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Pioneers

of Qualitative Research

Paul Thompson

Life story interview with Karen Worcman

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Principle investigator's thematic highlights

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1. Researching at school

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🔊 I started doing some kind of research when I was quite young, when I was at school. And I think that there were two people there who were important influences on me. One was the biology teacher. I was never really particularly interested in science, because, on the whole, it was very badly-taught. But this teacher used to use the children – well, we were all boys, actually, it was a boys' boarding school – he used to use them in the research he was doing. For instance, he'd take a square yard of a meadow, and he'd discover all the different insects in it, and he discovered new insects that nobody had ever identified before. And I found that rather exciting, the idea that you could go to a local field and discover something new, that nobody had ever found. And he also got people with walkie-talkie radio sets, out on the hills, plotting the movement of birds and their migration, for instance, in the autumn. So I think I learnt from that, the idea that you could do something on the spot where you were, that if you were ingenious, you could start working in your own area, and the research, therefore, could be wherever you were. And I think that may be an idea that stayed with me. 🔊

2. Trevor Aston, an inspirational tutor

(p 3)

I had a tutor, called Trevor Aston, I've recently written an article about him, actually, because - I didn't know this at the time, but he was a manic depressive, and he later killed himself. But he was deliberately driven to suicide by the President of the College. I didn't know that. He died about ten years ago, 1985, I think it was. Suicide, yes. The President had got really sick of him, because when he was manic, I mean, he was so dominating that he was interfering with everything, and buying books, very expensive books for the library, and altogether behaving in a very irritating way. And this President couldn't stand it! So, and the President himself, I think, was a most peculiar man, and he deliberately tried to drive Aston to kill himself, but nobody realised that he'd done that, until this President actually published an autobiography about a year ago, in which he boasted, he had a whole chapter called, "The Aston Affair", and he boasted of driving this man to death. And I was so outraged by this that I wrote a letter, it was published in *The Times*, and then I was encouraged by Raphael Samuel to do an article for the *History Workshop*

Journal. So I phoned about twenty people who'd known him, and I reconstructed his life, a kind of oral history on the telephone.

He was my tutor, and he was a very unusual man. He ran *Past and Present*, which was a Marxist/progressive history journal, very very influential journal. He was a mediaevalist. But he took me incredibly seriously. I mean, we had to write essays, twice a week we had to write essays, and he would argue and argue with me about my essays, and then he would tell me to come back in the morning, and he would look up more evidence and argue again. And it's true to say that nobody, in my whole life, has ever taken me so seriously! (LAUGHS) And I didn't realise it was partly because he was a bit crazy! I didn't know about it! (LAUGHS) ...

So he made me work a lot! And he got me doing research on the College buildings, and that was really exciting, I can remember rushing around the building with him, in this slightly intoxicated kind of state of excitement, and him showing me mediaeval documents about the building of it, you know, and so on, and I wrote things for him, which were published [in the college magazine, the *Pelican Record*]. Probably my first published research article.

3. Architecture and research

(p 5)

🔊 I could have professionally become an architectural historian.) Well, I do love architecture, and I have a sense of it, and I'd been interested ever since I started looking at buildings, by space and texture, and so on. So it sprang out of a real feeling, which I still have.

But I think the point was, when I started doing it, it was something - ... [First] you went to look at buildings, and then you became interested – and then you did research on the architect, or the building. So you started by the sensual experience, and then you moved to the research. I also wrote the book on William Morris (*The Work of William Morris*, 1967 and 3rd edn. 1991). So I've written two books, really, in that art historical field. And, for quite a time, I taught at East Anglia, one day a week, for the University there. But what I found was that, by the time I got there it [architectural history] had been professionalised.

So instead of starting with the buildings, you read books. And then, if you were lucky, you went out and looked at them. I tried to take these students out and look at buildings, take them to a 19th century building, and say, "Well, now, what is 19th century about this? How would you say that this is different from a mediaeval building?" And they'd never had that experience before. But, for me, that's how it started. And I think that was one reason why I started to withdraw, it became ... too specialised, too much a library activity, and I wanted the direct contact. 🗣️

4. Becoming a researcher, jokes and the law

(p 6)

Well, when I got to the end of my [first] degree at Oxford [in 1958], I think that my tutors were terribly surprised that I did very well. I think Trevor Aston, he knew that I was bright and might do well. [Michael Brock] the 19th century tutor who, in a way, was more important, didn't realise that, partly because I used to laugh at him too much! There was a lot of laughing went on in ... we had to read our essays out aloud to our tutors, that was the system, and Trevor Aston deliberately paired me with a rather pompous fellow student, and he used to try and get me to start laughing. In fact, he would deliberately let out a huge laugh, and then stop ... that I would be set off by him, and start laughing! But the trouble was, the other man, called Michael Brock, was that, that actually we laughed at him, rather than at each other! ...

There was another complication which was that, in my last few months, I got involved in the Peace Movement, which had just started, the anti-nuclear Movement, and I wrote an article, which was published in a student magazine [*/sis*], which resulted in my being charged under the Official Secrets Act, because I'd partly used knowledge that I'd got during my National Service in the Navy. And it all got mixed up with my Finals, between the, the first exams and the oral exams, for instance, I had the preliminary hearings of the trial. And by the time I came to the oral examination [the viva], I just couldn't think about history at all, I was only thinking about these questions about aeroplanes and so on! {I already had a First but} they had to get through, asking me two or three questions, and I just hardly could answer them.

So then I got convicted and I went to prison [for one month]. And then when I came out, I still didn't know what to do, and my parents said to me, "Well, you've always been very argumentative, why don't you be a lawyer?" So I tried doing that, and I spent six months in a quite interesting lawyer's office, they acted for the Musicians' Union, so you met quite interesting characters. But I hated the legal world, I thought it was so conservative and ... dirty, in a way, too. They lived in these dirty old offices, it was really stifling. And eventually, after about six months, well, I realised that in the evenings, I was spending my time trying to do research and write, and that was what I really wanted to do.

So I felt I just must go back and try and do that instead. And then I decided I wanted a 20th century subject, because I wanted so history that was relevant... and then I met somebody, just casually, who said, "Why don't you study the Labour Movement in London?" And I thought, "Well, that will be good, because I'd have to be in London a lot of the time". And so that's what I did.

5. How not to interview elites

(p 8)

🔊 But I also did an interview with Herbert Morrison, who was the Home Secretary in the ... late 40s, under the big Labour Government, and he had also been the Secretary of the London Labour Party, you see, so he was a big figure in my research, really. And this interview was a disaster. He was really retired, he was still an MP, but he was effectively retired by the time I interviewed him. So we sat on the terrace of the Houses of Parliament, overlooking the river, and had tea, and I started by, I wanted to hear about his earlier life. And I knew from what he'd actually written himself, and other evidence, that, for at least a year, he had belonged to a Marxist Party [the SDF], there was a Marxist strand of British Socialism, you see. And I asked him about this, and he completely denied having ever belonged to any Marxist organisation, you see. So I just accepted that. I mean, I thought that was the thing to do. You know, I had no training in how to do an interview. And almost immediately, he lost interest in the interview. And then he got out, he had something like a handbag on his shoulder, rather unusual at that time, for a man, and he got out this huge pair of scissors, and he started clipping at his finger-nails, and throwing the nails over into the river! (LAUGHS) And so I knew it was finished, really. And that really put me off oral history, you know. I just felt that showed it was no use. I didn't realise that I'd failed in

terms of how to do an interview with him. He didn't respect me after I'd accepted a whopping big lie like that. 🗣️

6. Reading landscapes and townscapes

(p 11)

When I travel, I'm always looking in a way which I've learnt, partly through the architectural history, and then there's all the social knowledge which one has developed over the years. But another important influence on me was W.G. Hoskings, who wrote about *The Making of the English Landscape*, and how you could read landscapes, historically, because you could see that, for instance, the shapes [of the fields], the positions of the hedges, were either mediaeval, or they were introduced in the eighteenth century, in the move from the open fields to the enclosure system. Or places like in the far West of England, where I was recently, you know we were in a house in January in a place called Zennor, overlooking the Atlantic, in the far West of England, in Cornwall, and the hedges there - they're not really hedges, they're stone banks - but they go back 2000 years. [Hoskins] wrote about that kind of thing, and taught me to look all the time at what you see as you pass by, as both beautiful, but also as a social and historical document. And I've found tremendous gain in that. So I learnt to read the countryside really.

But then I learnt, I got very interested, partly through the thesis on London, in reading towns, so that you learnt to see ... there's going to be, shall we say like here [in Stockholm], there's an old centre, and then there's a fashionable area near the centre, and then there's usually an inner ring which is rather poorer, and then you gradually go out and get to the better paid working-class, and then the middle-classes beyond them, and so on. And when I look back, I remember going to America, and reading a lot about their social history of the 19th and 20th century, and then visiting cities like Chicago, and looking at the architecture, but also looking at it socially. And I've got a terrific lot from that, for my life.

7. The influence of Peter Townsend

(p 14)

I had read a book by Peter Townsend, because one of his books was about London, it was *The Family Life of Old People in East London* [1957], and he was appointed Professor, at

Essex, of Sociology. I had a friend called Royston Lambert, who I knew because he'd been in architectural history, but he'd moved over to sociology, and he was in touch with Peter Townsend... So I went and had lunch and talked to Peter, and he liked me. And then they advertised the job, and I got it.

Peter was one of the big influences in my life. He's just retired now, he stayed at Essex until about ten years ago, then he went to Bristol University, and his research, his life's work has been on poverty. He started with old people, but then he moved from old people to poverty, and he did a whole series of big research programmes on that, and he's always been tremendously involved with the political scene, and trying to pressurise the government, or the opposition, to do things for people in poverty. And he founded various pressure groups too. And now that he's retired, and if you want to find him, the easiest way is to ring up the Houses of Parliament, because he's now married to a Member of Parliament, a younger woman, and he lurks around! The last two times I've been to the Houses of Parliament, each time I've bumped into him! So the point is, what I'm trying to say is, that he was actively involved in changing society, and that's what he thought research was about. And that really powerfully influenced me. He had a very powerful, moral commitment, he's got a charismatic morality, which I found very very influential. And it was something I wanted at the time. I wanted to feel there was a social purpose in what I was doing. So that working with him was very very positive for me, in that way.

8. Beginning oral history: Townsend, Hobsbawm and *The Edwardians*

(p 15)

[Peter Townsend] had been interviewing old people, and he said to me fairly soon, he said, "Look, I don't know whether this is of any potential interest to you, but I found that they can tell you very interesting things about the past. And let me show you this box of extracts from my interviews". He said, "I can't do anything with them, with this, but maybe it might interest you". So he showed me this box with all these extracts from his interviews, which were things like memories of funerals and ... I don't know. I mean, they were of interest. But the main point was, the idea that he was pushing.

Then I got asked by Eric Hobsbawm, who was already, I suppose, the most important Left-wing social historian, whom I had met once, and didn't really like terribly, because ... how could I express it? He's not exactly... he's become more vivacious and pleasure-loving as

he's got older. But he always seemed a person that had a down-pushing kind of side to him, and he didn't make you feel good.... But I admired his work enormously, actually. I thought he was a very very clever man. And always original, what he writes.

He asked me to write a volume in his *Social History of Britain*; and that became *The Edwardians* [1975; 3rd edn 1992]. Now, he didn't want me to do oral history, but the people at Essex, like Peter and others, said, "Well, why don't you go and talk to people who remember the period?" And, at that time, the Social Science Research Council had just been set up, so we decided to apply to them for money, and I got I think it was about £30,000 which would be an awful lot now, ... multiply by ten, probably... For making the interviews, transcribing, sorting material out. And we did about 450 interviews.

9. Interpreting *The Edwardians*: life stories or cross analysis

(pp 16-17)

I found a conflict between the cross-analysis, and the whole stories. Once you knew a whole interview, somehow you wanted to have that whole person there, that you always feel... Yes, that was the first time I experienced it. And the way I solved it in the book was that I had a series of chapters which used the interviews as a whole, with short extracts. It might be a chapter on childhood and youth, or marriage, for instance, or there was one on politics, and so on. But then I also had two groups of portraits of people and their families. In the main group I juxtaposed different social [levels]. So it started with the daughter of a landed aristocrat, a really upper-class wealthy family, and it ended with the child of a poor, unemployed labourer. Right in the middle, a big block in the middle, you see, about a quarter of the book roughly, and maybe more. And then two other [portraits] towards the end, which were both woman, and one was a political woman who'd consciously tried to change society, and the other was an example of unconscious pressure for change, a poor woman who struggled to get a decent life. Actually, in the end, she failed. It's a very sad story, but it shows the pressure that's there all the time for ordinary people [to better themselves (cf. 'Life histories and the analysis of social change', 1982)].

And that was an idea I got from the interviews, which I hadn't had before. Theories of social change were all about politics or megaforges like the economy, and there was nothing about this way in which ordinary people, all the time, are making decisions, trying to do better for themselves. Whether they marry, whether they have children, whether

they move to somewhere else, whether they get a different job, all those kind of things. And that's an enormous part of the pressure for change. So that was meant to be symbolised at the end of the book, This was one of the new ideas that came out of it.

Then I gave the manuscript, you see, to Hobsbawm, and his first reaction was that I should cut out all the oral history stuff! So I said, "I'm sorry, I'm keeping it in". He didn't want it, no... I said, "I won't cut it out, no". Anyway, I refused to, and then, well, he obviously decided it was better to have the book like it was than not at all!

10. Quota sampling

(pp 19)

🔊 My subsequent experience suggests that quotas for retrospective representativeness are rather good. I think they're better than random samples. Because the random samples, if you take the present population, in a random way, it's biased, in many ways. By gender, because of women living longer. Occupation – there are also particular occupations where people die much faster, like mining, for instance. And also poverty. Better off people live longer. So you tend to get a sample which is more heavily-biased towards the middle classes, if you use a random sample. I've noticed this with my more recent research, we've tended to use random samples, because that's what all the social scientists are asking for. But I think, actually, from experience, that the quota samples are better. 🔊

11. Problems of sampling

(p 18)

🔊 But just going back to the sample. A problem - we had some problems – that it was very difficult to find the poorest people, and I think that, by having this quota system, we were forced much more to look for them, than we would have done otherwise. I think that was good. But we also knew, for each area, that, for instance, this was a mining area, or a farming area, so we wanted to make sure that we had the main occupations included, you see.

And then, in each area, we would try to use a variety of methods of finding people, like the local radio, local newspaper. Sometimes there were social work contact organisations.

There were day centres where old people meet. Sometimes the churches. Sometimes people were just found casually.

And you had no other criteria than the person who spoke a lot?

No, we didn't insist on that. The interviewers naturally wanted people who would speak, so that wasn't a problem. Sometimes we had problems that interviewers were involved in one particular local network, and so it was very important to watch out for that. For instance, I remember, in South Wales, there was an interviewer who was connected to a local chapel, and so everybody she interviewed turned out to be religious. They were all very good, but they were all religious. Now, we knew from reading, that there was a big conflict in South Wales between the chapel people and the pub people. So we said to her, "Look", you know, "we've got to have people who don't go to chapel. Look for people who go into the pub". And once we said that, then she went and found the other people. 🗣️

(p 40)

🗣️ Well, the sample was the first problem to solve, and I feel very happy about that solution. The next problem really was the question about whether, if we were going to use the family systems perspective as part of what we were doing, because if we wanted a fusion between that perspective and the more social historical approach, was the single life story going to provide the material suitable for a family systems approach? Because, after all, the family systems approach was developed through clinical work, when families were seen as a group, and we were thinking about interviewing people singly, on their own. And we wanted to do a little pilot study on that, but we couldn't get anyone to give us support to do that.

So, eventually, we decided to do a rather impoverished pilot study, as an experiment. So we took some families who were willing to be guinea pigs, to be experimented on – who were going to the Institute of Family Therapy – and recorded their sessions, and then carried out in-depth individual interviews with some of them. Only two or three, in practice, because usually it wasn't possible to do more. And then compared them.

And I found that very interesting, because there were clear advantages in the group session. In highlighting the immediate problems faced by the family, and there was no doubt that – you might almost say that the life story interview actually softens as it comes to the present, it becomes blander, really and while, if you put members of a family together in a therapeutic situation, there is a lot of colliding, and it's almost explosive. There's nothing like that in the interviews. But, on the other hand, to understand the trajectory of people, how their experiences developed, how life made sense to them and so on, it's only really possible to do that well through the interviews. Because in the group sessions, nobody was able to talk for very long, and so everything they said is fragmented, it doesn't follow through, there are bits missing with one person, in comparison with another, and so on. So when we looked at this material, we all concluded that there was no doubt that we could, very effectively, use life story material from a systems perspective, although it would be quite a novel way of doing it. 🗣️

12. Conceiving the archive

(pp 22-23, 25)

I think we fairly quickly realised that we had, really, fallen on an extraordinarily rich material, and we couldn't possibly exhaust it with one book. And that was how the idea of creating the Archive came. And this was a completely independent decision. We knew of nobody who was doing anything in that way, creating an archive like that. In fact, we scarcely knew of anybody else doing oral history...

Well, I'd be surprised if the idea of the Archive is in the original application. I think it came to us fairly early on in doing the field-work. Yes ... but then we'd started, we realised that there was that potential. And it has, actually, been used by a number of interesting people. There was Standish Meacham, who, almost as soon as we'd finished, who ... American social historian, who wrote a book called *Worlds Apart*, which is three-quarters or more taken from our Archive: it's a social history book about Britain. And then another rather important one with John Gillis, who wrote on the history of marriage in Britain [*For Better, For Worse*], and there are, I think, three chapters from our Archive. And then there was one by Charles More, *Skill and the English Working-Class*, where we are again, the major source. There are a lot of people who have used it in a slightly lesser way, and there's a whole book on education based on it fairly recently, too. And this work on social

mobility, too, which is recent. So it's a continuing source of value. That's in spite of the fact that until very recently, it was not being looked after, formally, by anyone. Brenda kept a watching eye over it, but it wasn't officially open at all. People would learn there might be a possibility and then write. But I think that it's going to of tremendous value in the future, because it's absolutely unique. You couldn't possibly do it any longer, there are interviews going back to people born in the 1870s.

13. George Ewart Evans and interviewing: 'Never interrupt'

(pp 23, 30)

There was a local person, George Ewart Evans, who saw himself more as an ethnographer in the Scandinavian tradition. But he did some rather good books on East Anglian farm workers. And we met him, and he helped us to learn how to interview.

It was him, for instance, that said, "You've got to listen to people. That is the key thing. You should never interrupt". You know, "You've got to hear them". And I remember him playing bits of tape, so that we could get the idea. And then the other thing that we learnt from him was the way that some of these older local people had got words which went right back to the 16th century, and that was very fascinating, of course, and very unexpected. Perhaps less important in the long-run. But I do think he was a key influence about interviewing techniques, because the sociological tradition is more rigid.

What I then did is half way between the structured interview with a set of questions, and the completely unstructured interview. The way I see it is that the guide is there as a list of topics, and you've got to know the guide, and know that you need to cover those topics. But you do an interview which follows what the speaker is saying...

We'd learnt the technique, primarily, from sociological methods books. There were no history methods books at all, obviously. And we got some influence from anthropologists, but that was more a question of understanding that the interview was an interactive process, I think that idea was pushed at us fairly early on, by anthropologists. And then there was George Ewart Evans, who I mentioned before.

14. *The Voice of the Past*

(p 21-22)

🔊 *The Voice of the Past* was a sort of distillation of all that we'd learnt, really, on that project, and also, I would say, of the kind of common wisdom of the people that I'd met, who were doing oral history in Britain. And by 1977, when I wrote it, so I just had made first contact with Italy, but at that point Luisa Passerini, for instance, hadn't developed her ideas about the subjective. So the first edition of *The Voice of the Past* is very much a positivistic work. There is a mention about rumours, the importance of rumours, and people re-formulating their memories, but it's a terribly minor part of it, and the main argument is the positive value of these memories, and whether or not they're reliable, and how you decide whether or not they're reliable. That was the research tradition I was coming from, essentially, really, a social scientific one. 🔊

15. Towards subjectivity

(pp 32-34)

And the book, why did you make this positivist perspective in the beginning?

Well, I think, you see, I came out of history where there's no subjective tradition. I then moved into sociology where, again, at that time, there was no post-modern interest in subjectivity. It was a tremendously strong tradition of doing social research to establish facts, and I was trying to relate to that. I don't think, for the time, it was particularly positivistic, there just wasn't very much of an alternative vision. And the interesting thing is that through the interviews, I had already realised that there was something else.

In particular, it happened through an interview I describe in the book, when I went to Shetland, and [in one of my very first oral history interviews] I asked an old man [Willie Robertson] about whether or not there was much contact with the landed gentry in the Shetland Islands. In reply, he told me a story about a funeral [of a laird], and it was a very extraordinary story, it was about how there were people invited from all over Britain to this funeral, and they had a tremendous amount to drink, and then they set out, as was the custom in the Islands, with all the men sharing and carrying the coffin. And normally, they tend to group a poor man and a rich man together, as pairs, and then they go for a bit, and then they change round, so that everybody has a share in bearing the coffin, and it's

meant to symbolise equality before God. And then eventually he's buried. And in the Shetlands, it's usually rather dramatic, because most of the cemeteries are in a remote spot, or above the cliffs, with the sea below. Anyway, in this case, they set off, and they'd had too much to drink, so one by one they, they dropped by, fallen down by the wayside, until eventually there was just one man left, you see, and then he fell down, with the landowner's remains in the coffin. And then an old crofter, which is a local small farmer, comes by, and he sees the remains in the coffin, and he gets a rope, and puts the coffin on his back, and he buries the laird. But his kind weren't invited to the funeral. That's the last line, that "his kind weren't invited to the funeral". So it's very dramatic. He was saying there was no contact [even at a funeral; they were just totally different social groups.

I was very struck by this story, and I made sure that [Willie and his daughter] told me who it was, and they believed that it was [Gifford of Busta], within living memory, as far as they were concerned. And then I discovered from people in Edinburgh, at the School of Scottish Studies, that this was a folk story which was widespread in different versions, throughout Scotland, but that [Willie] had his own version. His way of telling it was strongly influenced by the fact that, on the one hand, he was an Elder of the Kirk, they're lay people who are important in the Church, and so it had an element of the Good Samaritan, the man who picks up the coffin, in the way of the Good Samaritan. A parable from the New Testament.

But also, [Willie was a class-conscious] Marxist. He'd been converted by visiting speakers, Socialists who came up to the Shetlands on the herring boats. So he was rather unusual in being both an Elder of the Kirk, and a Marxist. And you see that in his story. And I point that out in *The Voice of the Past*, that you could tell something about his consciousness from the story. But it's isolated there in the book.

Then, by the time of the second edition, ten years later, all the people in oral history had been very strongly influenced both by Luisa Passerini on her ideas about subjectivity and silence, and memory, and I think even more by Sandra Portelli and his ideas about the way in which people changed memory, and how that is part of the value of memory. So there's a whole chapter on "Memory and the Self", which is completely new, in the second edition.

16. Encountering the culture of Shetland

(p 36)

You see, we went to Shetland first, for *The Edwardians*, partly because we thought it was the most different bit of Britain ... But anyway, we became very interested by their extraordinary culture, particularly because it combined a very simple kind of way of life, in material terms, these very poor farmer/fishermen, with a rich verbal culture, and oral tradition, lots of stories and legends and so on. But also a tremendous vivacity they had. Very lively, very thinking people. They're almost the only people I've ever met who, when you're doing the interview, continually turn round and ask the interviewer, "What do you think about that?" You ask them about say, religion, and then they suddenly turn round and say, "And what's your view about that?" "Do you go to church?" and so on - which is quite unsettling, sometimes. But it's typical of them, they like an argument about something. So that was very attractive, and for me, it was very much parallel with - William Morris thought he'd found that kind of society in Iceland, actually. So, to me, it was exciting to find a place like that.

The other thing was the way they brought up children, which was, and still is, or certainly was when I went then, very remarkable, in that they keep children as part of the whole social life, and they don't use any physical punishment, they just use reasoning. Now, if you contrast that with Britain, and particularly Scotland, it's very exceptional. And it influenced me, personally, quite a lot, too.

17. *Living the Fishing*: changing a hypothesis

(pp 37-38, 41)

You could read one or two progressive handbooks that are around 1910, for middle-class people, about it, to not beat their children. But they wouldn't have been reading those sort of books in the Shetland Islands.

So then we developed a kind of Marxist idea of why this was happening. Because we noticed, also, the role divisions were much less sharp, and the men were sharing the cooking and the cleaning of the houses, and the women were working out on the land. So we decided, it's to do with the economy, because they are doing this fishing, where they

only go out for a day or so, and they come back all the time, and so the men are continually going out, leaving the farm under the care of the women for a couple of days, coming back. While they're on the boat, they have to cook for themselves and clean the boat, and so they learn these skills, and then the women are learning the farming. So they're, they're both multi-skilled, instead of there being a gender divisioning of skills. So that was a nice theory. So then we thought we'd try it out and look at other ...

Well, what happened was that we found the purely Marxist explanation didn't work, because we also then went and [interviewed on] the Western Isles, where they had a similar kind of fishing, but the family was totally different. The men were completely domineering, and the women were kept quiet and when you went to interview there, the women got shut into the kitchen! And the children were slapped, and so on. It was completely different.

So then we realised that it was also linked to the role of religion... The important point about Shetland, I think, was that there was a multiplicity of religious views, that people had. It had been Christianised very late, and it was never, I think, never very deep, [though they] incorporated guilt, to the extent that children bear a strong conscience. And what you found was that every person seemed to have their own religious position, which was often an amalgam of different religions. Or it might be a Socialist one, or a semi-Socialist one, and so on. And they would say, "Well, the reason why we're like that is that, when we go to sea, we have a long time out with nature, and we contemplate the meaning of life". Well, of course, that was rubbish, because you found plenty of other fishermen who were out at sea, who would spend their time drinking, or held very rigid religious attitudes.

And I think it really, probably, is partly a survival of Scandinavian culture. But it's very difficult, [because for family relationships] you can't go back beyond the late 19th century, so you can't really be sure of whether the pre-Christian epoch which had similar attitudes. But my guess would be that it does, because you do find this gender equality and attitude to children on the West Coast of Norway, where a lot of the [Shetland] people had come from. [Shetland was] Norwegian up until the 15th century. So in the end my interpretation was that it was communal culture, including religion, and family culture, which were the missing variables in the explanation...

[The book] started from this question about child-rearing, and then it gradually re-focused, in terms of my bit, around why was it that some fishing communities had the adaptability to change, and to deal with new technologies, new markets, changes in the species of fish you could catch, and so on, and others didn't? I tried to explain that in terms of socialisation and the community culture. So the extreme was between Shetland, where children were brought up to talk and have their own opinion, and think for themselves, and take responsibility for themselves from an early age, and the fishermen were remarkably creative, technically, for instance, they developed new adaptations of the equipment that was available, and they were prepared to shift their fishing patterns and so on. Like the people in the North-East of Scotland. But, in contrast to the Western Isles, where the children were brought up to follow their elders, and they just seemed to be incapable of adapting themselves, economically.

18. Strategic sampling

(pp 38-39)

Well, it's a very different kind of interview sample. We had the Census, and we looked at that, to find out what the main significant occupations were. But you don't want a representative sample, really. Obviously you want a lot of fishermen, because these are fishing communities. But then, what's going to be essential is to ...

For instance, when we went into one of the first places, Buckie, now, this interested me. I chose it because it was a town which converted from sail fishing to steam fishing, in the 1900s, around 1910-1920, without going capitalist, effectively. Their boats stayed owned by the local people, the families, instead of by companies, and I thought I'd like to try to understand how that happened. Now, we arrived in this place, and we got recommended all these marvellous old men [to interview]. But after a while, we noticed that they were all skippers of boats. So we said, "Well, what about the ones who weren't skippers?" And they said, "Oh, well, anyone with any intelligence, became skipper of a ship. There's no point in your talking to the other people, they wouldn't have anything to say to you".

And it was a long time before we eventually found some people who'd ... There was a man who'd been a lifeboat man, and had served earlier just on the deck of a boat. And through him, we got on to another network, and it turned out there was a different sort of network, a slightly different social group. And they had definitely a different story to tell. Also, their ideology was different. They were much less religious. And they were more traditional. And they had more weather lore, weather superstition. Their language was a bit different, too, and so on. So it was very very important to get them. And we wouldn't have done, without this concept of sampling. Of course, it was obvious we needed women too. And then we realised, after a while, that there were key financial intermediaries, like the sales people, in particular, who bought the fish, and arranged the loans for boats. So then we tried to interview those. And so, in a sense, we proceeded [to sample] in a strategic way, rather than in a representative way. And I think that's the only way to do that kind of study.

19. Influences from family therapy

(p 47)

So when we thought we had funding [for Families and Social Mobility, and] I got the other one, the Life Stories [and Ageing grant], so I decided to put the two together, and do the fieldwork together.

Because that enabled us to do two or three generations in each family. And so, for the old people, you could [hear from them] about their children and grandchildren, and [also hear] what the children and grandchildren thought about them. So it developed in that way. This is when I first started doing trans-generational interviews, within the same family, and I felt it was a very exciting new approach.

[At the same time] I got involved with Gill Gorrell-Barnes, the family therapist, through Natasha's influence, because I'd been married to Natasha [who was a child psychiatrist] for some time, and I got interested in the ideas about family therapy and the way in which the relationships within families are a kind of [interlocked] social and emotional dynamic, so that what happens with one person relates to what happens with the others, it is all inter-connected, so you understand the family as a whole. And you also find repeating systems of people who do the same thing in each generation. Or reject. There are also rejections across generations, so people do the opposite to their parents. And then the

next generation does the opposite again, so they end up doing the same as the grandparents!

20. Ageing and the challenge of recreating meaning

(pp 49-52)

With this project, where we were fortunate enough to be able to do that, we had three generations in the same family. We also had memories of [each person's] grandparents, so we were able to use those memories of grandparents of the oldest generation, to go right back and give a picture of older people in the early twentieth century. So we used a series of different interview evidence, both within the project, and also out of it, to construct both a picture of old age now, and also a social history of old age. So the first part of the book is a social history of old age, and then we look at old age today.

I think the thing that struck us most powerfully, was the way in which old age was a phase of life where people had, in a way, to start creating their own destiny again, because it was as if in the middle years of life, you were fixed, you had a job, you were a parent or whatever, but you've got a trajectory which is fairly clearly established, and you also don't have a great deal of free time. But once you retire, you're a bit more like young unmarried people are, you have this curious freedom, but with it, a problem of identity and meaning in life. So to search for meaning is even more crucial, I think, at that stage in life, than earlier. And we found that, obviously, was related to whether or not people had found something purposeful to do. If they hadn't, they were usually rather depressed, and, in fact, there's quite a lot of evidence suggesting that, with older people, being physically unwell and being depressed, are more powerfully linked than they are with people in the middle years of life. So it's actually rather crucial, to find meaning, even to survive physically, at that stage. And the book's fundamentally about how people found meaning. So you can find meaning either ... Particularly men, carry on working, [and there are] some women who carry on trying to make housework the centre of their lives. And then there are people who live for love. They're usually old people who have relatively recently remarried...

But anyway, going back to Life Stories and Ageing, you see, this idea about finding meaning: I hadn't mentioned leisure, that was the other area of it. And that was

particularly impressive, because it was the one where people tended to innovate most, at this stage in life, they would take up a new form of leisure. There was a woman who took up flower arrangements, for instance, and it became absolutely essential to her way of life, and even her whole garden depended on growing leaves for her flower arrangements. What was interesting was, though, that nearly always people were drawing on things which were in their earlier life, or their family, because, for instance, in her case, it went back to her feeling that she was artistic, it was in her kind of inheritance, and her father had been an artist.

So, it fits in with my interest in creativity in everyday life. In order to survive, in other words, as an older person, you have to have a certain degree of adaptability, creativity, because you've lost your work, and as you get older, of course, you lose friends, because they're dying. You often lose your home. And you have to have an ability to re-create something new – to make new friends, make new activities and so on. If you don't do that, you get depressed and very likely you will die relatively earlier. Well, if you find meaning, you can be incredibly happy and fulfilled. And some of these people we interviewed were absolutely wonderful.

21. Cultures and creativity

(pp 52-53)

This is a long-term interest of mine, creativity, and it's something I want to do more about. It connects up with my interest earlier in the arts and architecture. And the way that it now has come together, is of interest, particularly, in this creativity of early everyday life, but also an interest in popular art.

That's one of the things I found very exciting about going to Latin America, first of all, Mexico, [then Brazil]. I think it's just extraordinary, the variety of things that people make, very poor people, and not stereotyped things, but continually inventing. Natasha and I, about two years ago, went to this village [Ochimicho], where they make pottery with devils as the theme. You can get devils there doing almost everything. There are many women potters, very very poor, they live in one room, and half of the house is the kiln. But they're all doing different things, they've all got their own styles. I think it's very impressive, the potential of ordinary people...

I'm very fascinated by how it is that some cultures allow people to develop in this way, and, I think, realise the potential which is in human beings, and so many other cultures just repress it. Certainly, that was a major theme of the Coventry study, the repression, really, of that creative potential in the car workers. I don't know whether talked about that. And it's a continuous theme, that keeps coming up. It's also in William Morris, you see. William Morris believed that there was a creative potential in everybody, and that everybody, of the simplest level, should learn to make something, like making pottery, or something like that.

22. Women and social mobility

(p 54)

You can look at the way that each family, you could do a big family tree, of all the occupations, and then discover that there's not just father/son transmission of jobs, but mothers are also influential, or aunts, and then you start looking more deeply. "Well, why do they choose to accept or reject family influence?" And you can find that links in with some of the emotional things that are going on.

So I was trying to do this complex kind of analysis, but basically showing that transmission between generations is much richer and more complicated than just father's occupation and son's occupation. Women as well as men; and it's emotional as well as material and occupational. And trying to look at the things which were transmitted, which include attitudes, different sort of ways of behaving, emotional relationships. You'd get patterns, like patterns of violence, patterns of divorce, patterns of role division, like you get cases of families where all the women marry men who cook, for instance. All these strange repetitions that go on, and I got very fascinated by that.

23. Integrating qualitative and quantitative: the stepfamily sample

(pp 57-58)

The key problem was to find a sample, because it's been the experience of many people who have tried to do studies of stepfamilies, that people are reluctant to come forward. If you publicise that you want to do a study of stepfamilies, people won't come forward. Or, if you do get people, then they're not typical at all. And this means that you can't

generalise, obviously, from the work. So we were very keen to do something based on a proper sample...

So we were fortunate. We found a solution, which was [the National Child Development Study], that's a longitudinal study of all the people born in 1958, in one week, in Britain. So they have documentation of the people who grew up in stepfamilies, and who are now in their thirties, [and they generously agreed to give us] a list of them. We decided we wanted people who'd entered stepfamilies between 7-16, because we thought if they'd gone into stepfamilies earlier, the problem would be, they wouldn't remember the transition. And so we were given a list of these people, and then we did a regional sub-sample, because there were too many, and we decided to cut down the travelling. But we balanced that out, so it was representative. We interviewed 50 men and women, we balanced out men and women. We tried to have somewhat more stepmother families than we would have done, statistically, because they're much fewer, but we wanted enough to be able to compare them with stepfather families. We also had families from death, and families from divorce.

But then we found there was an immediate problem with the sample, which was, I think, very interesting, that one-fifth of our people had not actually become stepchildren after the age of seven, because the earlier interviewers on the longitudinal study had been misinformed about what was happening. Several of them had been stepchildren right from birth. The children had been misled, and so had been the interviewers. They pretended that the stepfather was the natural father. And there was a bizarre instance where it was the other way round: the child had been born out of wedlock, extra-maritally, when the woman was married to somebody else, it was a child of an affair when the mother was married. And then the man died, the original husband died, and she married the child's father. But she went on pretending that the original husband was the father. So this child was brought up as though she was with a stepfather, although he was really her real father.

And these children only discovered the truth, usually, when they were in their late teens, like they were trying to get a passport, or something like that. And then, of course, there was a total shock.

24. Differing perspectives in therapy and research interviews

(p 59)

The next problem really was the question, if we were going to use the family systems perspective as part of what we were doing, because if we wanted a fusion between that perspective and the more social historical approach, was the single life story going to provide material also suitable for a family systems approach? Because, after all, the family systems approach was developed through clinical work, when families were seen as a group, and we were thinking about interviewing people singly, on their own. And we wanted to do a little pilot study on that, but we couldn't get anyone give us support to do that.

So, eventually, we decided to do a rather impoverished pilot study, as an experiment. So we took some families who were willing to be guinea pigs, to be experimented on - who were going the Institute of Family Therapy - and we recorded their sessions, and then carried out in-depth individual interviews with some of them. Only two or three, in practice, because usually it wasn't possible to do more. And then compared them. And I found that very interesting. There were clear advantages in the group session, in highlighting the immediate problems faced by the family, and there was no doubt that - you might almost say that the life story interview actually softens as it comes to the present, it becomes blander, really; while, if you put them as a family together, in a therapeutic situation, there is a lot of colliding, and it's almost explosive. There's nothing like that in the interviews. But, on the other hand, to understand the trajectory of people, how their experiences developed, how life made sense to them, it's only really possible to do that well through the [individual] interviews. Because in the group sessions, nobody was able to talk for very long, and so everything they said is fragmented, it doesn't follow through, there are bits missing with one person, in comparison with another, and so on. So when we looked at this material, we all concluded that there was no doubt that we could, very effectively, use life story material from a systems perspective, although it would be quite a novel way of doing it.