Interview with Professor John Bond

Part 1: on his role in the Poverty in the UK research project

So, first of all, I was just wondering if you could tell me the story of how you got involved in the Poverty in the UK project, and you know your life as it led into it, and lead out of it, and what you went on to do.

Okay. I worked with Peter Townsend as his research assistant in 1971 for a 12-month period, and at that stage he was analysing the poverty data and drafting papers and book chapters in, on sabbatical. So he was, had a sabbatical from Essex then. And my role as his research assistant was to do two things. I was working on another project as well, which was a follow-up to a hospital study he did in '64, '63 with Dorothy Wedderburn. And then in the latter half of the period to prepare tables and some analysis of tables and write drafts of stuff around the use of health, and health resources. So, I can't tell you anything about the sampling of that now, because it's all in distant memory. I could go and get the book I suppose and tell you, but that's already there. And I didn't have, I don't have any stories about data collection, because it was very much done at the latter stages.

Peter was living in London, and so was I, and I used to commute down to Essex two or three times a week to run jobs, computer jobs that is; where he had a data programmer who was very, was organising and managing the data but I was given files and was able to go and run analyses on the use of health services. That was my role, and at the end of the sabbatical, and presumably the money he had for a research assistant I then moved out of London to Edinburgh, where I secured a different type of job. Not that different, but a different job. So that was kind of my limited role. I'm trying to, we were credited with drafting the appendix on Costing Health Services, I seem to recall, which was quite, nowadays my economics colleagues, and I had a bit of economics then, would be horrified in the kind of assumptions that one made. But then economists are always making assumptions.

So I had to learn Fortran and do all sorts of things I never used to, so it was quite educational, in order to do it. And my, the big memory I have is this one thing about, if you fail to punch your card correctly for the programme, this is pre-SPSS, so this was a older data survey programme, you failed to punch your card you then waited another 24 hours before you got anything. It was an overnight job. The processing took at least three or four hours of something which SPSS would do in a micro, in milliseconds now. So it's that kind of, historically the analysis of this large dataset was a very, very big undertaking, and took a lot of time and resources, because it was very easy to make mistakes as you can imagine, even though one checked things. And then you get the data back and you just have to make sure that it made sense. We had lots of time to do that.

Was does this punching your card actually involve?

Oh, right, you don't-

Probably people won't know about that.

Oh no, no. Well, when I first was in research, and I had worked two years previously at an Institute of Community Studies, that's kind of the connection I had with Peter, as well as being an undergraduate of Essex. We physically had a card which was about three, no two and a half inches deep by about nine inches wide, which went into a card reader, and you punched holes in the columns. So if you think about how one used to write SPSS programmes, perhaps not now but you used to write a card which told you to put the variable in column 80, column 90, column 100 whatever. These were 80 column punch cards, and you had a number, so if the response was yes, it was 1, you punched 1, if it was no you punched 2, and if it was a figure you punched 1 on the first number and 0 on the next, whatever. So that the data was punched in that way, and likewise your programme instructions were done in the same way. You literally punched across tab of x by y or something.

Oh right.

And, but the programme to do it wasn't quite as straightforward as the modern, you know, the more SPSS or SAS or whatever, where you kind of got it all done for you inside the machine, you actually had to write a lot more. And that took time, and you had to keep checking that you were doing it right. So when we

were trying to cost the use of health services, we would be doing it on the basis of an average cost of a hospital visit or something, multiply by the number of visits people had and that kind of simple arithmetic. And you had to punch that all out into the programme to create a variable. As you would in SPSS. But it was kind of more cumbersome. So the card, if you made one mistake, you could be out a column or you put the wrong number in or whatever, the programme crashed. That's another 24 hours delay. And that happened to everybody all the time. And it really continued like that in subsequent jobs for about 10 years before the speed, the power of computers took over and things were so quick that if you made a mistake you could enter it again, and get it back in an hour. But at that time it was an overnight run, sometimes a weekend run. And everybody was competing for this minor resource of one computer or two computers, in the University.

So did it feel quite pressurised?

Well it was quite pressurised when you made a mistake. You really, and you can imagine that Peter was a wonderful guy, but he had very high standards, and high expectations of you. And so if you kind of couldn't deliver, you felt very guilty about it and everything else, although he never really reprimanded you, you knew he was – understandably. And so kind of we all keep making mistakes, and, the trip down there was, when I say down there, the train journey down to Essex was all about making sure I got it right; because you'd go down and prepare for what analysis you wanted to do, and then you had to punch the cards and submit the job. And then stay the night and see if it ran, and if it didn't you had to stay another night, and that's usually why I can't get a social life etc.

Oh right.

But I was young, not married, so it didn't really matter.

So what, were you a research assistant then or?

I was a research assistant.

Yeah. Okay.

But the old fashioned type. The research assistant was the individual and you really did work with them quite closely. So we did work quite closely with Peter, it wasn't a kind of, as it seems to be more nowadays where you're a team and the person who is employing you doesn't really have that close contact. That was quite a lot, I learned a lot from Peter because of the close intellectual discussions we'd have about what he was wanting to do. And could make contributions, but I was only a RA.

Yeah. Did you make some contributions…?

I think I did make some contributions but I can't remember what they were. Forty years ago and it's, it would be detail rather than the big picture. But I can remember we did write a paper on the older worker, which came out of the poverty data, where kind of it was, I don't know whose idea it was, but it certainly came out of our discussions. The decline in people in the 50 to 65 age group men, increase in early retirement then, was being substituted by female employment. So we had this rhetoric about it was the employability, the employment of women was actually related to the earlier retirement of men. And I can't remember how the argument went, but it certainly suggested that there was a substitution effect going on because they were cheaper.

So it's less about equality, so this just happened to be a space