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Tirril Harris

Life story interview with Paul Thompson

2011

Principle investigator's thematic highlights

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Tirril Harris

Interviewed by Paul Thompson

11 July 2011

1: Parents and education

My mother was widowed, in fact, a month before I was born, and she remarried when I was about four and a half, to [Thomas Balogh] who was a Don, an Economics Don at Balliol, and so I spent a lot of my childhood in Oxford. But I went to a boys' boarding school in Oxford, called the Dragon School. And that was a great privilege. There were twelve girls and about 400 boys. And I played rugby, and learnt Latin and Greek and all these sorts of things, and although my parents were very Left-wing, I'm afraid this boys' school gave everybody a partiality for going to boarding school at secondary educational stage, so I went to a boarding school [Badminton School]. But it was quite a nice, progressive boarding school, in Bristol, where people like Indira Ghandi and Iris Murdoch had been. And the Headmistress had been in the Communist Party in the early thirties. She was retired by the time I went there in the fifties. But then I went to Oxford....

So when my mother was widowed, she went back to her parents. And my grandfather was a vicar in Hertfordshire.... I mean, he was my primary male parent figure, because although … my stepfather then became quite important later, I think those first four and a half years of one's life, you know, are where the patterns are laid down, really....

I did have this incredibly idealised view of my father. ... At various points, he seems to have been a biochemist and a physicist. And he worked [with] Rutherford at Cambridge. He worked in his lab. But then he also did things like going on expeditions to Spitzbergen, and to collect rocks and analyse them, and so on. But he was also, later, a

Don at Balliol, in Oxford. And he was rich, you know, and upper class, ...

Well, my mother was a lovely person. And although, I think, you know, she was hit quite badly by my father's death, again, I don't think she was depressed. ... [After she re-married] she became a psychoanalyst, but she didn't train at the Institute, what is now called the British Society, so she was a psychoanalyst without a capital A in the middle. And, basically, she then founded what is now called the British Association of Psychotherapists...

My stepfather was Hungarian, and he was an economist of somewhat volatile personality! But I was fortunate that he was nice to me. But he, he has terrorised many a poor economics student during their lives, I'm afraid! (pp 1-6)

2: Grandmother and depression

This was three years after Dunkerque, and my grandmother had decided she would wait to see whether my uncle might be captured somewhere, whether he was alive, and she would give herself three years, and if there had been no news of him after three years, then she would decide he really was dead. And, apparently, she put me in a pram, aged two and three quarters, on the third anniversary of Dunkerque, and wheeled me round the lake, and then came back and retired to bed with pneumonia. So I don't know whether you could say, perhaps, I had some kind of basic emotional training to be interested in depression, because of this experience! ...

But, to be honest with you, I don't think I was interested in depression, I just happened to end up focusing on depression, rather than other sort of psychological disturbances. Because I don't know whether you know, but I'm also a psychotherapist, and so in the morning, before I come here, and in the evening when I go home, I have a private practice of patients. And there, I don't just see people with depression, I see people with eating problems and anxiety, and - I've never had a patient with multiple personality disorder but, I would take one on if they presented themselves. So, in that sense,

although the work I've done with George focuses on depression, I don't think I was being trained to want to work with that, rather than any other psychiatric problem. (pp. 3, 9)

3: Marriage

When I came to London? No, we got a flat, and I was cohabiting with Nigel, who became my husband. And we were evicted. We got a flat in really quite an elegant place, because my mother felt that it was terrible to be living in London. She was still in Oxford. She knew some psychoanalyst who was emigrating to the States, and was giving up his elegant flat in Park Square East, and when he realised that I was living in sin with - and Nigel's half Indian, and in those days, upper class people were even more sensitive to such issues than they are now - he wasn't at all happy! ... So we got married a year later.

How did you meet?

At Oxford.... Nigel describes himself as an economist, but really, he's another PPE person, in the sense that, you know, he's taught in Political Sciences Departments, his doctorate's in sociology. But he has, in later life, had to specialise a bit, and he has focused on the economics of cities in developing countries, and he was a professor at the Development Planning Unit at University College London, but, in fact, he retired early, and now works as a consultant for the World Bank, which is very exciting, because he goes to lots of different cities and helps them focus on developing (pp. 15-16)

We went to work in the Indian Statistical Institute in Calcutta. And this was something which my stepfather's contacts with the Head of the Indian Statistical Institute, who was called Professor Mahalanobis, it was very useful that Tommy [Balogh] had contact with him, because he said that we should go there and work for a year there. (p 18)

4: Psychotherapy and working with George Brown

To be honest with you, I suppose I should say this more than once during the interview,

because it's a very important point, I think, about people of my generation, working, as well as having children, was quite a thing in those days, in the sixties, and I wasn't quite sure that I would find myself a part-time slot, because I just wasn't going to work full-time when my children were pre-school. So I thought, "Well, if I do a training in therapy, that's the sort of thing that I might be able to do while being a mother". ... So I applied to do the training, and then I realised that I could work part-time with George, and still do this training, because it was an evening training. And, fortunately, my kids were quite good at going to sleep, and so I'd sort of kiss them goodnight, and rush out to class!

Very lucky! But do you think that that practical work has fed into the work with George?

I think it has, and I remember when we were collecting some of the earliest Camberwell interviews, we came across a particular, very interesting case, because she wasn't just a case of depression, but she had a lot of very strange personality characteristics and so on. And I said to George that I thought it was something to do with the death of her sister in childhood, and the way the sister had died.

And George said, "I don't usually hold with all these psychoanalytical notions, but I think, in this case, you might be on to something Tirril". You know, this is way back in 1969 or 1970, one of the earliest cases. And then, I think, gradually things about childhood, and how they still affected adults, because we kept finding them in the data, I think George started to believe them much more, and give more credence to psychoanalytic notions than he would have done otherwise. ...

Looking back, it's always very surprising to me that the whole way we came on to childhood was just so haphazard. And it's not how people write about constructing theories. Because one day, I said to George, half absent-mindedly, "There do seem to be an awful lot of people in the patient sample, whose mothers died when they were little". And he said, "Well, don't just sit there, do something with it!" (LAUGHS) ...

Fortunately, we had got it in the computer, but we hadn't got it properly in the computer, because we hadn't made a space in the computer for people who had been separated from

their mothers [rather than them dying]. We'd only got a space if the mother had died. So then we had to read everybody's life history again, and sometimes we had to actually contact them, because we didn't have evidence one way or the other, about the separation, and do it systematically.

But the silly thing is that I had read work by John Bowlby before we collected this data, because he'd published stuff in the forties. And so the theory was around, but we didn't think of the theory and then look in our data, it just sort of emerged in this very absent-minded way, from the data. (pp. 10-11)

5: Working with George Brown

Can you give me a picture of George as you remember first seeing him? How did he strike you, and what did he seem like?

Well, he seemed very modest. Very interested in what I'd been doing abroad. ... I suppose I was taken aback that he was just so interested in what I'd been doing! And, you know, I was terribly interested in what he was doing. So I think that was how the first meeting went, really.

Yes. And he seemed very democratic, and later on, when we've worked together, we've often kind of argued and so on, but the arguments always end up all right, and we work something out together. And that's, I think, because he is very democratic, and there are a lot of really quite sort of authoritarian academics about. (p. 27)

What's it like, trying to write things with George?

Well, it's probably good for one. … I've always had such a good relationship with him, that I've been able to be very open with him … He felt he had to scribble over everything that anyone had written, you know! And that this meant that he had really participated in it, and it was his paper too, and so on! But the converse of that is that, as a junior author, it is very easy working with George. [Because] when you have suggestions, he is very

receptive to them, and very laid-back, and doesn't mind you being critical....

We've tolerated each other! And I think it's also because we are, basically, very dedicated to what we're doing, and, you know, we have this kind of curiosity about people's lives, and how people work, and so on, and in the end, that takes priority. (pp. 54-55)

6: Interviewing in Calcutta

In Calcutta] I worked on the government's family planning policy, in the Demography Department of the Institute. And, you know, I learnt a great deal, I have to say, about collecting data in unsavoury areas, I think that is how to put it in a nutshell. And I think that was probably one of the most important things about me then fitting in with George's plans. ...

I just learnt how to get people to talk to me, and it meant I had to learn Bengali, and I had to learn how to squat, and not mind in the monsoon when the drains overflowed and came into the tin, tin shack! Because I was in what they call "The Bustees", which are the slums, where people, they build houses out of any old bit of cardboard that's fallen off a lorry, or a bit of corrugated tin. I was talking to the women about, on the one hand, whether they really wanted to limit their families, and on the other hand, how practical was it for them to do it? And here I was, you know, a great white foreigner, and yet I managed to get them to feel relaxed, and I, myself, managed to feel okay, despite the overflowing water! (p. 19)

7: Interviewing upper class men

I think interviewing upper-class middle-aged men, in England, is very different to interviewing any women... You would have not to be chatty, you'd have to be quite businesslike and formal. We try to order the questions in our interviews so that the more difficult ones are at the end anyway, when the person's got to know you better. But there

might be certain things which are in the middle of an interview at the moment, which I would then take out and put to the very end, because I would think, "This guy still isn't softened up enough to ask about financial problems", say, which are in the middle. You know, we leave things about sex to the very end, at the moment, anyway, now. But sometimes you get a sense with somebody that a particular sort of family relationship, which normally would be quite easy to talk about, that they may have some kind of hesitations or embarrassments about it, and so we would just postpone it to the end.

And do you think there's been a change over time, in the kind of problems you encounter in interviewing?... You say that you tend to leave questions about sex to the end, but … are those less difficult to ask now?

They are, they are less difficult to ask. They're much less difficult to ask. I think, in general, people will talk about more now than they would before. You know, the media have really softened people up, I think, you know, and Oprah Winfrey, I know she's really American TV, but she's been featured on British TV from time to time, and people have copied her, and it's really let it all hang out. It seems to be quite acceptable now, which it certainly wasn't in the late sixties. (pp. 20-21)

8: Rating scales in group work

We had what we call, now, "Consensus Meetings". But it was very much George's way of developing measures, which was to think about them. He was always very keen that they be ordinal, but he didn't want people to think of them as strictly arithmetic dimensions. And so everything was always upside-down. The worst or the best was always 1, and the least good or bad was always 4, 5 or 6, depending on the scale, because he didn't want people coming along and adding them together, and having scores. And he very much wanted to get a feel from the point of view of everybody in the team, as to how they interpreted the person they'd been interviewing, how other people interpreted them. And so we regularly used to meet. And at the beginning, in '69, when I first joined the team, we used to meet twice a week. (p. 35)

There were two other research assistants working on the patients. We all met together and, I think, this was really a very important thing. I'm sure George had already done it in his schizophrenia work, getting the team meeting together, discussing ratings, because, in the discussions, we generated lots of ideas which then went into the manuals as anchoring examples of rating points, and perhaps, we thought out new rating scales.

I remember, there was a point at which we thought, "Oh yes, we ought to have a special scale for somebody who has reached a transition point in their life", and George thought of the name of it as "turning point", and then we developed the ratings for that. And we were quite a long way through the data collection, but we'd got so much information about all these events, that it was perfectly possible to go back and re-rate all the first half of the data about the life events, in terms of whether this was a turning point or not, in that person's life. In that 18 months, I collected data on 116 people (p.28)

So the interviewer would just say, "This is case number 33", and give a little brief demographic background, you know, "Aged 40, with three children of 12, 10, and 8. Works part-time in the corner shop. The first event in the year was this", and then a very neutral description. And because she would have had to ask quite a lot of probes, she would give quite a full neutral description. And then the rest of the team think about whether they are ready to rate it or not, and usually they want to ask extra questions, which, usually, the interviewer can answer, she's just forgotten to put them in the presentation. And then everybody decides what they should rate, writes it down, and then we go round the team, read out what we've got, to see what the inter-rate reliability is like. (pp 40-41)

9: Ethics and confidentiality

We certainly guaranteed confidentiality. And we always filed things under numbers. And there was just one address list. And we told them, you know, "Only the members of our team will ever have access to the address list", which we'll be able to put the number to the address list. And if they didn't want to be taped, then we'd, you know, we'd just make notes. That was quite a strain. But, fortunately, very few people objected to the

tape. If you carry out a two-hour interview, you can't really note enough down, as you go along, without disturbing your rapport. So you'd have to come out afterwards and sit in the car and write an awful lot in the car, otherwise you'd forget people's exact words, and they're just so important, aren't they. But, fortunately, very few people refused the tape. (p. 31)

10: The contextual approach

So why is it that the best measure is not by the informant?

Well, it's a very good question. And, of course, people coming from academic Departments of Psychology, are always very put off by the contextual approach. I think it's because of the particular dependent variable that we have chosen to measure, which is depression, and second most prevalent dependent variable being anxiety, that they are emotions, and you can actually end up in a very silly and boring circle if you say, "Well, people who have depression, claim that depressing things have happened to them more often than have happened to other people". You could say, "Okay, it's because they're depressed. They found it depressing".

So what George was dedicated to doing was to show that the sorts of things that these depressed people claimed were depressing, anybody would have found markedly depressing, even if they hadn't suffered from a clinical depression afterwards, they would have found that experience depressing. Or anybody would have found that anxiety-provoking, even though they didn't develop an anxiety state, clinically defined. So I think this was the reason why we had to ignore the individual.

George was concerned to avoid bias. That's why he couldn't use the informant as the best measuring rod, because he'd get trapped in this circle, that a depressed person is more likely to define something as depressing. (pp. 38-39)

11: Feminism

Although I support Feminism, I can't claim to have been a proper Feminist, because - did we talk about politics last time? I think we did, briefly. I was a member of the Socialist Review Group, which then became the International Socialists, which then became Socialist Workers' Party. And, you know, Feminism is secondary to class position in that theoretical perspective. So, actually, I was quite late in reading proper Feminist literature. But there was all sorts of stuff around about being a woman, both in psychoanalytic theory and in ordinary sociology, people were quite aware of gender, without having any axe to grind, as a Feminist thing. (p. 49)