
Interview with Professor John Bond

Part 3: on lessons learnt

So is there anything you think could've been done differently with regards to the research, either what you did or?

Sort of thing to reflect on, I kind of always felt that the project, once it, the LSE Essex team had got the money to do the data collection, but as quite often is the case with research nowadays, it's the same old story, they don't ever budget or obtain enough money to do the data analysis thoroughly, so there's commonly large quantities of data. I mean the fact it took until 1969 to 1979 to publish the definitive book. That sounds horrendous now, but actually that's probably quite fast, for the size of the dataset that was, and to come out in such a solid way. I guess it's about ensuring, the only thing I would have thought differently would be the resources for analysis and having help in doing the analysis and writing it all up, and being put in there.

But as always with academic jobs, even nowadays but then even more so, it was the senior academics who expected just to analyse and write it up. And tend to have large teams of analysts. I'm not even sure that what you call a formal statistician associated to the project at that stage. But the data processing or a computer expert who was sorting out the different aspects, he was shared. He was a Department of Sociology resource in Essex and he was shared. So kind of he was under a lot more stress I would imagine because he was, had competing masters who demand things of him, not knowing the whole picture. So it's kind of that figure out and making sure the resources are right, because that's history.

Yeah. Okay. And, what do you think about the political and social impacts of this study?

Well, it's well known that actually Peter's work on poverty and his theoretical work has had a major impact in terms of we now have this, we do have the concept of relative poverty, which has been implemented across the European Union, so poverty is defined by average earnings or weekly earnings, and a certain cut off below. That's kind of there, and that's probably a really major

input, impact, because every time data is reported in those terms, we can see that relatively we still have large numbers of proportion of the population in poverty. Whereas in absolute terms, okay we have food clubs now, but in absolute terms, it doesn't compare with the conditions of the '30s, in terms of what people were suffering then. But it's a different world we live in, now, so that will be kind of the lasting impact which will continue I'm sure to be important for years to come.

At the time when it was published of course, it hit, as did that other famous report which Peter was involved in, Inequalities in Health, the Tory Government of Thatcher in 1979, so had perfect timing. Right, I think also it clearly, and Alan might be able to tell you a bit more about it, because he was a bit more closely related to the political process through the Disability Alliance; he clearly provided a lot of ammunition for CPAG and the Disability Alliance and other pressure groups fighting specific causes around poverty and inequality.

Yeah, okay. I haven't got any more questions, so is there anything that I should have asked that I haven't and-

No, I kind of think it's a difficult position for you to be in, asking about a year in the life of a project, through the eyes of one person, so I'm not-

It's interesting though, I'm just trying to imagine what people would like to know. If there's anything you think that people might like to know when they go to the website to find out more about this.

Well presumably they're going to go to the website to look at historical data about poverty. So I think, I suspect the data really is quite crude, and that's an important message, that there must be quite a lot of error, potential error in some of the figures. But the big picture is going to be spot on, so it's kind of not important that we might have over-estimated the number of, the cost of a health service or the number of people who weren't receiving a particular benefit, because the sample size, as I recall meant that you only had a few people in each cell, so you couldn't do much analysis at some of the rarer benefits for example.

Oh, okay, yeah.

You're quite often dealing with single numbers, and that's when it got quite worrying, the number of people who, for example in the areas I worked the number of people who had a hospital operation and outpatient this and this, it became quite a small number, which I might aggregate it into a figure, cost of a health service use. So I think it's important people recognise that. But the big picture is going to be strong, from a historical perspective. Nowadays, you know, it would be seen as not up to the usual modern day standards of a survey, but we were dealing with different technologies and different situations then. But of course they would have had a much better response rate.

In those days?

Yeah.

Because of the kind of persistence and time that was put in-

No, because people are much more open and willing to talk to people.

Ah, why do you think that's changed then?

Well that's looking at surveys over the last two years, whereas you've got 90% to 95% response rates in the '60s and '70s, which declined and now if you get 40% people are quite happy sometimes.

Ah, do you think that's because people have been researched so much or?

Well, possibly they've been researched so much, but it's also because they're busier and don't see it as a 'oh that's interesting, let's do this'. And then on top of that there's all the privacy stuff which you have to worry about. If you didn't have anything to hide, or you didn't have any money, you kind of weren't giving anything away, were you? Nowadays you're always, we've all got bank accounts and this, that and the other, which we don't want everyone to know about. So there's that kind of a barrier.

Is there anything else that you think is changing in the world of research then over the period? There's probably lots of things, but doing that kind of research.

Well, clearly technology has made a major impact, and the way that you need to deliver an outcome as quickly as you've collected the data, is a major pressure on people nowadays. But they also take on too much, far too much nowadays. In the past I guess it was because you could only do so much, but now people think word processors and powerful computers, they can have six or seven balls in the air and thoroughly do it, thoroughly do the research.

Do you think there's been a change in the kind of level of passion that people feel for their work or? Because, you know, Peter was very...?

Oh no, no I think the passion is still there. Across the scientific world, it's still there. People are passionate about it, whether it be about defining the next gene or much more fundamental issues around the social world we live in. I think the passion is still there. It's sometimes difficult to separate it from the politics.

That's good. Well, on that optimistic note then, perhaps we'll finish.

Thank you.

Thank you.