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# Interview with Adrian Sinfield

## 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

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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.