
Interview with Professor Hilary Land

Part 3: on fieldwork and data handling

Were you involved in actually asking those questions and did you do the fieldwork as well?

No, I didn't, no. The only fieldwork I did was connected with the study of large families. So, as I say, my input was around the sample, and making sure that that got drawn properly, and then the preliminary, well, data cleaning really. So I was a sort of number cruncher more than, well not, you know, once I'd done my pilot I was much more of a number cruncher really.

Yeah. And how were the relationships between the team members or between you and other team members? Did you feel there was much support, did you feel there was difficulties, tensions that you're happy to talk about, or?

Well, as I say, the major issue arose from Brian kind of bobbing out at quite a crucial time. No, I mean I think sometimes Sheila Benson got a bit anxious about the sample and drawing the sample, so she and I sometimes had a rather frisky relationship. Although afterwards we got on perfectly okay, but there were times when I think she felt a bit, sometimes a bit sort of overwhelmed by it really. But apart-

She wasn't sure of the sample, or she'd...?

Well, I don't know, I think it was an awful lot for one person to do, and if you were having queries from people based all over the country and you were having to deal with them quickly, it was, I think there was quite a lot on her plate. I suspect she probably needed more support. I mean I know Marie Brown gave her a lot of support because she had a lot of experience of, because I think at time she'd worked for government social surveys, she'd had a lot of experience interviewing and so on, and there were other people like Colin Jacobson I think, I'm never quite sure whether he was on the payroll as such, but he was based, he was involved with the property survey and he was involved in some of the issues around the sample and computing and things. So there were sort of people

round the edges who were also based at Skepper House who got drawn in from time to time, as I recall.

Okay. And was there any kind of emotional impact on the people doing the research, either learning about or being reminded of the difficulties that people were facing, do you think?

Well, yeah, I mean I did find it, my poor flatmate, yes, if you'd come, if I'd interviewed a really poor family, or a family that was really struggling, I mean it's very draining and upsetting, and so being able to go back to Skepper House and just tell someone about it and people who were interested, and as I say, my poor flatmate at the time, she still remembers it, you know, the way you sort of offload it as it were, or at least talk about it and share it, was really important. And one of the things that we did agree to do was that the families, it was a bit arbitrary, but the large family study, I don't think we did it for the national one, I'm not sure, those that I thought were really struggling, we did send, we did pay them for the interview.

They didn't know that at the time, but afterwards we would send them, I think it was £5, which at that time was worth quite a lot, so we did sort of thank them in kind. And Brian, there was one family who was in a terrible housing situation, waiting to be rehoused and the children were ill because the place was so damp, and Brian did write, with the permission of the family, did write to I think it was Haringey local authority, to the housing department, and he did, he was instrumental in getting them rehoused. So there was a sense of well let's see whether we can make a difference, however small. If there was something we could do, we did try and do it. Which is probably against all the rules, but that's what we did, so that made one feel a little bit better. And of course it did feed into the campaign for higher family allowances and the Child Poverty Action Group and Shelter had just started at that time.

And we did an awful lot of public speaking. We went to all kinds of groups and spoke to them about poverty. One was invited by all sorts of people to talk about poverty, because it was news, and I mean I remember going to speak to a meeting of the Cooperative Women's Guild somewhere in Surrey I think, and afterwards they gave me all these dolls to take back to the families that I'd interviewed. So I travelled back on the tube with a great armful of dolls, which I

actually took to the Family Service Unit, but. So there were a lot, all sorts of weird and wonderful organisations invited people to go and speak, because I did an awful lot of speaking for the Child Poverty Action Group really, talking about my findings.

So that also was, and we wrote quite a lot of articles and things like that, I mean little things in the newspaper and did things on, sometimes on the radio or the television. I mean I remember being interviewed by a couple of television producers, very young, not much older than me at the time I don't think, who came and they wanted to meet some really poor families, could I introduce them to some and I said well no, not without their permission. Because they were grumbling, the ones that they had got through social, you know, through the Family Service Unit or something, they didn't look poor enough. So I explained that I could, you know, that I could write to them and ask if they would agree, but whether they'd reply or not, because their lives were pretty busy with at least five children, if you're on a tight budget you don't have time to write letters very often, couldn't I phone them up? Well these were, I said these families don't have enough beds to sleep in, they don't have telephones.

So, you know, there was an awful lot of ignorance about poverty at that time. I mean hopefully that's not what somebody would say, the television producer would say today, but. So we did quite a lot, I mean and that helped one think that well, perhaps we can make a little bit of difference at the margins really.

And when you kind of made these, gave these thank you gifts, was that decided sort of along the way in the team, or did...?

No, I just decided. Well I think I asked Brian, I mean I probably told Brian, I mean because I mean it wasn't my £5 notes I was putting in. I've forgotten now how they made the payments, but anyway, whatever, or maybe I claimed, I can't remember the mechanics of it, but basically Brian took my word for it. I mean that's how it worked. It was pretty arbitrary in that sense. I mean that's just how we did it. He just trusted me to choose the one. Because my sample, because it was based on family allowance records, they weren't all poor. I mean the wealthiest family I think was getting £7,000 a year. Well I was only being paid £700 a year when I first became a research assistant, so there was a big earnings range, income range, and so some of them clearly were fine, whereas

the others that were really struggling. So we did make a little bit of difference hopefully. But as I say it's probably, these days one wouldn't be allowed, the ethics committee would probably want to look at it and sorts, but they weren't quite so careful in those days.

And did, was there any use of paradata in the research?

Well mine was nearly all notes. I mean the questionnaire was a bit tick box or you just had square boxes that you put figures in, and then the rest of it was stuff that I either wrote in the interview or wrote up afterwards in my notebook. I mean sometimes writing notes in the interview was quite tricky because you'd be sitting in the one warm room in the house, the children, and there were at least five, remember, and sometimes, the largest family was 14, would be watching what, you know, they'd be all over you trying to take your pencil, watching or reading what you were writing. So the opportunity to take careful notes was certainly not there for every interview that you did. So you had to rely on writing perhaps just a word down to trigger one's memory and to write it up as soon afterwards as possible.

And how was that used, the paradata then, was it...?

Well that was the basis of, I mean my book on large families, I mean that's, I use, I mean I quote basically from those notes. I think I've still got some of the notes actually. But, so that's how we did that, you know, it wasn't, I didn't record anything. I don't think Dennis, neither Dennis nor I recorded things, you know, in a sort of audio sense. It was paper and questionnaire and pencils basically. Which again I know these days we wouldn't do, but that's what we did. So I mean I developed a coding frame to analyse some of the data, and then used some of the more vivid quotes in my actual piece that I wrote when I wrote it up. So that's how I, so it was a mix really of things, but it wasn't all coded very tightly, and I think it shouldn't have been, because it was a pilot after all and was exploring things, so it would have been foolish to try to prejudge too much. But I think the work that Dennis and I did in particular meant that it was possible to do a bit more coding for the main study, well that was the idea anyway, and I think it did work, at least for some of it.

Well I just need to ask you if you could tell me the story of the data entry problems, do you know what I'm talking about?

You mean punch cards and things, you mean?

I think so, yeah.

Well it's just that they were on these, the ones they used to sort on a Hollerith machine. I've forgotten who did the data entry, I don't know because I wasn't involved in the actual physical side of it, but it was always better if you didn't use the top two holes. Because, I don't, I've forgotten why now, it just made it harder to run them through. Otherwise I think you, I think, did you have, I think you had ten holes and then you had 11 and 12, and having the 11 and 12 made it, and also we had, I don't know how many cards, maybe it was, how many pages did the questionnaire have?

I can't remember off the top of my head. About 40 or something.

Maybe it was 17 punched cards per household or something like that. I mean it was a huge number, well it goes back to this handling huge amounts of data at a time when computers were not really very sophisticated in terms of handling large amounts of data. Now it would be much easier to enter that sort of data, but we'd only moved a little bit beyond, you know, in 1968, you were still using punch cards. So it was, it was better than the old Hollerith machines that you sort of chucked around, you know, and sorted, but not that much better in some ways.

And then there was a move of the data from Essex to LSE, or the other way round?

Would have been the other way round, I think.

The other way round, yeah.

I don't know what that involved. As I say, my final year was, on the study was really spent based, physically based in LSE and not at Skepper House, so I wouldn't have seen what was going on there, if you see what I mean. I mean

some of, I must have had some of the data to play with, to make sure that my programme worked, so it must have been still there then. I guess it must have moved after I left. Because I had to test out my programme to make sure it did pick up the inconsistencies that I'd hoped it would.