
Interview with Professor Hilary Land

Part 2: on relationships and survey development

So were there any changes in working practices over time, over the period of time? Was there any kind of change of direction or?

Well I'm not quite sure what you mean by working practices as such. I mean there was this huge change in the middle when the Labour government came in and Dick Crossman, Richard Crossman became, headed up the new Department of Health and Social Security, and invited Brian Abel-Smith to become one of his advisers. And that meant that Brian gave up jointly directing the poverty survey, because in effect he was seconded to the DHSS, which left Peter kind of holding the baby. And it was roughly at the time when we'd more or less got all the data but it was the writing up which Brian was, you know, they were going to do, the plan was, I understand it was would have done it jointly.

So in a sense Peter was left with this huge amount of data, the money running out and Brian off to the DHSS. And part of the problem was that what made it worse I think for Peter was that Dick Crossman and Peter, although they worked very well together when they were members of the Fabian Society in the late '50s and early '60s, writing about pensions and so on, once the Labour government came in in, was it '64, then those who criticised Labour government policy were regarded as traitors really. So Richard Titmuss became Deputy of the National Assistance Board, which later became the Supplementary Boundary Commission, so he was well and truly a sort of paid up member of the Labour party, and Peter's work on poverty amongst pensioners, which he did in the early '60s, with Dorothy Wedderburn amongst others, was critical of pension policy

And so Crossman, and they published, was it the circumstances of old people or something like that, showing that pensioner poverty was still an issue and that too heavy reliance on means tested benefits rather than having a proper national insurance state pension was still very stigmatising, and a third of old people weren't claiming it, pensioners weren't claiming the top up that they were entitled to. And as a result of Peter's work the government actually did another study of old people, and I think they hoped the circumstances of old people, a national one

obviously with a bigger sample, hoping that it would disprove Peter's figures, but they didn't. And I remember Peter coming back and telling us that he'd met Crossman when he was giving a lecture, I think at the Cambridge Union or something, and Crossman had come up to him and sort of said very crossly I expect you're pleased now to see that your research findings were proved right, and Peter said no, I wish that they'd been proved wrong and that there were fewer pensioners in poverty.

So there was this problem about the sort of political issue about if you were a Labour party supporter, and you'd been fighting for Labour policies in the 13 years that the Tories had been in in the '50s and early '60s, what was your position when, how did you respond to a Labour government that doesn't implement the kind of policies that you thought they were committed to? And Peter was very outspoken and he was chair of the Child Poverty Action Group, which had been formed in 1965, and he and Tony Lynes, who was one of the first directors, and then Frank Field, who wasn't an MP at that time, he and Frank were always writing both critical letters into the press, as well as to government departments and the Prime Minister.

So they were seen rather as attacking from the outside, whereas in a sense Brian was joining the government on the inside, and although Brian and Peter had worked very closely together because Peter had been at LSE, and worked very closely with Titmuss too, in fact Brian Abel-Smith, Peter Townsend and Tony Lynes were known as the Titmice, because they were a sort of team that were always writing about social security and poverty and so on. So the break in that relationship, well, it was a break in the relationship, it wasn't just that Brian had another opportunity and he took it, it was that it was a kind of sense of betrayal I think in a way. And we felt rather, I remember, as a team felt rather betrayed by Brian going off and we sort of thought that he should, the poverty survey was going to be more important than telling Crossman what to do about pensions.

But actually I think, and Peter said this to me not that long ago before he died, that actually he realises now just how much Brian did, not just on the main planks of social security, but in particular he did an enormous amount of valuable work on pensions for, and support for people who were disabled or chronically ill, because they'd been more or less ignored in the Beveridge Report. It was a huge and growing gap, and you had to be a war pensioner or someone who'd been

industrially injured really to be covered by the Beveridge proposals, and if you weren't one of those, there was very little apart from the means tested national assistance for you.

So I think after many years Peter revised his view about Brian, but at the time we did feel very let down really. And we sort of, I think we pointed out to Brian that Charles Booth was going to be remembered more for the work that he did on the poverty survey at the end of the 19th century than he would for his views on pensions, but I suspect history might show, prove us wrong really, that actually Brian's work was really very important at that time. And I know Barbara Castle found his work and support inside government invaluable. So, you know, it's hard to know, with hindsight I suspect Brian may have done the wrong thing, but at the time we felt rather bereft.

Okay, thank you, so that was an important kind of turning point then really.

Yes, it was, it was. And I mean Brian and Peter barely spoke to each other for about ten years afterwards. I mean it really did make a huge rift, and it's a shame because they'd worked, well, a) they were very close friends, but also they'd worked very closely together and written together, so I think it was a loss for both of them really. But anyway they did finally kind of make their peace. But by then, you know, the poverty survey had been published, and it was out the way, so.

Yeah, well thank you. And I want to ask you about the kind of ethos of the team, of how did you build an understanding of values and the way the questions would be asked and the kind of standards that you would have, how did you establish all of that?

Well, you have to remember that I was based in London, at Skepper House on Endsleigh Street, with John Veit-Wilson when he was working on his study. And Dennis Marsden was in Essex, and by then Peter had been made chair of the sociology, the first chair of the Sociology Department in what was then the New University of Essex. So, and I, we were with the, at LSE and Brian Abel-Smith in a sense had oversight of our work. So it was already split, it was on two sites. But in London, London was where we had basic most of the administrative

support, so Sheila Benson did a lot of the administrative work associated with the, you know, I'm sure she typed, she probably typed the questionnaires over and over, and was very involved with the organisation of the interviews and so on.

I really didn't have much to do with that. I mean Marie Brown was based at Skepper House and although she did a lot of the interviews, she was very involved in establishing the fieldwork and briefing the interviews. I mean I remember interviewers coming to Skepper House and being briefed, but I don't think I was part of the, I'm sure, I don't think I went to the meetings. I might have met them over lunch or something, but that wasn't my kind of concern really. So, and then the last year I worked on the project I was actually based at LSE in the main building, in the computer centre, because it made more sense for me to be there when I was writing programmes, rather than stuck up at Skepper House where they had a Hollerith machine, but that wouldn't be any use to me.

So in that sense we more or less did our own thing really. I mean we had project meetings, but not that frequently that I remember, you know, and we sent things to each other. And in effect I think really Peter wrote the questionnaire, as he said, you know, he'd been waiting all his life to ask these questions, and when it turned out, when you see the questionnaire, it's a book! Was it 17 pages or something? When we tried to say isn't this a bit too long, you ought to cut this out, no, no, I've been waiting to ask all these questions for so long, it's like asking me to cut my right arm off. So he wouldn't shorten it.

So really Peter, well, and Brian too, but mainly Peter, because I don't think Brian had ever been involved in fieldwork of that kind before, whereas Peter had. When he was at the Institute of Community Studies, I mean that's where he started, and he was an anthropologist by background, so, you know, for Peter he was much more comfortable with fieldwork, I think. Brian had a degree in economics so that wasn't his particular method of working really. So I mean there were other colleagues, some of them involved with the poverty survey, some of them not, based at Skepper House, people like Sally Sainsbury, and then Blevin Davis and Mike Reading were working on school meals and services like that. So there were other research assistants based up at Skepper House.

So in a sense I felt I was part of that community rather than specifically solely part of the poverty survey. Because really there weren't very many of us there, I mean it was not a large team, and the interviewers, I mean the ones who could easily get to London were briefed at Skepper House, but the others, of course you didn't bring someone down from Glasgow to be briefed about the survey. I mean people went up there and briefed them there, so one wasn't, it wasn't a big team in that, or didn't feel like a big team in that sense, because one didn't have contact with those literally on the ground, or at least I didn't.

And when the survey was being developed, did you have any chance to, apart from you said it should be shorter, did you have any chance to comment on the questions?

Yes, I think, I'm sure, yes, we commented, and obviously what we'd learnt from doing our own studies, our own pilots obviously, some of those questions we could say, you know, look this one really worked. I mean one of the things I remember I was surprised at, I thought when it came to large families one of the most sensitive areas, remember this was mid '60s, but I would find difficult to ask or people might be shy about answering were issues relating to birth control. But that wasn't a problem. The most sensitive question I could ask, particularly were the poorer mothers was when did you last have a new pair of shoes or a new coat, because many of them, they hadn't had a new winter coat for perhaps twenty years, and for me that was a real shock that they didn't really have a pair of good outdoor shoes. And I hadn't realised that people were poor enough to, that clothing was, particularly for the mother, who wanted to make sure the children wore reasonable clothes because they would be picked on at school if they didn't.

I mean that's what they worried about, was not being able to send the kids to school properly dressed, or at least with a proper uniform. And also they didn't like, the mothers felt ashamed to go to the school if they weren't well dressed. They felt the teacher would take no notice of them. So for me one of the really important things was what one looked like, how one presented oneself in public was actually really very important, and one of the markers of poverty was feeling that you couldn't put your best face forward really. So when it came to looking at the sort of indicators of poverty, you know, which people are very rude about, just because you haven't, you know, you couldn't send Christmas cards, that

doesn't mean you're poor, well actually it does, because it's a way of keeping contact with your family, and if you fail to do that at Christmas, then you've failed in a very significant way.

So some of those sorts of, I think particularly when it came to looking at what should we include as indicators of poverty in terms of people's daily lives, I think particularly Dennis and I fed in quite a lot of stuff from what we'd learnt from the pilots that we'd done. But I don't remember, well I suppose we must have done, but it doesn't sort of stick particularly in my mind, except as I say when it came to what are some of the key indicators of poverty.