
Interview with Professor John Bond

Part 2: on being part of the Poverty in the UK research team

So, actually how were you recruited then? So you were already working for Peter or?

No, I was working, I was an undergraduate at Essex '66-'69, so Peter knew me because he was, I was doing sociology and social policy, so he taught me and mentored me in a few things. And I was working then at the Institute of Community Studies which as you know Peter obviously worked with, with Michael Young. And so I was known, and I must have applied for a job, but it was very casual sort of employment process. I actually applied for another job at the Institute of Race Relations which I got, when Peter phoned up to offer me the job. He wasn't very happy. So I said well I'd better go away and think about this, and decided working for Peter might have been a better move than working for the Institute of Race Relations. And I think I was right, because white researchers working in issues of race in the early 70s was acceptable. By mid-70s you wouldn't have got anywhere. So it was something specialised. So I then focused on health, that's why I'm here.

So it kind of directed your career really then that opportunity.

Oh yes, yes. It helped. And he was very helpful, because he was, later on, about three or four years later, I was recruited in Scotland to do a survey on old people and it was primarily at his suggestion, they would take notice of me.

Okay, great. So, how long was it all together that you were working on the project then?

Well, as I say, it was about a year that I was, I had a contract for a year, while he was on sabbatical, but I did another project at the same time, so I had two bits of work going on. Which was rather helpful given the data processing crisis, you

know, it meant I could actually work on the other thing when it failed, and wasn't sitting twiddling my thumbs.

And were you kind of, did you feel part of the team on that project?

No, I don't think there was a team then. There was Peter and a series of research assistants for whom he found money over a period of time. Alan Walker worked for him, or worked, I can never work out whether Alan worked before or after me for him, but he kind of, it was-

I can ask him, I'm interviewing him tomorrow, so.

Sure. We overlapped. That's where we first met, at Essex, Alan and I. And, and, kind of, you didn't, so, no there was no team as a team, because the big team that was based at LSE had all been dispersed presumably and the data was just sitting in Essex, being mined by Peter, with anybody, any resource he could fund.

Right. Okay. I've got various questions here about the team dynamics, but, it would just be the dynamics between you and Peter then.

Yeah, and they were fine. As I say, he was living in Hampstead at the time, I was living in Kensington, and we used to meet once a week and have coffee and discuss what we were doing, and I'd go off to Essex and, I had to share, well I didn't have to share a room, I had a desk in a shared space in Essex, so I kind of recall being friendly with the folk I was working in, in whose room I was working, but they were doing something completely different, working for some other person, so there was no teamwork there, was there? It was a collegiationship, but that was it.

Did you find Peter very inspiring in terms of, you know, did you motivate you?

Oh, yes, he always had. I think he inspired me to, I provisionally went to Essex as an undergraduate to do economics, but he inspired me so much in the social policy lectures he did in the first year that I actually majored on sociology and social policy, I didn't go down the economics route. So right from the beginning then he was kind of an inspiration. He was a very inspirational lecturer, at the

undergraduate level. So, when I was working with him, he was always very positive and motivating. He was good to work with, but he had high standards.

And did you personally feel affected by the things that he talked about, did you feel like you'd, you could see...

Politically motivated, but not in the sense that I was politically active, because I was a shy and retiring sort of individual that couldn't do the PR stuff which he did, so I didn't go along to the Child Poverty Action Group and join up with that, although I appreciated all the work I was, the poverty side he was doing was being passed straight through to CPAG to promote at the same time, and I was perfectly in tune with all that.

Yeah, excellent. So, we'll go over the questions, things about the actual data gathering. So, when you were studying poverty, do you feel, did you have any personal experience of it yourself or?

No, I was fortunate. Although I came from South London, I was living in a low-middle class area and I had all the right facilities in the house. We had a running toilet, you know running water and hot water, and probably not central heating but kind of it was, it was very pleasant. No, the nearest I ever got to poverty was when I was doing field for Michael Young in Lewisham and Deptford, and then I did experience what it was in terms of observing other people's living conditions. But not really, I've got no experience of poverty. I mean in a student one, I was never had poverty.

Is that after that you did the work...?

Well, I was working with Michael the year before, and I think that's probably where Peter got the connection. Because I did a case study in Lewisham of West Indian families and obviously in the case study I identified that a very large number of people who were clearly in poverty, and you walk into a house where the electric light is black, you know, the switch, with just a wire hanging down, and hanging, and next to it would be water dripping. The kind of conditions, and going in and interviewing people where they'd had, where their oil fire had caught fire and the place was still black, and it was horrendous finding things that you had never experienced. I mean, my father lived in poverty as kid, because he

was from Deptford, and used to talk about it, but that's not the same as experiencing or observing it.

Yeah. So, when you were kind of looking at all the data then, did it upset you to see-

Well, I kind of was looking at the Health Service usage data mostly, and so I wasn't seeing, I think actually if you look at, if you're doing a quantitative study, you quite often don't, it doesn't really impact on you what it means to have an income which is half the average wage, or the fact that you've got five children and you're unemployed. That's just a statistic. Doesn't actually impact you in a way that says what that feels or means to the individual concerned. So, no it didn't horrify me. It horrified me in terms of, from a political level about the inequalities and the absolute poverty which still existed. Which the governments were of course denying madly. But, no, not the actual data, and that was just, well that's the data. But you kind of disengage from it. If it had been a qualitative study where you interviewed people and those things, the data would then kind of meant more to you, and I can imagine being quite upset by it.

Yeah, you're just worrying about the punch cards.

I was more worried about making sure that the table made sense, yeah, and that I hadn't got women coded as men and all the other things that could happen.

Yeah, understand that.