
Interview with Professor Hilary Land

Part 4: on the research outputs

Okay. And how was it decided on the kind of outputs from the research, whether it was writing a book or giving talks?

Well it was clear from the outset that we were all going to write them up as books or, I mean mine was in the occasional paper series at LSE, and although I know Brian had had problems with some of his other researchers about authorship, there was never any question that I would write it up and it would be, my name would, I would be the author. Whereas this hadn't always been acceptable with some of the other things that, other projects that Brian had been involved with. So I never had a problem about, it was just assumed if it was good enough it would be published and my name would be on the front, and that's what happened. So I did manage to learn to write well enough for it to be published in the end, and Dennis' likewise.

I mean he, well Dennis was much more experienced, I mean he'd written his book on education in the working class and other things. I mean Dennis and Peter I felt reading their work that they were almost novelists, I mean they had a lovely use of words, they could write in very vivid language, and so their books, if you read Peter's early studies of old people, they really come alive. He describes their circumstances and the old person that he's interviewing in a very perceptive and warm way, and you get the same feeling with Dennis and his, the way he describes the work, his work and his interviews with the lone mothers that he included in his study. So one had very high standards to try and come up to. So I think, you know, they were much more experienced field workers and writers than I was.

Did you have an idea of what kind of impact the work would have at that stage, you know, when you were writing up?

Well yes, one did, because, well a) as I say there was this Child Poverty Action Group that seemed to get quite a lot of press and at that time the media were interested in poverty and family poverty and child poverty. And also because Brian in particular was, this was before he joined Crossman but in the early days I

think he knew quite a lot of the people, like Peggy Herbison, who became, she was minister of national insurance, he would have meetings with people inside government and I know that some of the work that I did on large families were fed into the arguments for increasing family allowances, particularly for larger families, for giving families with four or more children free school meals, irrespective of their income, which is what they did, the Labour government introduced that for a while. So there were ways in which because there was this correspondence or in the case of Brian meetings with senior civil servants and ministers, there was a chance to influence policy and there were one or two things that our work must have fed into. I'm not saying it was determined by our evidence, but it certainly helped, it must have helped.

So you did get the sense that you could make a little bit of difference around the edges, you know, if one had decent evidence and one could put forward a good argument and make a case. And in a way, that stayed with me for the rest of my academic career, the sort of belief that if you could put forward a really good case and it was backed by evidence, then it needs be one shamed civil servants or ministers into doing certain things, or rather to, one could help break down their resistance to doing certain things, and I guess that lived with me for the rest of my career really. Even though my, the work, the data I used was more based on actual policy and the impact that different policies had on, well men and women, women and children in particular, in the '70s, it certainly fed into my work with the women's movement.

And did you realise academically what the impact would be, you know, it would be so widely referenced and talked about and everything, the study?

Well, I don't think my large families' thing was that, I mean I don't, it was fairly short-lived I think. I suspect Dennis' work was more, had a longer life, because in the '60s, apart from Margaret Wynn's study of fatherless families, Dennis' is one of the first post-war studies of lone mothers. I mean we didn't even have a word for them properly, and if you look in the old National Assistance Board reports, then you can't, you have to add up the numbers from different categories. You know, you had widows, you had divorced, you had unmarried, and they would appear on different pages.

Lone motherhood was not, it was beginning to be an issue for the policy people in the '60s, but it was only beginning. So in a way Dennis' work stood the test of time in a way because it fed into a growing concern about the particular problems facing lone mothers. After all, you see most lone mothers were in paid employment. We forget that, we assume that lone mothers equals dependents on benefits. Well no they weren't, most of them had paid employment. Particularly unmarried mothers, and widows had pensions that had generous earnings disregards. In fact the earnings disregard was totally removed from widows in the '60s by Labour government.

So it was much easier for mothers to, lone mothers to combine paid employment with looking after the children, and unmarried mothers, most of them lived with their own mothers, who provided childcare, and if not there was local authority nursery provision, most of which was actually taken up by lone parents, the children of lone parents. So what, although it was pretty sparse, nevertheless what was there did go to lone mothers, so they weren't a problem for the benefits system until the '70s really, and then they became a big issue in the '80s when Mrs Thatcher woke up to the fact that there were all these lone mothers on benefits.

So I think probably Dennis' study would be, I doubt whether anybody reads my large families in London, whereas I suspect there are still students who would read lone mothers, Dennis' book on lone mothers.

And the Poverty in the UK book as well.

Well I don't know how widely read, I don't know how far that, see I mean I don't have any notion of how well that, I mean I do remember, because I was in the Cabinet Office when it was published, I was in the think tank when there was only one government think tank, in 1978, '79, and I do remember the deputy Gordon coming in and saying those ridiculous people, you know, this thing about you're poor if you can't send a Christmas card, and I sort of gave him a little lecture about how that wasn't quite what was being said.

So, but I mean I, because I kind of shifted away from poverty as such in my work, I don't think I'm in a very good way of judging what impact the poverty survey as such had, but I mean it certainly inspired an awful lot more work on poverty from the time it was published onwards. And in a way that's, what more

could you ask really? I mean if that's what it did then that's great. And certainly all the work done on indicators of poverty, which kind of took on an international dimension, I think Peter was very instrumental in developing those, whether it was for the OECD or UN or whatever, I mean he always had an eye to the international, his international colleagues, as it were.

I mean that was true right back in the '60s, the first big international conference I ever attended was at Essex and that, you know, it was the first time I'd met sort of eminent sociologists and social researchers from different European countries, the United States, Canada and Australia and so on. So again I thought oh, a bit overwhelmed by it all. But, so I'm sure Peter's work has, Peter in particular, well because he has had, and still has a huge reputation. So I'm sure it's had a, it's gone, his work in particular, I mean one thinks of it as his work really, and I know Alan Walker did a lot but, you know, I still think of it as really inspired by Peter. But it's inspired others who kind of carrying, still carrying the torch in a way.

And how was it originally funded then, the Poverty in the UK?

It was the Rowntree Trust.

Oh the Rowntree, yeah, you said that.

Yeah, I mean they applied for it in the summer of '64 and were surprised they got an answer so quickly. Which is why they were rather caught on the back foot, they hadn't really thought god, what shall we do, we've been given some money?

It's quite often that way, I think.

Yes, so you know, it was a bit of a shock, so I think they hadn't expected to get it so quick. I mean I'm glad they did, because otherwise I'd have gone off and started my training as a social worker and I probably would never have become an academic, so for me it was very good that the timing was as it was, but they really hadn't anticipated getting such enthusiasm from JRF. But of course it was the first, apart from a little study that Rowntree himself did in the early '50s in York, there wasn't, there hadn't been a poverty survey in the UK since the ones he did in the '20s and '30s. So you could see why JRF would be really keen, because it sort of followed on their tradition.

So were they asking for a poverty survey or Peter suggested it?

I've no idea, I don't know, because I was still, I was just a student at that time so I haven't a clue. I don't know.

That would be interesting to find that out, maybe I'll find that out.

Yes, you might well, but that's something I don't, it's something Adrian Sinfield might know. As I say, I mean I was just Brian's sort of student at that time, so it's not something he would have discussed with me.

And do you think the researchers, you or any of them, kind of had poverty in their background at all? I know that Peter Townsend did in some ways, but were any from any kind of working class background, do you think?

Well I think Dennis was. I honestly don't, I just don't know. I don't know. I really don't know the answer to that. I don't think John Veit-Wilson, I mean Harriet Wilson, I think he's still alive anyway, she was a sort of quite well known academic, I don't know whether she, I don't think so, I don't, I honestly don't know actually, you'd have to ask them. I don't know. I think Dennis came from a more working class background. I mean I think he was a sort of grammar school boy that went to Cambridge, I'm not sure, I'm not absolutely sure, but. No, I just, I don't know. I mean I certainly, I was just a middle class girl.

What about the interviewers, do you think they were?

I don't, I just don't know because I didn't meet many of them, and when I did it was very superficial. It might be over a lunch when they were sort of in between being briefed, and as I say I wasn't part of the briefing so I don't know about that.