
Interview with Professor Alan Walker

Part 1: on his role in the research project

First of all, could you tell me how you became involved the Poverty in the UK study? And just tell me the story of it, as you remember it, before I ask you specific questions, just your memories of it.

Okay. I became involved in what we called The Poverty Survey, at the analysis stage. So I had nothing directly to do with data collection, and the planning of the survey. What happened was that Peter employed me, the colleague, as Research Assistants, to help him complete the analysis and the publication of the final book Poverty in the United Kingdom. So I was involved in essentially in the analysis of the raw data and co-writing some of the material with Peter and general tasks around that final stage of the research.

Okay, brilliant. So, what were you actually required to do?

Good question! And my answer will be quite a lot of stuff. Peter had got to the stage where he had a lot of draft chapters, some of them in rough draft, and because of the nature of his life, basically spread everywhere, he couldn't spend enough time on the final push for the preparation of the book, so he got from the Rowntree Foundation that funded the original research some additional funds in order to help to finish it off, basically. And I think he got resources for one research assistant, but he split the money and employed two research assistants at very low wages, and so we were both engaged in everything you can name.

So, that included literature review work, it included further analysis of data that had not yet been analysed, by Peter using basic SPSS programme. It included in my case some writing of the draft chapters, or making additions to drafts that Peter had already prepared, in particular for me the chapter on means testing. And well we co-wrote the chapter on older people, which started with a very skeleton draft by Peter but then I added more material and did some class and generational analyses of the data. So, you see, quite a wide range of things.

And who was the other assistant with that, John Bond? Who was the other assistant? The other research assistant?

The other research assistant was a woman called Jennifer Neiman, and I can't for the life of me recall the split in what we did, but I think that Jenny was involved in more statistical analyses and some more dogsbody style work. And I think that's because she came, if my memory serves me correctly, from an economics/statistics background. Whereas I'd come, we were both just, we'd just graduated, so our first jobs after three years of undergraduate work. And I'd come through the sociology/social policy route, so I was a bit more familiar with the social policy material, I think that's why I could pitch into some of the basic writing stuff.

And did you know Peter before then, before you started working with him or?

Well, only as an undergraduate teacher. So I hadn't done any work for him, and I must confess it was a complete surprise to me, and, you know, what happened was that I think, I was either celebrating the degree result in the bar, student bar, in the University of Essex, or it was the day after the celebrations, so I was further celebrating the results. But anyway, I was having, I was just buying a drink or some drinks at the bar in the student union building. And had a tap on the shoulder, and it was Peter. And he said congratulations on degree result, and do you think we could have a brief word? So then he offered me the job. So that was a complete surprise to me. I was expecting to go LSE to take a postgraduate course, but for all sorts of reasons it was quite convenient for me to stay there and to work for him.

Were you an outstanding student then? Were you an outstanding student then, was that why he asked you?

I'm not sure that I would say that in particular. I don't know. What I can say, on the basis of, the fact is Peter became a close friend later, and over the course of working for him and then working with him over many years. So I can say that he recognised something in the essays that I wrote for the Social Policy course and he had, he told me quite early on, sort of made a mental note, that here is someone who I suppose understands what I'm trying to say about social policy. And I don't think you could then have said that about all of the undergraduate students. So, anyway, that's, that was the way it was. But I must tell you, I was completely surprised.

And what do you think happened that gave you that understanding? Why do you think that you had a similar outlook to Peter, let's say that, at such a young age?

Yes. Oh, heavens, that's all sorts of complex biographical stuff. It's probably way beyond where he'd want to be for the project. But for all sorts of reasons, I'd gone to Essex to study economics, and had not done sociology at A-level. Luckily the Essex University had a common first year, so there was economics, there was sociology, and there was government or politics, plus some statistical analysis and computer analysis, rather a good first year course. So I was exposed to sociology, and Peter gave some of the first year lectures, and government, and I decided very quickly that I didn't want to continue with economics, basically it was the same course I'd done at A-level. The first year was just a repeat of the A-level course. And I didn't have much affinity with neoclassical economics, but sociology and politics grabbed my attention, so I was pulled into that. And I suppose if you ask the follow-up question is why, why was I particularly attracted to that, that's to do with my values, and those could briefly be encapsulated as Christian Socialist position and a member of the Labour Party.

So, when I encountered Peter's work, I must confess I would express more strongly Richard Titmuss's work, then I knew that if I was absolutely, that it was social policy and particularly our Fabian tradition of social policy was absolutely what I believed in, and that's why I was so pleased to end up working for and then with Peter, because we have pretty much the same view about everything that matters, so yes. As I say, the rest of it is much more biographical.

So, how long was it you were actually working on the project then, if you came in at the analysis stage and then you're working towards the-

Was I working?

You came in at the analysis stage, and you were working on the book -

Yes.

- and how long was that?

Good question. I think it as an 18-month appointment. Possibly two years, you see without, I was going to say without looking at my CV, but I don't know even that was recorded. It was, I think, 18 months. It may have been extended in my case, I think it was, to two years, and then Peter and I did some other projects together. And obviously what happens in that process is that you get more, you get more into it. So initially it starts with some basic cross-tabs, hundreds and hundreds of cross-tabs looking for some interesting findings, and then more complex statistically analyses and trying out different approaches to writing. So it's quite valuable experience. For example, Peter would give me a draft chapter and ask me to update it, add references to it.

So I'd find myself - the one that sticks in my mind is the chapter on means testing. So I'd simply add what new literature had come out since it was first drafted, any further tables from the survey analysis, and just try to improve it and bring it up to a position where it counted as a final draft. The chapter on people was different in that I was, by that time I was a bit more experienced and could do more analyses and could have with Peter more of a dialogue about what I think in reading the data was emerging as some of the important aspects of it. And that was quite accidental, it wasn't, because I ended up working in the field of ageing and became a social gerontologist. I didn't really choose that, it was from Peter's perspective which chapters were the ones that needed most work on them. Some were very close to being finished and didn't need further work, but others needed quite a lot of additional work, so in terms of using the research assistants, he focused on those chapters that needed most further work.