
Interview with Professor Alan Walker

Part 2: on working with Townsend

Was he quite easy going in the sense that he wasn't trying to control the whole thing too much?

Peter?

I can imagine it must be difficult to let somebody write bits of your book.

Well, yeah, it's a very interesting question. But when push comes to shove, Peter led a very full life, and he was chair of CPAG, and involved in, up to his neck in Fabian Society stuff. He was here, there and everywhere, and nationally at least in terms of the political agenda, so he had no choice. He wanted to get it polished off but he couldn't do it himself. So, research assistants was, I suppose the answer to a prayer. But he had the final say. It's his, you know, it's his venture, and whatever I've produced or anyone else has produced, he could veto and cast out.

So it's a matter of pride that, how much survived, because he's very discerning, he was very discerning in terms of what he thought was as being up to standard. And his standard is incredibly high. So it was, no, and I was so easy going, yes, and that was good really, because you had the sense, well, again it was partly that there was no choice, that Peter was just pulled in every direction, so we didn't see much of him. As long as there was a clear idea about what we should be doing, and we had the opportunity to refer back to him when we needed to, that was okay. But it wasn't one of those occasions where there was a daily interaction, absolutely not.

In fact, what's interesting, from just reflecting on it now, and I never really thought about this subsequently, is a couple of the other people who worked with Peter on the property survey, Adrian Sinfield and Dennis Marsden were important sources of support and advice in lieu of Peter. So, you know, they were both in the department at Essex, they were both on the same corridor, and they were crucially much more accessible than Peter. So, if there was a question about

what Peter meant by this or what he meant by that, or how one thought this analysis should go, then Adrian and Dennis were really helpful sources of information. And I would say were consulted more than Peter once we'd got a clear idea about what he was looking for.

And did you have a research team as such, or it was more-

A research?

A kind of research team, or was it more different dynamics between say the research assistants and Peter, and then asking...?

Well, you mean how did he run it?

Yeah.

Well, as I say, Peter was absent a lot of the time. Even if he was in the department, he was still doing teaching and writing, so he'd be hold-up in his room, you know, just bogged down in reams of papers. So I wouldn't say really that he ran it as a team. Because by that time there was just really, there were just three people, as well as him, that were involved in the analyses. That's two research assistants, and there was a bit of time of a computer programmer whose name was Phil something. And I would refer to him a lot on the technical side of running SPSS programmes and so on, he would be immensely helpful with the basic computing stuff. This was, kind of must have been probably the first version of SPSS, so we're talking about the dark ages here. And so Peter didn't really engage us as a team.

He would talk to me and he would talk to Jenny separately about whatever we were doing. But the time for team I think had long passed, you know, from the original project, the kind of setting up the survey and, you know, having everyone involved, that was the, I suppose, the teamwork time. Although I must confess I don't know anything about how that was run, and how they interacted together. And the person that could have given the best account of that was a woman called Marie Brown, who sadly died long, long ago, and she ran the fieldwork for the poverty survey. So she would have the best sense of that, and I, I knew Marie, but I couldn't really have a discussion with her, as far as I can recall for help in the doing of the survey. No, I don't.

Okay.

So it was a bit more like a look of I suppose a student/master, you know, PI/research assistant relationship, it wasn't really a team by that time.

And were you involved in deciding the other outputs from the study? You know, so there was the book, but anything else that came out of it, like reports and influencing campaigns and all that kind of thing, did you get involved in any of that?

Definitely in campaigning stuff afterwards, because, you know, I suppose by then I was some, I was also involved in CPAG nationally, and by then had, yeah, by the time the book was published, had co-founded the Disability Alliance with Peter. So, we were quite closely engaged in campaigning. But, as far as I recall, the only person who presented Poverty in the United Kingdom was Peter. And the rest of us might have done some stuff alongside, but I'm sure that he's the only one that gave lectures on the Poverty book; I never gave one of those. So in terms of campaigning, he was the, you know, it was his project, it was his book, and he spoke about it here, there and everywhere.

So when you set up the Disability Alliance, was that, that was as a result of working on this project?

Well, it was, of course it was, it was two things. Another chapter that I made input to was on disability, and then when I finished the poverty survey analysis, the job, you know, the money had run out. Peter had a project on the stocks. I mean by that he had an idea for a project on the assessment of disability, so he said to me, are you interested in potentially working on this project? So we, but largely he, put together an application to the Department of Health to do some pilot work in the assessment of disability. I got the research officer, the job's like a two-year post, so we were working together in the disability field, and these things are always serendipity.

The thalidomide tragedy occurred in 1974, '73, or '74, and we were outraged at the Government's pathetic response to that; just doing something for the victims of the thalidomide tragedy but not those who had similar disabilities but had had them from birth. So we started a campaign, we wrote a joint article in The Times

about it, and Peter masterminded a round-robin to everyone that he knew that had anything to do with disability. So we put together a letter to The Times, and out of that came the Disability Alliance, so yes, absolutely, that was rooted in the joint work that we, first of all within the analysis of the poverty survey and data, and then in a subsequent joint project.

So, later when the book was published, you know, I never presented a seminar or a lecture publicly on the book. That was always, considered that to be Peter's job. And he did it, hugely. He went all over the place. So in a sense that was definitely his baby.