
Median total income - men	\$17,639	\$14,987	\$19,632	\$15,319
Median total income - women	\$9,362	\$11,760	\$10,373	\$11,161
Median household income	\$28,905	\$28,426	\$32,770	\$24,769
Source: Census of Canada 1996. <a href="http://www.statscan.estat.ca">www.statscan.estat.ca</a>				

*Table 1: Selected Economic Characteristics of Bonavista and Catalina, 1991 and 1996.*

Our 1994 survey identified those of normal labour force age who reported either a current or previous occupation – 9.9 percent were fishers, 26.2 percent worked in fish plants, and 63.9 percent held other occupations. Table 2 compares fishery workers and those with other jobs for the towns of Bonavista and Catalina. In late 1994, the percent employed in the week prior to the interview was extremely low, especially for fishing industry workers. In Catalina, only 20.4 percent were engaged

in some kind of paid work. Most expected to be unemployed in the future and a substantial minority anticipated moving to another area, but few were dissatisfied with the quality of life. In this general situation, I now examine the experience of four local people.

**Joe: Retraining**

In his thirties when interviewed, Joe lived with his common-law wife and daughter. Prior to the moratorium, he worked as a deckhand on a trawler based in the outport where he grew up in. His mother was a housewife until eventually she took employment at the fish plant after Joe (one of her five children) left school. His father moved through a series of manual labour jobs, punctuated by periods of unemployment, with the consequence that money was often scarce. Joe commented that there ‘wasn’t a lot of gravy at times. I seen hard times’. Joe left school when he was 16. Even before that, he had a job unloading fish at the plant, making what he felt was good money (\$150-160 per week) with no apparent need for an education. So he quit to work full-time.

Labour Force Groups (No. of Cases)	Bonavista	Catalina	Chi-Sq. prob.
	% employed in last 7 days		
Adults 16-65	31.4	20.4	.01
Fishery Workers (136)	3.1	0.0	NS
Other Occupations (242)	46.3	31.1	<.05
% who expect to be unemployed in next 5 years			
Adults 16-65	78.8	74.9	NS
Fishery Workers (127)	92.2	82.1	NS
Other Occupations (229)	71.3	69.3	NS
% dissatisfied with life in the area			
Adults 16-65	5.0	9.6	.05
Fishery Workers (135)	0.0	7.0	<.05
Other Occupations (239)	4.2	10.9	NS
% who expect to leave area within 5 years			
Adults 16-65	29.7	39.2	<.05
Fishery Workers (136)	23.4	36.1	NS
Other Occupations (243)	30.6	36.9	NS

*Table 2: Employment Status and Perceptions of Future, Fishery Workers and Those With Other Occupations by Place of Residence.*

I gave up [school] and I was making good money. You know what I mean. I didn’t see the need of an education then, not like I look back at it now. Where I am now, I’m currently doing an ABE [adult basic education] program up to Melrose. And looking at it now, it would’ve been much easier if I’d done this then.

Joe was like most of his friends, who also left school for day-work at the plant. It seems that there was no commitment to saving any money or to steady work. In the mid 1970s, young people assumed that the plant would always be there, needing them when they felt like working. Joe said he always had money in his pocket and would skip work for a week or a 'scattered day' after a period of making good money. Somewhat later, he accepted a lower paying job with the town council rather than be inside on the production line at the fish plant.

Like many young people, Joe, encouraged by some friends, headed for the mainland where he spent six months working on the Canadian National Railroad in Saskatchewan.

A couple of friends I knew were up there working on the tracks. They went away to look for work on the [Great] Lake boats. Never got on that, so they end up getting a job at the tracks. And they said, 'come up, there's lots of work up here.' I was ready to leave, get out of here then anyway, right. Then when I come back home, I was gonna go away again and I decided to make a trip on the draggers to get a bit of money to go away. Probably I should've stayed away from the draggers, I don't know. But when I got there, I got it in my blood and that's what I stayed at.

Joe is one of many return migrants in this area (about one-third of the survey sample). His experience is common. A young man wants to see what living is like elsewhere and gets the word from friends that work is available. After trying that for a while, he returns home, often unsure whether to stay or not. Joe intended to leave, but took a temporary job on a trawler that turned out to be long-term.

On the same trawler for 12 years, Joe worked as deck hand, icer and cook at different times despite hating it.

I never did like it. I hated it, hated it all my life while I was at it. But it was always something that made me go back there. Every trip would be the last trip until the phone rang and said my boat is leaving again. Then I'd be back aboard of her again.

The pattern was 10 days at sea and two ashore. He would make three to five thousand dollar over three or four trips, then stay ashore for one or more trips until it was necessary to put to sea again. It appears that there was no problem for an established fisher like Joe to take a trip off: 'You basically tell them on the way in, tell the skipper 'I'm taking off this trip,' and he'd mark it on the crew list... They'd get a reliever to go in my place and the next trip they call me again.'

Joe was asked about subsistence production once he was established in his own home. Did he cut his own heating fuel? Given the income that would be lost from fishing, it was more economical to buy wood than to take time off to get it himself. This would only make sense on the rare occasions that the boat was tied up. In general, Joe acknowledged that people were much less self-sufficient than in the past because they could buy what they required. Plant workers might still cut their own wood, but other things died out. For example, bread was purchased rather than baked at home. Home baking was thought to be coming back somewhat as well as

growing vegetables, but not so much as before the plant was operating. Joe did not consider that returning to such work was reasonable, except in desperation.

I don't think people are into gardens and raising vegetables. You still see, you'll always see that, I think. You'll always see a scattered person with their potatoes in and their gardens in, raisin' a few chickens and stuff like that. But I don't think you'll ever see it back to where everybody's gonna have a garden in their yard, unless things get awful rough.

Soon after going to sea, Joe and Martha moved in together, living in a trailer located near her parents. The arrival of their daughter had a big impact. Joe claimed to do his share of bathing, feeding and changing when he was home. For a period both were employed at FPI (Fishery Products International) and they had to hire a babysitter. Indeed, almost everyone who wanted to earn was employed, but the moratorium changed the situation dramatically. Hardly anyone could find a job. Joe was asked how he thought this was affecting people:



*New Bonaventure, an outport on Trinity Bay which is suffering from out-migration.*

I think in a lot of cases....it's tearing families apart, I think, in a lot of cases. There's a strain on my family, just the sheer fact that, I mean, I was fishing on the draggers before, basically, as soon as me and Martha become involved with each other. And I was fishing right on up through until '92. And I fished in '93 'cause I went at the shrimp racket. And, ah, I'd be home 10 days or take a trip off every once in a while, and home and gone, home and gone, like that, right. And all of a sudden, now I'm home all the time. Even (daughter) is having a hard time coping with me being around. And I'm having an even harder time coping with being around. I mean, I was never very contrary, but it's starting, you know. I mean, now things agitate me more. I find myself balling at young (daughter) for basically no reason... It's just a fact of being home. I was so used

to coming home and after things got on my nerves so much around, I'd just jump aboard the boat and go on. Even...it was only for 10 days. I mean it was 10 days, you know. That's long enough to be gone to clear yourself and mind and everything and come back in. You were only home for 48 hours.

Now that he had time to fill, Joe enrolled in the adult basic education program to provide him with a diploma equivalent to high school graduation. Not without significance is the fact that this kept him on extended unemployment payments rather than TAGS with the consequence that his monthly income was about \$370 higher. At the time of the interview he was on the Burin Peninsula doing a marine cooking course: 'Yeah, well I'm doing this 10 week marine cooking course. See I cooked on the boats before, but I had no papers. So, I mean, if the oil business starts up, they're gonna want cooks.' Joe saw more prospects in being a cook than a deck hand, but still expected to go back to sea. Certification as a marine cook was essential, he understood, if he was to have any chance of being employed by the oil industry where future prospects appeared better.

On the retraining program in general, Joe supported some aspects and criticized others. He appeared incensed that it took until 1995 for anyone to consult with local people to discover their needs and opinions.

...I told them, 'Here you are now. This is 1995. I mean we've been in this state since 1992. Millions and millions, probably billions of dollars gone, and you're finally coming down asking the people that know what's wrong what needs to be done and where it should go. You're finally coming and asking us.' And the only reason why they're coming and asking us is because they're running out of money and trying to find out where they can cut and where they can't cut, right. What was the point of them sitting down and letting someone in Ottawa devise our fate for us? 'Well, they need this.' How did they know what we need? I mean I never did doubt the education part of it; it was wonderful. I thought it was great, you know. But, and then...you know, they shouldn't have shoved it down your throat.

Yet, some young people could not see the need for improving their education and Joe almost believed they ought to be compelled to attend. At least, he would support counsellors who would try to convince them of the value of education. As for the older people, he still saw real gains:

If you're 55 years old or 60 years old and you don't know how to read and write, wouldn't that be a great accomplishment before you die, to know that you could sit down and read the newspaper? Or write your... You know, I sailed with a guy. I used to have to sign his cheque. I sign his cheque and he marks an 'X' next to my name, you know. And he gone in and he'd change his cheque, and if they, if his cheque was for \$1,000 and they give him back change for a hundred, he wouldn't...he just take that and walk away happy. He didn't know. He only knew what time it was when he was hungry. I mean, he didn't know what time it was on the clock. He didn't know the numbers. He just knowed that he was starting to get hungry and he basically knew it was meal time.



*Houses on the rocks at wind-swept Maberly*

In 1993, Joe earned about \$40,000. This fell dramatically in 1994 to \$15,000. However, Martha brought in \$10,000 to the household. Joe adjusted reasonably well and refused to worry.

I'm surprised how easy... I can't say it was easy, because Martha, she's getting grey and, I mean, I still got my hair colour! I don't worry. Sometimes I think she gets pissed off with it 'cause I don't worry. And I'm not gonna worry. I mean it's no good to worry. It's pointless to worry.

Financially, Joe and his family were not in terrible condition. They still could go out on Saturday night, but were more likely to stay home than in the past. They bought a used car rather than a new one. Groceries were more expensive with him home all the time. Joe saw himself in a fortunate position compared with many others. Were they feeling the strain?

Oh God yes, definitely. Definitely. I mean you got a man that worked all his life, that was used to his children coming and saying, 'I want this and I want that.' 'We'll get it Friday,' or 'Go on up and get it.' And now they just, they just can't. Kids don't understand that they can't have a \$250 pair of sneakers on their feet or designer jeans or whatever you want to call it. I mean I'm fortunate. I got one child. You know I'm pretty fortunate in that department. But I mean, what would a man do at my age with five or six kids? Gee, I shivers at

the thought of that and I mean, if I had another kid come along now, I mean, I shivers at the thought of it.

Migration has become a burning issue in rural areas. Did Joe consider moving away? Yes, but not permanently as he could not face the prospect of leaving his house and saw no chance to rent it. 'I would go if it meant work, but I don't think I'd leave my home. I don't think I would leave my home un-lived in and I don't think I could rent it.' It appears he would consider leaving himself for work, but with his family remaining at home.

Like so many others, Joe likes life in this area with the exception of the employment situation. Otherwise, his biggest worry was whether his daughter was paying attention when biking downhill. He says he is content but finds it hard to specify what keeps him there. He does recognize that he would have to find a high paying job or one in which his expenses were low because he would have to keep his family at home as well as support himself while away. This is one reason that jobs on boats that plied the Great Lakes of central Canada and the U.S. were attractive. In fact, 'I was thinking about going up and trying the Lakes when I finish this program I'm into down there (Burin Peninsula). But see, like I say, so long as I stays in the ABE (Adult Basic Education) program I'm good for my UIC (unemployment benefits) for a nice while.' Although Joe says he would rather be employed, clearly his choice is to remain at home receiving unemployment benefits rather than leave by himself.

### **Shirley: Towards Self-Employment<sup>2</sup>**

Shirley was in her forties, living with her common-law partner, his daughter (who has just finished high school) and his invalid mother at the time of the interview. Shirley's two children had already left home. Two years after the moratorium, she moved to her partner's home in a sheltered cove, but kept her house near the fish plant. Her son was staying in it in 1995.

Shirley was raised by her aunt because she did not want to move with her mother when she remarried. Although the outsider in this family by birth, Shirley says she was treated with special favour when it came to discipline. When only fourteen, Shirley moved to St. John's where she became a kitchen helper in the hospital. No one ever found out her real age during the two years she worked there. She and a friend earned about \$200 every two weeks after room and board were taken out and thought they were rich. However, Shirley became homesick and returned.

When she was nineteen, Shirley married and settled near the FPI plant. After ten years of being a full-time housewife, and her son by then in kindergarten, she obtained work at the plant, first as a cleaner and later as a packer. Shirley enjoyed her work, especially the people:

One of the things I miss about it is the people. I miss 'em right. You try to keep in touch with them, but you can't. I don't know. Everybody's going to school at different schools. Like there was close friends that I had there. I talk to them a scattered time, but I don't get to see 'em like I did.

Work was a place to socialize. 'We be always laughing and carrying on, joking. I enjoyed that.' Time did not drag, and she had no preference for the day or night shift, although Monday nights were tough. 'Monday nights is the hardest because you're on the go all weekend. You got up early Monday morning most likely. Then you were on the go all day.'

Fairly soon after going to work, Shirley's marriage ended when her husband left. As a single parent, she was anxious to get all the work she could at the plant. Stormy days were a great help because she lived right beside the plant and got 12 or 14 hours when others had to stay home because snow made the roads impassable:

It was more money for me...well, I needed it. I was a single parent at that time. So I needed all the hours I could get. Even the years that we were laid off, the last few years, the work and everything was slow, I never stayed home. I just went in casual then. Every day, every time my shift came around I went in as casual. I didn't lose any time. The last five years I was there I didn't even take any holidays. I couldn't really afford to.

After the plant closed, her income was cut roughly in half. This made it more difficult to provide support for her daughter at university. She would have gone back to the plant even if the money were little more than what TAGS paid her.

While at FPI, Shirley lived close to the plant, which made her situation easier than it might have been, given that she had no driver's licence. Indeed, she still can find no time to get one:



*Traditional buildings near Bonavista*

I'm trying to get it now but I can't get a chance to get at it. Anyone says they're bored on moratorium, I don't know. I wish there was more hours in the day for all I'm at now. 'Cause when you were working, you had your eight and nine hours, and you came home and whatever housework you had to do, you did it. There was no such thing putting it off until tomorrow. It had to be done. I even used to come home dinner times and whatever had to be done I'd do it, rather than let it pile up on me.

There seems to have been little free time in her life for socializing after the moratorium. 'Probably a scattered Saturday night we go out. Probably we go to someone's house or they come in. But no, I never had a lot of spare time....But I'd rather be like this (busy).'

Many of her friends from the plant reported that they were bored, 'in a rut'. It seems that weekends were more fun when people were employed because they would spend more time at the cabin where they would relax and 'go trouting'. In the forthcoming summer, Shirley expected spend much more time at the cabin. Walking around the point, socializing with neighbours who played musical instruments, and berry picking were her favourite activities at the cabin. 'We'd like to be going up right now, but we just haven't got the time.' In the area around their cabin, Shirley picked berries (partridge berries, blueberries, raspberries, cranberries and strawberries) and then made jam, a common practice in the area. She tried to sell the jam, but there was hardly any market for it. So they gave most that was not kept for home use to relatives.

Shirley was so busy partly because she went to school three days a week. She studied small business management and marketing through TAGS and was taking a separate course on sewing and dressmaking by correspondence. At the same time she was still working on up-grading her basic education. Shirley could not find time to do everything.

I haven't touched the two courses from [the University of] Guelph...I've looked through it and got it figured and now I got to get a day that I can sit down and...but I only got it come next week and I just never had the time. Maybe if (partner's) mother wasn't here, I might've been able to get at it. But you need time when there's no one around.

Shirley and her partner played darts twice a week and another day they might visit or have friends over to play cards. Add to that visiting an ill relative and it was hardly possible to relax at home, even on the weekends: 'I can't remember the last time we stayed home a night. Sunday night we stayed home... and about eight o'clock two friends of ours came over to play cards.'

As to future employment, Shirley had a vision of a working a farm and craft shop with her partner, but returning to the plant was what she preferred:

Because if the plant don't open and we get our money cut, well we're gonna have to do something. And I really don't want to move away but it might have to come to that. But see, the opportunity is there to get something out of it, and that's the only thing I could think of that would work because...it's some-

thing you can do yourself rather than have to go to someone to get hired. You know, you got to have experience.

Moving would be preferred to going on welfare, but she had no place in mind and had never been off the island. She had no clear sense of what the future held for people like her between 40 and 50. 'I even hate to think about what's going to happen, what we're gonna have to do.' However, she is less despondent than others at the training programs:

Ah, sometimes over to school everybody's talking and I just has to get up and go on 'cause it's so depressing. Everybody's fed up with everything. Like a lot of people that's in school don't really want to be there, just to keep their TAGS. And, they're not interested and they're grumbling because they got to be there...

Shirley would have gone to school even without the requirement that she go to keep her TAGS income:

I think I would have went anyway. Well I think I still would have took a course even if I didn't have to. That sewing one for instance, I mean I didn't have to take that. If I can get through that one, there's a lot of courses you can take on your own through them. So maybe there's something else I can take and...like sewing. It's not going to hurt me. And the managing and marketing one if I never do nothing with it, it's not gonna hurt.

Shirley appreciated the fishery more when it was gone and was sceptical about it coming back – hence her commitment to study and set up her own business.

### **Janet: Anything to Stay**

Once a plant worker, Janet was in her thirties and looking for regular employment when interviewed, anything that would make it possible to stay rather than move. She lived with her common-law husband and daughter. Her personal income was about \$10,000 per annum from TAGS. While growing up her dad worked on boats on the Great Lakes for most of the year, while her mother stayed home with her eight children before taking a service job. Her family was moderately well off by the standards of the area. Janet left school at sixteen to work at the fish plant. By twenty-one she had moved in with her current partner. Through night school she up-graded her education and also took a course in 'beauty culture' after being laid off at the plant in the 1980s, but she could find no work locally in this occupation and returned again to the plant as a casual worker when her baby was six months old. Social connections made at the plant were important to her, both on the job and outside of work.

As a casual worker, Janet was fortunate to have worked enough weeks to qualify for income assistance:

You had to have six stamps in one year – I'm not quite sure which year it was, and ten stamps in the year after. And I had managed, the year after I had

eleven stamps but the year before this was the start that you had to have six. I made it with six and I got my other four up to the Fish Port lounge [bar].

Nevertheless, the joint income of herself and her partner, who had worked as a trawlerman, was greatly reduced. They had to make 'big adjustments' in their spending because they could no longer get just what they wanted when they felt like it. At the time of the interview Janet was worried that she might be dropped from the program and lose her \$10,000 income from that source.

Filling time did not seem to be difficult. Janet was especially involved in voluntary activities connected with her daughter – Brownies (including fund-raising and program planning), figure skating and the parent-teacher association.

I likes being involved with the Brownies. I likes working with kids. Yeah, I enjoy it but I don't like fundraising. ...And (daughter) is involved with figure skating so she got me killed the year with fundraising. But it's really too much as far as I'm concerned. Then she got school, it's always something, then they got book orders and that kind of thing. There's always something to take that extra money now.

In addition, she played softball in the summer, as she had for many years. Janet also took a series of short six week courses, including one on using computers.

In the future Janet hoped to be employed once again. Her preference was to work in early childhood education, but she could not move to St. John's where the course for this occupation was offered. To move there without selling their home appeared impossible. Her fallback was to try office administration.

We wouldn't be able...we wouldn't survive. And to rent my house, I mean we're paying \$500 mortgage, roughly \$500 and who's going to pay rent of \$500 a month. Nobody. So I'd have to rent it for probably \$350 and the other \$150, it's impossible. But I really don't want to move to St. John's, I don't want (daughter) moving. I prefer her to grow up around here.

She had applied for an office administration course in the Fall and hoped meantime to be taken on at a nearby crab plant for a few weeks.

I'm hoping I'll get up to the plant and in September I get accepted for this office administration. And time the plant rolls around again in the summer to open, I'll be finished in April, May. That way, I won't lose seniority. Well, it's not seniority because they got no union or nothing, but still, your name is on the list... So I'm hoping it'll work out that way.

### **Gord: Expansion and Diversification**

About 40 years old, married with two children, Gord remained successful as a fisher despite the loss of cod. He might have chosen a different career because he graduated from school with a high average, but did not go on to university as expected.

Although Gord's father owned a service establishment, Gord worked at the fishery from time to time, along with other jobs, including several seasons on Great Lakes vessels, before returning to settle into the fishery. In his late twenties, Gord ended his seasonal migration because his daughter was two years old and 'she didn't know me when I came home. So... I said to hell with it.' He got into the fishery seriously in the 1980s by borrowing through the Fisheries Loan Board to purchase a 45 foot longliner. He fished cod, turbot and flounder from Labrador to the southern Grand Banks along with crab.

It was not long until the fishery was devastated, which Gord blamed largely on the newer technologies with which he himself fished – gillnets and trawls.

It was technology that caused this to happen. This would have never happened, if they left this to the traditional fisherman, the handliner. He could only fish for four or five months a year. So once the cod went offshore to spawn it would never have been touched. People... wanted more fish, more work. So they came up with new technologies. They came up with gill nets and they came up with otter trawls ... you give three or four of those big trawlers a licence and they can go out and destroy any species in a matter of a year, you know.

How could this impact occur? Regarding the otter trawl technology. 'They drags up bags of it and if it's not the right size, they just lets it go again. And probably a 100,000 pounds of fish floats off and dies. And it's just destructive. For the one fish that they're keeping, they're probably killing seven or eight.' Nor did gill nets escape his scorn.

Same with the gill net. You get a gill net with a bit of 'time' on it (i.e., a net that has been in the water for several days), and we calls it dirt – we picks out the dirt... It's old fish that's too soft to sell, or the catfish got chewed up, or the crabs got it picked at. And you're picking up one fish and throwing away three or four. So they got the quotas allocated for the amount of fish that you're keeping, but actually you're destroying a much bigger amount.

When the cod fishery was closed, Gord attempted in vain to have his interest payments reduced and ended up losing the boat in a forced sale that realized only the amount of a single year's interest payment. An arrangement with the bank wrote off most of his remaining personal debt and soon Gord had another 45-foot vessel that he was able to purchase following a successful season fishing for crab off Labrador as skipper for a local boat owner, who had no experience in the fishery.

The fishing industry was not dead, but it was different and smaller scale. These changes since the cod moratorium had varied implications according to whether the former cod fishers could access the crab fishery or whether they had to depend mainly on state support programs. How did Gord respond? Crab kept him going, though the season was short, but fishing off Labrador in the summer and sea urchins in the winter permitted almost year round employment and a good living.

We still got this feeling that we're going to be able to make a living, you know. We've been doing well with the crab now and – like myself, I'm into other

kinds of things: I fishes in Labrador now over the summer, and I'm into the sea urchins in the winter, and between it all I'm going to scrape a living out of the sea still. I'm hoping to get into aquaculture as well down the road. I mean, I'm going to stay with this, you know, because I'm making a good living – I'm making as good a living as ever I made, but it's only because the price of crab is up, you know. I'm realistic. I know it's not going to stay there. I'm going to have to be scraping.

Adversity seemed to make Gord try new ideas, like fishing sea urchins in local waters and even off Labrador where he had heard that urchins were larger and more abundant. Not expecting the crab to last indefinitely, aquaculture was part of his plan as well. Planning ahead was essential:

This is the time now we got to get in to, we got the chance. I got the money, to get into other things, you know. But the people that sits back on their haunches now and thinks the crab is going to provide for them the rest of their life they're going to be left out. But people.. I'm trying to look out for my own crowd too and we're getting into other species and things - other areas, and hopefully we'll be able to... We're going down. I'm going down for two weeks now in Labrador looking for sea urchins. I got the crowd that fishes sea urchins up here with me, and I got a boat down there I'm going to use. I'm going to spend two weeks down there. That might open up a door for us too.

Sea urchin work was only possible because he and his crew trained as divers through TAGS. Gord himself took a fourteen month course and received his commercial licence. In this regard, the government support program worked well.

I never would have had the time or the money to go at it, you know. It wasn't a waste of money with regards to meself. I'm going to make a living – well, it won't be a full living for me but it's going to be part of my living. Instead of doing nothing now from, say, the end of September until March or April we'll be at that you know. And I'll be using the gear that I got – the ropes and the boat and everything that we got. So the infrastructure is there; I don't have to go out and buy all new stuff.

Diving in the winter in the icy waters of the region requires strength and tenacity. As Gord said:

It's rough, but we're suited to it. The same kind of people that's suited for fishing is suited for that, you know. Tough and... We be's out there strip naked on a beach with a strong north east wind in the middle of the winter. If you gets wet, you got to take all your gear off and then you dries yourself off and you puts on dry gear, and you runs around the beach for a while... Then we'll light a fire and boil the kettle and then we'll strip it all off and put on diving gear and go on again then. And we're pretty well suited for that kind of stuff; we knows the water anyway, it's just the diving aspect of it to factor into it.

Thus the sea urchin fishery combined older knowledge and gear with new training and a new product.

Gord seemed confident of his own capacity to make a living, but was less optimistic for others and for the area as a whole, despite high crab landings. 'What's here is pretty well taken up, you know. You're not going to get a berth on a crab boat, a young fellow coming up, unless your brother owns a boat or something.' Some would stay; some would leave:

I don't know who's going to stay and who's going to go, but... I got poor hopes for Fish Port – to be quite honest... The crab is keeping it alive now with the price and things, but it's only for one little thing to happen or... another fishery somewhere in another part of the world to come on stream, or Alaska [pollock] to come back, or... somebody gets some bad crab somewhere and a few people get food poisoning... anything at all, you know. It's a very delicate world.

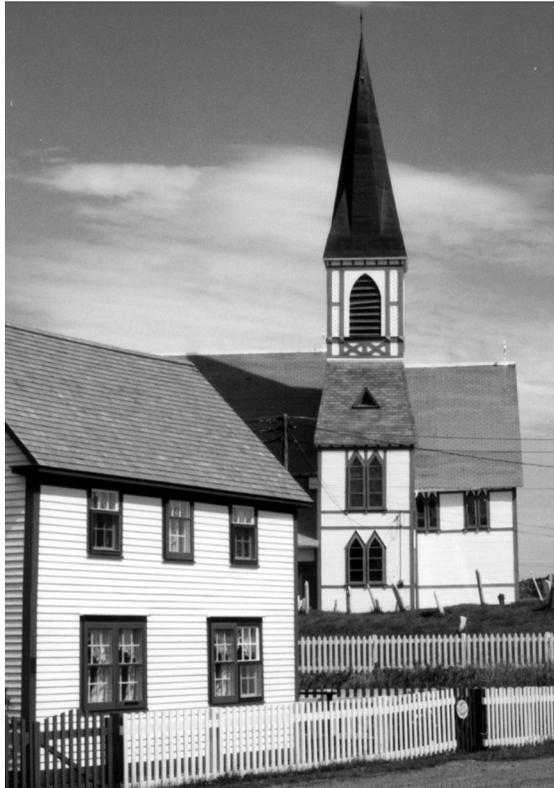
## **Discussion**

Everyone sits at the end of a chain of contextual events, contextual in the sense that they constitute the environment of each person's actions. If social power is understood as inherent in all social relationships and contained in actors' strategies (e.g. Flyvbjerg 2001:117-23), it is paradoxical that individuals appear both as powerless and as controlling agents, depending on our focus. Individuals in these Newfoundland outports are powerless in the sense that they contributed not at all, or in a small way, to the events that led to the moratorium. Nor did they control the costs of living, local labour market conditions, and government policies that both constrained and enabled their actions, as Giddens (1979) might put it. At the same time, they selected courses of action, exhibited their agency and contributed to the restructuring of social life.

On the side of constraint, the fishers and plant workers faced the decline and collapse of groundfish with subsequent loss of employment and reduced income. The local labour market was flooded with far more workers than could be absorbed quickly. Driving for an hour each way on a daily basis would not have helped because no regional businesses even approached the fish plants in scale and there was no immediate prospect of diversification. With the fishery in decline, the service sector was also likely to contract. In any event, the only positions for which displaced fishers and plant workers could qualify were low paid, unskilled jobs such as cleaning, serving as cashiers or attending gas pumps. The state's social security net provided financial support to a degree and a number of retraining schemes were soon operating, but with no obvious link to the local labour market.

What people do in these circumstances is obviously conditioned by the context, but that context is open to interpretation and a variety of actions. Recently, Bauman (2001:7-8) even suggests that the boundary between background and action (or agency and structure) is mobile and contested, even that what serves as a barrier or constraint depends on people believing that it is so – or not. Perhaps in some circumstances, the influence of definition may be observed, but I would not go so far in interpreting the experiences I have reported here. Background is a mixture

of factors that are common to all (the moratorium, the local labour market) and those that are person specific (their biographies and social relationships). These contextual meanings must be absorbed and sometimes explicitly interpreted, but people can only act in terms of which resources they can draw upon and which possibilities their cultural experience allows them to see as open for them. The people I have presented do not engage in radical social action; they do not challenge the boundaries of constraint. This is not to deny 'an open-ended, contingent relation between contexts and actions and interpretations' (Flyvbjerg 2001:43). However, they act within their power (the resources they control) and within their vision of what life can offer them.



*Trinity, a fishing village turns to tourism*

I now examine the strategies employed, but first consider a course of action not yet taken by any. Many people in the survey considered migrating to some other area, but none of the four studied here intended to move permanently, although Joe thought he might have to go away for some time himself. Gord was confident of making a living with only seasonal absences, as in the past. Janet was unwilling to contemplate leaving and Shirley saw it as a last resort. Some local people did leave and others expected that they would do so. Evidently, even the collapse of the core economic activity of the area was not a structural condition that forced a common response. It was countered by other structural characteristics, the most important being family ties, state income support, and the remaining opportunities in the local economy, both formal and informal. Others, less attached to the local area or more attracted by the different opportunities of St. John's and the mainland, might reasonably have made different choices.

How was staying possible for these people? Pettersen (1996) identified a household strategy<sup>3</sup> of expansion of fishing activities in response to the crisis. Gord's strategy was to expand within fishing. His wife was not employed and his utilization of TAGS programs to rebound from the loss of his boat by entering new fisheries fits her model. Gord became one of Newfoundland's successful crab fishers and also diversified into sea urchins with plans to enter aquaculture. He earned a living as a small entrepreneur before the fisheries crisis and continued afterwards with greater

success by taking advantage of what was possible.

Pettersen (1996) considers that retrenchment characterized those households that could not compensate for lost fishing income and had to reduce patterns of consumption. Janet, Joe, and Shirley were all part of households that had to retrench in this sense. In Shirley's case, it involved more attention to subsistence production from the farm she shared with her partner and the lands around their cabin. However, as individuals they were following strategies so that, ideally, retrenchment would be temporary. All were taking courses that might open new employment opportunities (marine cooking, office administration) or self-employment (Shirley's craft store). Shirley, anxious about the fragility of her future would immediately return to the plant if that were possible.

The moratorium inevitably meant that people had to use their time differently. Shirley and Janet were both fully occupied with courses, voluntary activities and children. They did not become bored with idleness, partly because they took on new activities, partly because they had been excessively burdened by double duties as employed workers and homemakers prior to 1992. Gord had changed his work patterns but was as active as ever. Joe was in a different situation. He was not accustomed to spending long periods at home and was concerned to find that he was losing his temper easily.

It is evident that many people felt forced to take education or training programs that they considered unnecessary or inappropriate for them. They enrolled only because they needed the TAGS money and had no alternatives. The subjects in this paper were more positive. Janet had been working to upgrade her education even before the moratorium and was looking to a new career in office administration. This was the best choice she could make, given the locally available resources and her priority of remaining in the area rather than move to St. John's. Shirley would have taken courses even without pressure from TAGS; she was trying to use the program as a resource to help her new business succeed. Joe determined that his best chance for the future was to retrain as a cook. He also valued education in general, which is evident from his support for basic education, even for those with no plans other than retirement. Gord took advantage of the moratorium program to diversify his knowledge and skill so that he could reasonably plan to make a good living by building on what he possessed (the infrastructure and fishing knowledge). He was optimistic but aware that he lived in 'a very delicate world'.

What each of these people could do was influenced by their household relationships as well as the broader social context. Thus Joe was relatively unstressed and able to leave home for weeks to complete a course because he had a spouse who accepted this situation and was accustomed to being alone. Had he four children rather than one at home, Joe's situation might have appeared more stressful or even hopeless to him. He might have acted differently. Gord had one young daughter and a spouse who accepted a traditional division of labour that released him to focus on his entrepreneurial plans. Shirley's own children were adults and to that extent she was able to spend time on courses and did not have to be concerned about supporting them. However, she had chosen to live with a new partner who was also struggling to build a business and his personal relationships (daughter and mother) had to be considered by Shirley.

The outcome of the various actions of the people of the area (and also of

those responsible for what in this situation are external constraints) is the restructuring of social life, an on-going process. I have tried to show how four people contributed to restructuring Bonavista. In some small measure, they made a difference in the local social system. As Giddens (1979:70) claimed: 'every process of action is a production of something new, a fresh start; but at the same time all action exists in continuity with the past, which supplies the means of its initiation...' Hopefully, the cases of Shirley and Janet, Gord and Joe provide some insight into how ordinary people remake society through their choices and daily activities.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The data for this paper were gathered as part of 'Sustainability in a Changing Cold Ocean Coastal Environment' which was directed by Rosemary Ommer and funded by Environment Canada through 'the Green Plan' administered by the Canadian academic research councils for social sciences and humanities, natural sciences, and health – SSHRCC, NSERC and MRC. Thanks to Lynn Downton, Theresa Heath and Heather Squires, who as research assistants, collected much of the data.

<sup>2</sup> Shirley is also discussed in Sinclair (2001).

<sup>3</sup> In this small group of subjects, only examples of expansion and retrenchment are evident. Other cases could have been selected that fit her categories of diversification and withdrawal.

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