
Interview with Adrian Sinfield

Part 1: on his involvement in the project

If you could just talk first in your own words from the beginning, how you got involved in Poverty in the UK?

Right, okay! I was doing a postgraduate diploma in social administration at LSE, and Peter Townsend was my supervisor. And I was extremely lucky, and worked with him, and was fortunate getting a distinction at the end of the course, and they invited me to stay on and do a piece of work with Peter and Brian. And I don't know how much they'd got, but they'd got some money from I think a research endowment fund of LSE, which they were paid £825 a year, which was real bonus. But the first month for some reason or other it went up to £850, it was such a tremendous increase! But what I was employed to do at that time was to look at what the impact was of the increased unemployment that had been the previous winter.

So I went off to find an area of relatively high unemployment, and hesitated between doing research around Billingham and Teesside or North Shields, which is the working class end of Tynemouth County Borough, now North Tyneside, on the north side of the Tyne. Everybody assumes I've done South Shields because South Shields is where the boat came in, and everybody knew about that, but this was, I interviewed 92 unemployed men in North Shields and wrote that up in the 12 months between July '63 and '64. And I then went off to the United States for a year to do the same thing. But before I went I'd got an assistant lectureship at the University of Essex, because Peter had just been appointed Professor of Sociology there, and I was interviewed and was successful.

So I knew when I went off to Syracuse upstate New York that I'd be coming back. And during those two months in Syracuse where I was interviewing unemployed men, in fact supported by my wife who'd done some minor work, assistant work on the North Shields study, the poverty study got underway. And when I came back there was John Veit-Wilson looking at disabled families, Hilary Land at large families, and my piece of work on the unemployed was treated as one of the pilots. Because it had all been done, in a sense it was there. And although the only thing that was published, well, there was one in the States which compared

the British and American experience of being out of work in Syracuse and Shields, but the British one, the only thing sadly that was published was a chapter in *The Concept of Poverty*, published in 1970, edited by Peter Townsend, and there's a chapter there on unemployment in North Shields.

And I wrote a 12 chapter report in the end which was, stupidly I took more and more time, because I came back to a full teaching load in the New University of Essex, and I hadn't got a sociology qualification and I unfortunately got caught up much more on that and having a new family and work there. And I played a sort of marginal role I think on the poverty project. I took part in a number of meetings with John Veit-Wilson, Hilary Land, Peter, Brian Abel-Smith, and then Brian of course went off to the Department of Health and Social Security with Barbara Castle, and he left. And I was in a sense one of two, probably the main of the two teaching social policy at Essex with Peter, and Peter was carrying an enormous load because Brian had had to step away from his part.

At the time when the LSE computer, I mean you probably know all this, the LSE computer was working on the data and for 18 months there was enormous problems with converting material that could be read by the LSE computer to material that could be read by the Essex one. And the money ran out, as I understand, and the poverty project, Peter, I don't know how he kept going on this, he started producing chapter after chapter, some of which I'd looked at and some of which I made a few comments on, and I'd got a very fulsome note in *The Concept of Poverty*, in the eventual (?) *Poverty* book. But the amount of time I spent with the research team then was somewhat limited.

I took part in a number of the conferences, like the one that led to *The Concept of Poverty*, and various others, and I'll try to help, but I think I really could have done much more, and I think also the sort of comments I was making then were so finicky, whereas I didn't grasp what the overall conception was. And so in a sense I think I felt that I was perhaps helping on the labour market chapters, and the splendid work Peter did on poverty in work and deprivation in work, one of those chapters that hasn't been paid much attention to, but I'm not sure that I paid the full tribute. People like Dennis Marsden really played a key role in the research.

So do you feel like some of the people that were on the pilot then, there wasn't a sort of continuity then onto the main survey?

Well, sadly John Veit-Wilson didn't continue, and his research, I don't think he and Peter quite agreed on the way in which, the arrangements and so John got a job in Newcastle and left Dennis and moved onto the staff at Essex, but continued to play a very important part doing a lot of the qualitative interviewing, as I recall it, and helping with the analysis. And then Alan Walker was someone who played a crucial role coming in as a research officer supporting Peter.

All right, okay. So I'm just going to go through the relevant questions here. So were you involved in the building of the team ethos during the main survey in terms of how the research questions were kind of interpreted and kind of the quality of the data that was expected and all that kind of thing, like the general ethos?

I made a very limited contribution to helping to design the questionnaire, partly using the work that I developed for interviewing people unemployed in Shields, but I'm not sure that I made as much as I could have done. I did take part in a number of discussions on that, but I had much less involvement with the data that came back. I looked at drafts of sort of the chapters and discussed them a number of times, and some of the issues that came up, we had meetings and that, if I wasn't lecturing or teaching I took part. But I was outside it and it was the core team or Marie Brown, Sheila Benson and people like this who were doing the work. And I'm trying to remember at what point it shifted from Skepper House to Edinburgh. But there was an enormous amount of work on the computer trying to shift the data.

Yeah, Essex, wasn't it, to Essex, was it?

Yes.

Yes. So what kind of issues were you discussing in the meetings then, can you remember?

Probably the most efficient way of collecting data, and I was one of the people who was very concerned to get labour market data that wasn't just contemporary

what are you doing now, but what the experience had been and what sort of work career they'd had. And this I felt was very important in trying to build a picture over time.

And was there any kind of arrangements for debriefing you when you were involved in the research work?

Well I suppose I wasn't in that sense. I didn't do any of the interviews. I heard some of the accounts and perhaps I'd listen to some of the discussions about, how usefully I contributed on that, I'm not sure.

Do you feel that your pilot work was influential in developing the Poverty in the UK survey?

Well certainly I didn't think it was ignored; I mean people were nice about it. I had the sense of being part of the whole thing, but there isn't a thing that I feel yes I got that in or.

Yeah, because it was more of a group thinking process.

I felt so, yes.

Part 2: on researching unemployment

And when you began this work, did you have any vision of the difference it might make to society, or was it more a sort of step-by-step thing?

Well, at that point, it really was a very separate piece of research on unemployment. I mean perhaps reflecting on that, it was interesting that people said to me that what I was doing was very helpful and would be very valuable to historians, but not to policymakers or to administrators, because never again would we have such high unemployment as we'd had in 1963. And they assumed that this was a post-war hiccup. And I very much contrast this with the fact that during the 1970s and '80s when I was writing and talking about unemployment and involved in a follow up to the North Shields study in the mid '70s, people

then were saying that I was talking about full employment and this was a thing of the past. And it is interesting reflecting back now how people assumed that what was currently happening was going to be the pattern. So that back in the early '60s they were seeing full employment was here forever, and in the early '80s they assumed it had gone forever. It was just a sort of constant reminder which I give my own students of saying don't accept the way in which we project the future from our own current analyses of the present. And that is something I feel very strongly about.

Yes, absolutely. And then that seemed, I don't know if this happened in your-

Sorry, if I can just continue. I think perhaps one point that I was very concerned to push once this pattern of employment and unemployment over time, because unusually at that time I was able to, with the people I interviewed's permission, I was able to get from the employment exchange, as it was then called, a full detailed account of their receipt of unemployment benefit over the previous five years. And bizarrely this was a high unemployment area, the North East of England, and still is, and bizarrely the length of time on average that my 92 men had been out of work currently was six weeks, which was the national average at the time. So in that sense they were typical.

On the other hand, looking at this five-year analysis, on average one quarter of that time had been spent out of work, in and out of work. There was a few people who'd been out of work three, four or five years, very few, and there were some people who'd only been out of work two or three months, but a lot of people had been in and out of work, and this meant that their experience of low income or poverty was chronic, with acute periods when they were out of work. And I was very concerned that the data that was collected in the poverty survey should in a sense get some of this historical edge, and perhaps this is one thing that I think I'd want to push.

And it's interesting today, there's a beautiful book by Tracy Shildrick, Donald and others called Poverty and Insecurity, which is about the no-pay, low-pay cycle. And they've documented for Middlesbrough, very close to Billingham that I nearly took, the way in which low-pay no-pay in and out of work is a central problem which is not picked up by our data. We still have long-term unemployed data and

current, but we don't have the in and out of work, and this is still a major issue that's got to be picked up. Peter was very good at analysing the labour market, and he talked about a spectrum, some people were out of work, right out of the labour market, and some had been for many years, but there was a lot of movement in the middle, people being in and out of work, and then there was the secure group as well, and maybe I helped to ensure that the data collected this.

So that was an important finding then at the time, yeah. And did you feel when you were researching the unemployed man, did you feel any kind of similarity in your own experience, or was it something new for you to see people living like this?

I'd been very fortunate, I hadn't experienced being out of work, so it was very different, and it was really quite extraordinary. And I think I was particularly struck by the, there were almost two patterns. There were skilled people who'd never been out of work until this period, partly because the shipyards were running down, the ship repair yards were running out, or people who'd been down the mines, and then they'd got another job and then because of last in first out. And when you asked them what it was like being out of work, they would tell you they were really angry and go on. In fact I'd have these questions, but I'd be flipping through my pages because they were telling me before I asked the question.

On the other hand there were people who hadn't got much skill, unskilled labour, as they were called then, who were in and out of work, even in a good year. And when you asked them about unemployment, you would say what's it like, they'd say well it's serious man, it's serious! And each question was almost monosyllabic, and so sometimes I'd finish the interviews for these people in half an hour, which I'd take an hour and a quarter with the skilled workers, who were still so incensed about having this experience. They'd always got their own work before; they may have changed jobs but not done any unemployment. So this difference came through very sharply for me. But my own experience was protected from that point.

So they'd kind of become accustomed to it then, the unskilled?

Well, accustomed suggests that they were in a sense living on the dole, and like resting on benefits, whereas in fact they saw being out of work as part of being an unskilled labourer, and it's one of those things that you had. Whereas you'd get some other people, in the ship repair yards for example, there were penalties if a ship wasn't finished on time, ready to go out to sea and take cargos and passengers, therefore unlike some jobs where work runs out, and so you've partly gone to part time, even half time and then the job finishes, in many of these jobs people had been working two, three or five extra shifts a week, and then they'd finished absolutely exhausted with a vast amount of money, and so for the first couple of weeks they were recovering.

So it was very different from these people, as opposed to the building labourer, whose health was deteriorating, got bronchitis, and was finding the gaps between jobs stretching out over the period of high unemployment in the area. The construction industry almost closed down for a bit. It was getting worse and worse.

Part 3: reflections on the study

Okay. What are your thoughts kind of looking back and your feelings about what came out of the Poverty in the UK survey?

I think that was a marvellous study. I know I heard one academic, social policy academic – and I won't name that person – who said I wish I could have been asked to review it. I just said it's ten years old, and there was no understanding of the problems that Peter, to a lesser extent, Brian had got to go through to get it. I remember hearing about Peter taking the various reports to Penguin, Allen Lane, and there was one occasion, which probably other people have told you, where Peter had a meeting with Allen Lane, and they said Peter, we can't possibly publish all these tables, just not possible. And for two hours Peter said, he took it back, everyone, I envisage him almost sitting there holding the text in his arms, and he said well we argued over it. And to their credit Allen Lane published this monumental book and brought it out in paper and it really made an enormous impact, and the very sad thing is that time and time again I heard when it was

launched there were no copies because they hadn't got themselves ready for the demand.

Peter came up to Edinburgh in October '79, I'd moved up there that year, and we got Peter to address a student audience at very short notice, which took 200 and there were 300 people trying to get in. We managed to move to the university theatre, and in the end though I think it was something like 400 people listening, packed, but I think the local bookshop had 20 copies, although we'd warned them. And I heard the same thing happened in Newcastle, they ran out of copies, so they were reprinting and reprinting, and I'm sure they could have sold far more copies. And there was tremendous interest, on the radio, on the television, people were writing about it.

I was absolutely delighted and astonished and kept trying to note how often it was picked up, and I was invited to take part of a television discussion on not Radio 4 but Radio Forth, which was a Firth of Forth Edinburgh commercial radio station, one evening, on a Friday evening from seven until eight, which you might expect to be a sort of peak time, and we were discussing this. And it was interesting that Scotland, the Head of the CBI, the Scottish CBI was interviewed, and it was expected me to have a task, but he said I was so upset by the poverty, particularly for disabled people, I'm really concerned that our country isn't doing enough. This was clearly a conservative. You know, time and time again people had this, this book really hit home. So it was as marvellous impact, and I don't know if you've seen the cartoon version? See if you can track that down because it's a marvellous, I think it was done in Nottingham but I'm not sure. Alan may well have a copy. I did once. But a short cartoon version.

Right, and what do you think was the reason for that massive interest? Was it the time, the thinking of the time or?

It was partly helped by the time, because it came out in September/October 1979, which was in the first few months of the Thatcher government, and they made it very clear within those first few months that they were going to cut, if they could, social security spending, at the same time as unemployment was already leaping. It really was a remarkable change. And if you look at their white paper on public expenditure, the first sentence is public expenditure is the heart of Britain's economic problems, and within that they then go on to talk

about the need to cut social spending. And I think this book provided things for people who wanted to challenge this, to say look, here's this major study which challenges everything. Okay, the data related to earlier periods, but it was quite clear you could use this data to show that the sorts of cuts that were being talked about would have a far harsher impact.

So it was a really exciting period, that period. And I think it did make a difference, things did get very much worse. There was an enormous increase in poverty and unemployment, but I think there would have been more cuts if there hadn't been that evidence available.

Is there anything looking back that you think could have been done differently, with regards to the research, as far as you're aware?

I suppose if more funds could have been found to enable Peter to make the transition from the LSE computer to the Essex computer, and if he'd had research assistants, more than he actually did. I mean this is something that Alan particularly would be able to tell you more about because, you know, Peter wrote so much of that by himself. And in those days, the sorts of, I don't know if anybody's got a sort of printout that you would have when you have something, so, you know, you'd stretch the stuff out. It wouldn't be the sort of stuff that you get now easily on a laptop. So the job of analysing this was extraordinary. How he managed to do it, it's an incredible achievement. I mean he'd been criticised for going too quantitative, but I think he said just to cope with those data and then there are some marvellous chapters within Poverty in the UK, which have some lovely qualitative data.

Yeah. So do you want to say anything about the impact? You've said that it made a big difference, do you want to say anything more about that?

I did, and sadly it came out at the time when the Government was very resistant to that sort of thing. But my own feeling is that it probably stopped them from doing worse, as various other bits of research encouraged within the government did. No, I just wish it had come out earlier with less impact on Peter's life and, yes.

Because it took so much of his time and that do you mean or?

Time, energy, almost life force, but he got it out, by god! And he continued the momentum on with further studies of this time.

Okay, that's all the questions that I had, is there anything else you want to say that I haven't asked that you think might be important?

Yes. I wasn't aware of the tensions between various people on the team, and it was only a few years ago that Dennis was telling me about the arguments, very principled arguments he and Peter had about moving from the qualitative work that Peter had done much more of in the family life of old people to the big quantitative stuff of Poverty in the UK. And I wasn't taking part in the discussions at the time, but looking back I couldn't help feeling it was so sad because it was almost presented as an either or.

Em, yes, and I also felt that it probably pushed Peter into perhaps dog in the manger is too strong, but because he had to take so much of this on, I always felt that he and Amartya Sen had differences over how to tackle poverty at a time when if the two of them had said look, we've got major differences but we agree on these points and we are prepared to sign a letter to, in those days it would have been The Times, or to make a petition to the Prime Minister, the two of them to get, or to the United Nations, because they were both concerned about poverty across the world, the impact would have been so great. But somehow or other both of them couldn't get out of that and agree to make that thrust, and I always felt sorry about that. I thought it was a tremendous opportunity missed by both of them to really put pressure on. Because if Amartya Sen and Peter Townsend, and then the number of other people who would have joined with them, it could have made such a statement. All right, academics can't have a tremendous impact, but I think they could have had much more.

Yeah, it's a lesson for us all, isn't it? Anything else you want to say, any last thoughts about the process or the findings, or the relationships between people?

No, I really didn't know so much. I mean perhaps that was a fault on my part, because I was busy doing various things that I got involved with other groups. No, I don't think so, thanks very much.

Okay.

It was very exciting to have been involved. One particular memory that sticks with me, Brian Abel-Smith was an extraordinary charming legit man. He and Peter were close friends until they had this split up over the poverty research and it was like this. But as almost a research student, as rather a research assistant, which is what I was, it was one occasion when I was trying to design my own questionnaire and Peter said you must put this in, and I then took the draft to Brian, he said why have you put that in? So I took it out and put something else in. Peter then, so we actually had a three-way phone call, which in 1963 was very unusual, and Brian said go through to my bedroom, and I was lying there on this Thai silk bedspread and looking up, he had a copper ceiling. And this was just off Ebury Street in Pimlico in London, and we argued out this questionnaire over the phone.

It was one of these things that comes back to me every now and again, but working with the two of them, they were just such encouraging people. And I suppose I still am aware I suppose that I let them down, and one of the reasons I'm being so enthusiastic about the Shildrick Donald and others' book is that when I read it I thought this is the book that Peter wanted me to do. And I just wish I'd, you know, if I perhaps had other guidance at the time, I think I was only about two or three weeks off having a book that could have gone to publish. It went to Penguin at one point, and then it came back, but I don't know why it went to Penguin. But anyway I think it could have come out as an LSE occasional paper or something. But that was my fault.

I don't want to leave on a bad note, what's your proudest moment of the whole?

Well to have been involved with it. And it certainly helped me to try and make a contribution in terms of challenging the acceptance of unemployment of the '70s and '80s, and enabled me to get the follow-up research in the mid '70s, and then to in fact write in the late '70s, '80s and work with a group called the

Unemployment Unit alongside the Child Poverty Action Group to try and challenge the acceptance of high unemployment as a permanent aspect of that society. But I edited a book called the Workless State, which Peter Townsend did the preface for, and if you read the preface you think ah, and I just wish we'd measured up to the preface, if he'd written it before we wrote the book, it's splendid.

I'm sure it was a great book. Okay, thank you very much.