
Interview with Adrian Sinfield

Part 1: on his involvement in the project

If you could just talk first in your own words from the beginning, how you got involved in Poverty in the UK?

Right, okay! I was doing a postgraduate diploma in social administration at LSE, and Peter Townsend was my supervisor. And I was extremely lucky, and worked with him, and was fortunate getting a distinction at the end of the course, and they invited me to stay on and do a piece of work with Peter and Brian. And I don't know how much they'd got, but they'd got some money from I think a research endowment fund of LSE, which they were paid £825 a year, which was real bonus. But the first month for some reason or other it went up to £850, it was such a tremendous increase! But what I was employed to do at that time was to look at what the impact was of the increased unemployment that had been the previous winter.

So I went off to find an area of relatively high unemployment, and hesitated between doing research around Billingham and Teesside or North Shields, which is the working class end of Tynemouth County Borough, now North Tyneside, on the north side of the Tyne. Everybody assumes I've done South Shields because South Shields is where the boat came in, and everybody knew about that, but this was, I interviewed 92 unemployed men in North Shields and wrote that up in the 12 months between July '63 and '64. And I then went off to the United States for a year to do the same thing. But before I went I'd got an assistant lectureship at the University of Essex, because Peter had just been appointed Professor of Sociology there, and I was interviewed and was successful.

So I knew when I went off to Syracuse upstate New York that I'd be coming back. And during those two months in Syracuse where I was interviewing unemployed men, in fact supported by my wife who'd done some minor work, assistant work on the North Shields study, the poverty study got underway. And when I came back there was John Veit-Wilson looking at disabled families, Hilary Land at large families, and my piece of work on the unemployed was treated as one of the pilots. Because it had all been done, in a sense it was there. And although the only thing that was published, well, there was one in the States which compared

the British and American experience of being out of work in Syracuse and Shields, but the British one, the only thing sadly that was published was a chapter in *The Concept of Poverty*, published in 1970, edited by Peter Townsend, and there's a chapter there on unemployment in North Shields.

And I wrote a 12 chapter report in the end which was, stupidly I took more and more time, because I came back to a full teaching load in the New University of Essex, and I hadn't got a sociology qualification and I unfortunately got caught up much more on that and having a new family and work there. And I played a sort of marginal role I think on the poverty project. I took part in a number of meetings with John Veit-Wilson, Hilary Land, Peter, Brian Abel-Smith, and then Brian of course went off to the Department of Health and Social Security with Barbara Castle, and he left. And I was in a sense one of two, probably the main of the two teaching social policy at Essex with Peter, and Peter was carrying an enormous load because Brian had had to step away from his part.

At the time when the LSE computer, I mean you probably know all this, the LSE computer was working on the data and for 18 months there was enormous problems with converting material that could be read by the LSE computer to material that could be read by the Essex one. And the money ran out, as I understand, and the poverty project, Peter, I don't know how he kept going on this, he started producing chapter after chapter, some of which I'd looked at and some of which I made a few comments on, and I'd got a very fulsome note in *The Concept of Poverty*, in the eventual (?) *Poverty* book. But the amount of time I spent with the research team then was somewhat limited.

I took part in a number of the conferences, like the one that led to *The Concept of Poverty*, and various others, and I'll try to help, but I think I really could have done much more, and I think also the sort of comments I was making then were so finicky, whereas I didn't grasp what the overall conception was. And so in a sense I think I felt that I was perhaps helping on the labour market chapters, and the splendid work Peter did on poverty in work and deprivation in work, one of those chapters that hasn't been paid much attention to, but I'm not sure that I paid the full tribute. People like Dennis Marsden really played a key role in the research.

So do you feel like some of the people that were on the pilot then, there wasn't a sort of continuity then onto the main survey?

Well, sadly John Veit-Wilson didn't continue, and his research, I don't think he and Peter quite agreed on the way in which, the arrangements and so John got a job in Newcastle and left Dennis and moved onto the staff at Essex, but continued to play a very important part doing a lot of the qualitative interviewing, as I recall it, and helping with the analysis. And then Alan Walker was someone who played a crucial role coming in as a research officer supporting Peter.

All right, okay. So I'm just going to go through the relevant questions here. So were you involved in the building of the team ethos during the main survey in terms of how the research questions were kind of interpreted and kind of the quality of the data that was expected and all that kind of thing, like the general ethos?

I made a very limited contribution to helping to design the questionnaire, partly using the work that I developed for interviewing people unemployed in Shields, but I'm not sure that I made as much as I could have done. I did take part in a number of discussions on that, but I had much less involvement with the data that came back. I looked at drafts of sort of the chapters and discussed them a number of times, and some of the issues that came up, we had meetings and that, if I wasn't lecturing or teaching I took part. But I was outside it and it was the core team or Marie Brown, Sheila Benson and people like this who were doing the work. And I'm trying to remember at what point it shifted from Skepper House to Edinburgh. But there was an enormous amount of work on the computer trying to shift the data.

Yeah, Essex, wasn't it, to Essex, was it?

Yes.

Yes. So what kind of issues were you discussing in the meetings then, can you remember?

Probably the most efficient way of collecting data, and I was one of the people who was very concerned to get labour market data that wasn't just contemporary

what are you doing now, but what the experience had been and what sort of work career they'd had. And this I felt was very important in trying to build a picture over time.

And was there any kind of arrangements for debriefing you when you were involved in the research work?

Well I suppose I wasn't in that sense. I didn't do any of the interviews. I heard some of the accounts and perhaps I'd listen to some of the discussions about, how usefully I contributed on that, I'm not sure.

Do you feel that your pilot work was influential in developing the Poverty in the UK survey?

Well certainly I didn't think it was ignored; I mean people were nice about it. I had the sense of being part of the whole thing, but there isn't a thing that I feel yes I got that in or.

Yeah, because it was more of a group thinking process.

I felt so, yes.