
Interview with Professor John Veit-Wilson

Part 2: on ethos and ethics

How did you kind of establish an ethos for the team that were doing the pilot study, you know, how to establish standards or the meanings of the research questions and all that kind of thing, how did that come about?

I think it was an extremely hit or miss matter. I don't recall us having meetings, and by that I stress I don't recall it, I don't say it didn't happen, and it may be that you find Hilary Land or Adrian Sinfield – Dennis Marsden is sadly not with us anymore – will be able to give you a better answer about that. In fact, Adrian was in the States during the first year I worked on it, '64, '65, and he'd done his study in North Shields before this stage of the national survey had started. So he was not actually working on a survey at the time when Hilary, Dennis and I were working on ours. As I said, I started work with Hilary and did the, what we were piloting was our handwritten questionnaire forms for use, and then we adapted them after the first dozen or 15 interviews to make them work better, and then as I said I went off to Colchester and Hilary continued with the large family study, just by the way.

But obviously I remember between Hilary and me there was a great deal of discussion when we were generating the first questionnaires and the adaptation, but I don't recall the content of that discussion at all. Issues of ethics which nowadays rank very highly I don't recall being mentioned at all. I think there was the usual kind of courteous consideration for the dignity of the people whom we were interviewing, and it was rather taken for granted that we knew what that would be and it did not have to be a checklist or anything of that kind. There certainly wasn't a checklist to tell us how to do it. For me it was at times quite an eye opener, not that I was unfamiliar with poverty, and I'm not going to go into all that here, for various reasons, I've been involved in socially active work since my school days, but the extent and nature of it in different contexts was quite eye opening. I was a naïve mid 20-year-old, and Hilary too, and Dennis, we'd all graduated only a few years earlier, all had done something in the meantime. Hilary will tell you her own account.

Did you feel comfortable interviewing people who were in that situation?

Well, I've personally never had a problem in interpersonal exchanges, so to speak. I didn't always feel comfortable with the degree of what then appeared to be, either to be prying or to be exposing the intimacies of people's lives. Because with the large families and with the what we called chronic sick respondents, we were dealing with couples, and we were asking about every aspect of their lives that had been affected by having a large family or having a sick, a chronically sick husband, and some of them went into quite considerable detail about how it had affected their marital lives and so on. Which, as I say, I was married, it wasn't that I was unfamiliar with what the issues were, but having them discussed with me by complete strangers, I mean that's my problem. They did or did not open up according to how they felt about it, and it was perfectly clear that some of them, it was an enormous relief to have somebody to talk to about it who was not otherwise engaged.

It's an old experience, we all know about it, but I didn't know about it to that extent then and I hadn't experienced it in that kind of kind of way. We did make a point, and that was, I remember, a deliberate decision that we would try to interview both husband and wife separately in both of those two samples. Dennis obviously there were no partners involved in the interview process, and some of the single mothers he interviewed will have had partners but not formally, so to speak; it was the old days of the cohabitation problem and so on. So that was merely part of the dynamics of interviewing, that wasn't the survey. The survey itself we did decide we wanted to open the possibility of a gender distinctive responses to some of these issues and so that is what we did.

But otherwise on the ethics front I don't recall that we made a particular point to either use particular forms of language or keep off areas or things of this kind, apart from saying all the data, saying all the data will be kept strictly confidential and won't be published or won't be used in any identifiable form. I don't recall that we got signatures or anything like that. They had, I think had to sign a consent form certainly for the large family study because that went through the, whichever ministry it was administering family allowances at the time. And that was an opt-in one, they had to return, they were sent a letter about the survey with a postcard which they had to return if they were willing to be interviewed.

And I think I used that method with the GPs, that the GPs had to get the consent of the patient before I was allowed to have the details of the addresses.

But I do recall even after that going to one house of somebody clearly quite well off who when I turned up and explained why I was there said I don't want to do that! So there were non-response, there were refusals to respond even at that stage, but that's the only one I can remember.

And it seemed in the actual survey itself that some of the researchers did something or kind of intervened in the lives of the people being researched in terms of sending them some money or sorting out their housing situation or something. Did that happen at all in the pilot, or was there any discussions?

Well I didn't know that. It was certainly put to me, yes, I do recall being asked by, in the large family study, one family who were clearly quite desperate from a financial point of view asking me if I'd lend them £10, which was a lot of money in those days. I mean their whole income may only have been, I don't know, £10-15-20 a week or something.

THE VIDEO IS MISSING FOR THIS SECTION OF THE INTERVIEW

Okay, where had we got to? We were on the subject of having, whether I was ever asked, and I was actually very moved by a number of the people whom I interviewed. That was not a question.

That wasn't an issue. I didn't become engaged to the point of so to speak getting sucked into it, but I've always been affected by the other in those kinds of relationship and some of these situations were pretty desperate. In the case of the family you asked me for, for a loan, first of all I wasn't in a position to give them one on the spot. I'm not even sure I carried that much money around in my wallet in those days. And I asked a person with great experience of this kind of work about it afterwards, and she said no, you can't ever get engaged in those situations. That is you just have to keep your distance, so to speak. You're not the solution to their problems, even though you're emotionally engaged in the fact that they have problems. And so I didn't. I said I would think about it. I don't think anybody else ever asked me for money. And this wasn't a matter of paying them for the interviews, I can't remember if they got paid, but I can't

remember ever having been involved myself in dealing with payment issues - because if they did get paid then it wasn't done by me. Possibly by the others, but I don't think we did. And some of them were, and particularly with the chronic sick respondents very, very difficult situations of severely disabled people, lots of very depressed people about their condition.

And was there any kind of arrangements for debriefing you, meeting with you after to see how you're feeling about the research process or anything like that?

I don't remember any. We were expected to do what I think we all understood was normal good practice, which was to write up our notes as quickly as we could and put them in a form in which they would then be usable by ourselves. I don't recall that there was ever an issue about doing so in a form in which other people could use them. It was very much assumed we were responsible for our own studies and we would have to write them up. So there was no issue about using, as I said earlier, we made up our interview forms. If I used the word questionnaire, I shouldn't have done, because they were actually interview schedules. There were a whole lot of them naturally of the usual [unclear 04:13] variables and other things of this kind, household composition and all that. But then there were pages left for just sitting there and scribbling what was being said - this was prerecording days. And you just had to get it, the vox pop down as well as you could, and some of us managed it better than others. But you did what you could, and then reconstructed it as well as you could afterwards.

So it was a very informal system of interviewing. Nothing was done in a form that could then be coded or anything like this. And I think there was a sense that with the sample sizes that we were working on, I think Hilary had a similar total sample of 60 or 70, and Dennis was of the same order even if it was a different number.

And we didn't feel that this was something that was really amenable to, in those days machine processing, the punched cards, I think it was pretty well pre-computerised. Well, there were mainframes, but the punched cards, but not something that I think we were thinking we would be working on. We were working on large sheets of squared paper, filling things in in pencil.

