
Interview with Professor Alan Walker

Part 1: on his role in the research project

First of all, could you tell me how you became involved the Poverty in the UK study? And just tell me the story of it, as you remember it, before I ask you specific questions, just your memories of it.

Okay. I became involved in what we called The Poverty Survey, at the analysis stage. So I had nothing directly to do with data collection, and the planning of the survey. What happened was that Peter employed me, the colleague, as Research Assistants, to help him complete the analysis and the publication of the final book Poverty in the United Kingdom. So I was involved in essentially in the analysis of the raw data and co-writing some of the material with Peter and general tasks around that final stage of the research.

Okay, brilliant. So, what were you actually required to do?

Good question! And my answer will be quite a lot of stuff. Peter had got to the stage where he had a lot of draft chapters, some of them in rough draft, and because of the nature of his life, basically spread everywhere, he couldn't spend enough time on the final push for the preparation of the book, so he got from the Rowntree Foundation that funded the original research some additional funds in order to help to finish it off, basically. And I think he got resources for one research assistant, but he split the money and employed two research assistants at very low wages, and so we were both engaged in everything you can name.

So, that included literature review work, it included further analysis of data that had not yet been analysed, by Peter using basic SPSS programme. It included in my case some writing of the draft chapters, or making additions to drafts that Peter had already prepared, in particular for me the chapter on means testing. And well we co-wrote the chapter on older people, which started with a very skeleton draft by Peter but then I added more material and did some class and generational analyses of the data. So, you see, quite a wide range of things.

And who was the other assistant with that, John Bond? Who was the other assistant? The other research assistant?

The other research assistant was a woman called Jennifer Neiman, and I can't for the life of me recall the split in what we did, but I think that Jenny was involved in more statistical analyses and some more dogsbody style work. And I think that's because she came, if my memory serves me correctly, from an economics/statistics background. Whereas I'd come, we were both just, we'd just graduated, so our first jobs after three years of undergraduate work. And I'd come through the sociology/social policy route, so I was a bit more familiar with the social policy material, I think that's why I could pitch into some of the basic writing stuff.

And did you know Peter before then, before you started working with him or?

Well, only as an undergraduate teacher. So I hadn't done any work for him, and I must confess it was a complete surprise to me, and, you know, what happened was that I think, I was either celebrating the degree result in the bar, student bar, in the University of Essex, or it was the day after the celebrations, so I was further celebrating the results. But anyway, I was having, I was just buying a drink or some drinks at the bar in the student union building. And had a tap on the shoulder, and it was Peter. And he said congratulations on degree result, and do you think we could have a brief word? So then he offered me the job. So that was a complete surprise to me. I was expecting to go LSE to take a postgraduate course, but for all sorts of reasons it was quite convenient for me to stay there and to work for him.

Were you an outstanding student then? Were you an outstanding student then, was that why he asked you?

I'm not sure that I would say that in particular. I don't know. What I can say, on the basis of, the fact is Peter became a close friend later, and over the course of working for him and then working with him over many years. So I can say that he recognised something in the essays that I wrote for the Social Policy course and he had, he told me quite early on, sort of made a mental note, that here is someone who I suppose understands what I'm trying to say about social policy. And I don't think you could then have said that about all of the undergraduate students. So, anyway, that's, that was the way it was. But I must tell you, I was completely surprised.

And what do you think happened that gave you that understanding? Why do you think that you had a similar outlook to Peter, let's say that, at such a young age?

Yes. Oh, heavens, that's all sorts of complex biographical stuff. It's probably way beyond where he'd want to be for the project. But for all sorts of reasons, I'd gone to Essex to study economics, and had not done sociology at A-level. Luckily the Essex University had a common first year, so there was economics, there was sociology, and there was government or politics, plus some statistical analysis and computer analysis, rather a good first year course. So I was exposed to sociology, and Peter gave some of the first year lectures, and government, and I decided very quickly that I didn't want to continue with economics, basically it was the same course I'd done at A-level. The first year was just a repeat of the A-level course. And I didn't have much affinity with neoclassical economics, but sociology and politics grabbed my attention, so I was pulled into that. And I suppose if you ask the follow-up question is why, why was I particularly attracted to that, that's to do with my values, and those could briefly be encapsulated as Christian Socialist position and a member of the Labour Party.

So, when I encountered Peter's work, I must confess I would express more strongly Richard Titmuss's work, then I knew that if I was absolutely, that it was social policy and particularly our Fabian tradition of social policy was absolutely what I believed in, and that's why I was so pleased to end up working for and then with Peter, because we have pretty much the same view about everything that matters, so yes. As I say, the rest of it is much more biographical.

So, how long was it you were actually working on the project then, if you came in at the analysis stage and then you're working towards the-

Was I working?

You came in at the analysis stage, and you were working on the book -

Yes.

- and how long was that?

Good question. I think it as an 18-month appointment. Possibly two years, you see without, I was going to say without looking at my CV, but I don't know even that was recorded. It was, I think, 18 months. It may have been extended in my case, I think it was, to two years, and then Peter and I did some other projects together. And obviously what happens in that process is that you get more, you get more into it. So initially it starts with some basic cross-tabs, hundreds and hundreds of cross-tabs looking for some interesting findings, and then more complex statistically analyses and trying out different approaches to writing. So it's quite valuable experience. For example, Peter would give me a draft chapter and ask me to update it, add references to it.

So I'd find myself - the one that sticks in my mind is the chapter on means testing. So I'd simply add what new literature had come out since it was first drafted, any further tables from the survey analysis, and just try to improve it and bring it up to a position where it counted as a final draft. The chapter on people was different in that I was, by that time I was a bit more experienced and could do more analyses and could have with Peter more of a dialogue about what I think in reading the data was emerging as some of the important aspects of it. And that was quite accidental, it wasn't, because I ended up working in the field of ageing and became a social gerontologist. I didn't really choose that, it was from Peter's perspective which chapters were the ones that needed most work on them. Some were very close to being finished and didn't need further work, but others needed quite a lot of additional work, so in terms of using the research assistants, he focused on those chapters that needed most further work.

Part 2: on working with Townsend

Was he quite easy going in the sense that he wasn't trying to control the whole thing too much?

Peter?

I can imagine it must be difficult to let somebody write bits of your book.

Well, yeah, it's a very interesting question. But when push comes to shove, Peter led a very full life, and he was chair of CPAG, and involved in, up to his neck in Fabian Society stuff. He was here, there and everywhere, and nationally at least

in terms of the political agenda, so he had no choice. He wanted to get it polished off but he couldn't do it himself. So, research assistants was, I suppose the answer to a prayer. But he had the final say. It's his, you know, it's his venture, and whatever I've produced or anyone else has produced, he could veto and cast out.

So it's a matter of pride that, how much survived, because he's very discerning, he was very discerning in terms of what he thought was as being up to standard. And his standard is incredibly high. So it was, no, and I was so easy going, yes, and that was good really, because you had the sense, well, again it was partly that there was no choice, that Peter was just pulled in every direction, so we didn't see much of him. As long as there was a clear idea about what we should be doing, and we had the opportunity to refer back to him when we needed to, that was okay. But it wasn't one of those occasions where there was a daily interaction, absolutely not.

In fact, what's interesting, from just reflecting on it now, and I never really thought about this subsequently, is a couple of the other people who worked with Peter on the property survey, Adrian Sinfield and Dennis Marsden were important sources of support and advice in lieu of Peter. So, you know, they were both in the department at Essex, they were both on the same corridor, and they were crucially much more accessible than Peter. So, if there was a question about what Peter meant by this or what he meant by that, or how one thought this analysis should go, then Adrian and Dennis were really helpful sources of information. And I would say were consulted more than Peter once we'd got a clear idea about what he was looking for.

And did you have a research team as such, or it was more-

A research?

A kind of research team, or was it more different dynamics between say the research assistants and Peter, and then asking...?

Well, you mean how did he run it?

Yeah.

Well, as I say, Peter was absent a lot of the time. Even if he was in the department, he was still doing teaching and writing, so he'd be hold-up in his room, you know, just bogged down in reams of papers. So I wouldn't say really that he ran it as a team. Because by that time there was just really, there were just three people, as well as him, that were involved in the analyses. That's two research assistants, and there was a bit of time of a computer programmer whose name was Phil something. And I would refer to him a lot on the technical side of running SPSS programmes and so on, he would be immensely helpful with the basic computing stuff. This was, kind of must have been probably the first version of SPSS, so we're talking about the dark ages here. And so Peter didn't really engage us as a team.

He would talk to me and he would talk to Jenny separately about whatever we were doing. But the time for team I think had long passed, you know, from the original project, the kind of setting up the survey and, you know, having everyone involved, that was the, I suppose, the teamwork time. Although I must confess I don't know anything about how that was run, and how they interacted together. And the person that could have given the best account of that was a woman called Marie Brown, who sadly died long, long ago, and she ran the fieldwork for the poverty survey. So she would have the best sense of that, and I, I knew Marie, but I couldn't really have a discussion with her, as far as I can recall for help in the doing of the survey. No, I don't.

Okay.

So it was a bit more like a look of I suppose a student/master, you know, PI/research assistant relationship, it wasn't really a team by that time.

And were you involved in deciding the other outputs from the study? You know, so there was the book, but anything else that came out of it, like reports and influencing campaigns and all that kind of thing, did you get involved in any of that?

Definitely in campaigning stuff afterwards, because, you know, I suppose by then I was some, I was also involved in CPAG nationally, and by then had, yeah, by the time the book was published, had co-founded the Disability Alliance with Peter. So, we were quite closely engaged in campaigning. But, as far as I recall, the only person who presented Poverty in the United Kingdom was Peter. And

the rest of us might have done some stuff alongside, but I'm sure that he's the only one that gave lectures on the Poverty book; I never gave one of those. So in terms of campaigning, he was the, you know, it was his project, it was his book, and he spoke about it here, there and everywhere.

So when you set up the Disability Alliance, was that, that was as a result of working on this project?

Well, it was, of course it was, it was two things. Another chapter that I made input to was on disability, and then when I finished the poverty survey analysis, the job, you know, the money had run out. Peter had a project on the stocks. I mean by that he had an idea for a project on the assessment of disability, so he said to me, are you interested in potentially working on this project? So we, but largely he, put together an application to the Department of Health to do some pilot work in the assessment of disability. I got the research officer, the job's like a two-year post, so we were working together in the disability field, and these things are always serendipity.

The thalidomide tragedy occurred in 1974, '73, or '74, and we were outraged at the Government's pathetic response to that; just doing something for the victims of the thalidomide tragedy but not those who had similar disabilities but had had them from birth. So we started a campaign, we wrote a joint article in The Times about it, and Peter masterminded a round-robin to everyone that he knew that had anything to do with disability. So we put together a letter to The Times, and out of that came the Disability Alliance, so yes, absolutely, that was rooted in the joint work that we, first of all within the analysis of the poverty survey and data, and then in a subsequent joint project.

So, later when the book was published, you know, I never presented a seminar or a lecture publicly on the book. That was always, considered that to be Peter's job. And he did it, hugely. He went all over the place. So in a sense that was definitely his baby.

Part 3: on the book and its impact

How do you feel about the project, being involved in it and the findings from it?

Well I feel incredibly positive about it personally, because it was a great opportunity, and the chance of working with Peter Townsend, I don't think when he first asked me to do the job I had a sense of what working, a sense of how significant a figure Peter was, and how working with him would have such a profound impact on my life. You know, we became very close friends, so that I knew his children and he was the non-believer's equivalent of godparent to one of my children. It was kind of very close relationship, I would, so I can only think of it as an incredibly positive experience, personally. I gained a huge amount from it and we're never again going to say that, really important.

In terms of contributing to the production of Poverty in the UK, I'm really pleased and proud to have done that. And it is the most important book on poverty that's ever been produced, I have no doubt about that. And I think probably always will be. So it's a huge milestone in the history of social science, and to be a part of that project, I think is a great thing, very pleased with it. To his great credit, Peter decided that he could not benefit financially from the publication of the book, so he set up a trust fund. So all the royalties for the book went into a trust fund that I'm a trustee of, Adrian Sinfield and Hilary Rose. So, and we, he asked in setting up the trust fund that the money should go to groups campaigning on behalf of the poor. So, most of it has gone to groups like CPAG. So it's a real, I think it's a real privilege to have been involved in it, and I'm very pleased about that.

The only sort of negative element I would mention is really nothing to do with my involvement. It's the protracted nature of the whole project. You know, it did stretch over a very long period, 10 years basically, and it had an unfortunate beginning in that it was meant to be a joint project and then Brian Abel-Smith pulled out of it, because he was sucked into government and working with the Labour Party. And Peter was left holding the baby, and likewise Peter was so heavily involved in the policymaking process, and so engaged that he found it incredibly difficult to devote the time necessary to undertaking such a mammoth project. And I think that's a real issue for social policy, and for the public academic, because as social scientists we want someone with the eminence and the capacity of Townsend to produce work like the poverty book. On the other hand, we want him to engage in the public debate. And it is impossible to do both of those things simultaneously. Something has to give, and what gave was the timetable of the production of the poverty book.

Having said that, and I did say it was the only negative aspect I can think of, it was worth waiting for. It's still immensely powerful. So, it's for me a very positive experience, and I think Peter was seriously proud of it. He may have felt subsequently that he carried the burden for too long, and it did become a huge burden, and his burning the midnight oil to try and finish it off at the very end. And that might have coloured the experience for him, and somehow diminished the achievement. I'm not sure. I never had a direct conversation with him about that, but I have heard him refer to subsequent work as the best thing he'd done. And I disagreed, you know, because the poverty book is immense and it's a stunning achievement.

What do you think were the actual impacts of it? What kind of difference did it make in terms of policy and academic-

What do I think is its impact?

Yeah.

Well I think it changed the debate on poverty. And one has to think of impact in all sorts of different ways. So, I've no doubt that its impact in academic terms is profound and long, long lasting. Ever-lasting, I would say. There can't be anyone who writes seriously about the subject of poverty without referring to Poverty in the UK, even though the fashion these days for doctoral students is only to reference over the last decade, you couldn't imagine a doctoral thesis in that field that didn't take as its starting point Poverty in the UK. And although Peter's earlier work on relative poverty has kind of paved the way, the poverty survey was the clear demonstration. So I think in terms of the academic impact it was huge, immense and long-lasting.

In terms of policy, it, of course it's so contingent on who's in power and who in particular is in national government in this country and in other countries. So, I'm sure that Gordon Brown was, had read and understood the poverty book and clearly understood the nature about relative poverty. George Osborne and Iain Duncan-Smith, fat chance. And that's part of the problem. It's indeed part of the problem that Labour is experiencing currently, is seeing how to sustain achievement and understanding and consensus in the face of radical ideological shifts. And there's no easy answer to that, because one of the reasons the

Labour government was elected in 1997 is the reaction against the growth of inequality in the Conservative period and the driving down of the public sector, including the National Health Service. And Labour did a lot of bad things but also some good things in terms of trying to introduce anti-poverty policies and improving the public services. But those achievements have quickly turned around, as we're finding out.

So, I think on the left the understanding that the poverty book brought and Peter's writing about it brought, is deeply embedded. I can't see that being turned around. Of course it's solidly in the Fabian tradition, but politics at the moment is dominated by a neo-Liberal agenda which is antithetical to a relative understanding of poverty and all of the policy proposals that flow from it. So, that's the problem, in saying, impact in policy and practice terms. But nonetheless the academic impact means that there is a basis for helping to change the politics, and when the politics nationally change, there's a chance of reasserting some of those teachings that arise out of the poverty book.

Okay. Is there anything else you want to say, because I've gone through my questions now, do you want to say anything else about that I haven't asked you?

Gosh. I don't think there is frankly. This is about the poverty survey, and the poverty book, rather than about Peter more generally, so no, I don't think there's anything else. There may be some little things that I can't remember, but I don't think there's anything big I can tell you.

Do you want to say anything about Peter that you think people might not already know in general?

Oh, wouldn't know where to start [laughter] in answer to that.

You know a lot of his secrets.

Yes, yes. No, I, what people need to know is that he was an absolute giant of twentieth century social science, and I think that he was not given the recognition that he was due, for two reasons. One, that he didn't sit firmly within the sociological discipline, and it always had that tension between sociology and social policy, and was at some early stage rather critical of sociologists for not paying

enough attention to social policy, and secondly, because of his public stance, and for all the wrong reasons that tended to make some people sceptical about his position. That he should be in the academy, doing research, rather than speaking on public platforms and representing all of those causes that he did. That's a great shame, and it does huge injustice.

I think his work will stand for ever, for its quality, really. Amazing work, and not just the poverty book, if you go back to books like *The Family Life of Old People* and *The Last Refuge*, they are absolutely stunning in terms of the quality of the research, the quality of the narrative and understanding of human nature, and the quality of the writing. So he's a great, great social scientist, absolutely no doubt about that.

Interviewed by Dr Karen Bell

© Poverty in the UK Paradata project

www.poverty.ac.uk