SOCIAL WORK at Edinburgh University | KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION SINCE 1918

CENTENARY RESEARCH NOTES 1

The Social Environment Research Unit (SERU), University of Edinburgh, 1959-64

INTRODUCTION

This is a brief outline of *Social Environment in Suburban Edinburgh* (1975), a report to the Joseph Rowntree Memorial Trust, written by Geoffrey Hutton, Director of the Social Environment Research Unit between 1959 and 1964. The report has 20 chapters, 454 pages of single-spaced typed text and tables, so perhaps 150,000-200,000 words, not counting appendices. It is available at Edinburgh University Library Folio HT 110 Hut

BACKGROUND

The report takes the form of a book, with the ambition for this to be edited down for publication as *Strands and Styles.* It is put together from a series of working papers. The Unit had Geoffrey Hutton as Director (1959-64), Molly Harrington as Senior Research Worker (1961-4), and two Research Workers, Roy Cox (1960-4) and Monica Rushforth (1961-4) and four secretaries Eileen Hutton (1959-61), Moira McFadyen and Margaret Stewart (both 1961-3) and Lilias Wylie (1963-4). The team included psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists, so was interdisciplinary. Tom Burns was involved in the project, having guided students in the Social Study Department at Edinburgh to produce a small preliminary study (1953-4). Tom Burns produced the drafts in Part 1 between 1966 and 1970, but the project suffered from his and Geoffrey Hutton's lack of time to devote to it.

THE 'BOOK'

The 'book' bears a resemblance to other works of the time, notably community studies, but with a particular interest in the effects of re-housing, and how to encourage the development of 'community', and with the particular influence of Tavistock thinking about psycho-social perspectives. Some of it looks dated, inevitably, quite a bit is descriptive, but some of it bears comparison with other things published at the time, and some of it looks prescient and therefore a shame that it didn't get more widely published. Points of connection with wider literature are there but are patchy, and it is curious that no mention is made of Tom Brennan's (1959) book *Reshaping a City* which came out of the University of Glasgow, about the development of housing estates on the outskirts of Glasgow.

There are lots of wonderful details, such as stories of 'fathers who "wouldn't pour themselves a cup of tea"' (6.12), compared to the husband who asked 'What about a cup of tea?' who 'proceeded at once to put on the kettle, lay the table, and later, when the toddler woke and cried, was the first to go and pick up the child' adding 'It should be recorded' that this was a man 'whose masculinity was in no way in doubt' (6.29), the description of 'Mrs. B. was a woman of about forty, very handsome, dressed with impeccable taste in a "little black dress" of excellent cut, acquainted with the Mediterranean resorts and possessing social poise that would be the envy of many a middle-class hostess. Her husband was employed in the grocery trade; her son was a policeman' (6.19), and the reproduction of the local idiom 'A bit of help's worth a lot of pity' (6.26).

The comparison of the findings from the different areas of Wardie, Wardieburn, Muirhouse and Silverknowes are all quite predictable. 'A lot of effort … produced a great deal of very dull data' (7.2). There were unsurprising findings about status hierarchies, about varying degrees of and attitudes towards neighbourliness, about neighbour noise, and about ambitions for upward mobility. Comparisons between Pilton and Leith (where many residents came from) are made. There is unintentional humour: 'Silverknowes was the only district where people said that such houses should be built with central heating and these were immigrant English' (10.20).

The themes relating to community and exclusivity are not straightforward echoes of more sociological writing of the time because of the psycho-social angle. So the question was asked about comparing areas by 'the rate of psychiatric breakdown' (7.16), and quite a few references to anxiety and insecurity among residents. There is also the beginnings of an analytical framework from Burns around the idea of 'mediocratization' (2.15) of working-class life for those who do not achieve upward mobility, which would be fascinating to see developed further, and also the idea that community consists of a tangle of strands (ii).

There was also the methodological tension between local figures like doctors and clergy who were interested in research with a social problems focus (with a view to producing solutions to those problems), people called 'moral entrepreneurs' (2.8) after Becker, and more social scientific analytical questions driving the research (see 5.12). Looking at how well housing meets people's needs and aspirations is one way of trying to resolve this through the idea of 'psycho-social fit' (iv), but the team were always 'outsiders' in the area (1.11).

There are no photographs, although other studies of the time like Mogey's on housing in Oxford had them.

In sum, this is a fascinating record of what a group of researchers found 50 years ago, and of how they found out these things (their methods, concepts and theories). There is a mystery about why more didn't come out in publications from such a big project, but other projects at the time met a similar fate e.g. Elias's study of school to work transitions in Leicester, recently revisited by Goodwin and O'Connor. And the pilot study involving students makes me think of what Lassiter's *The Other Side of Middletown* (2004) project achieved. And there's the echo of Mike Savage's history of social research which sees this period as the point at which 'gentlemanly' research was displaced by more standardised social science (Mike has looked at the archives around Elizabeth Bott's study and also the *Affluent Worker* study).

Professor Graham Crow, The University of Edinburgh, 17/11/2016

References

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