

The contribution of six recently deceased pioneer child care researchers in the UK

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Abstract

This essay looks at the legacy of six pioneer child care researchers who died in the two years before January 2017. It shows that they were not only highly innovatory in terms of theory and methodology but also left a set of studies that stimulated and informed subsequent research. Their contributions demonstrate the benefits of scrutinising current situations in a way that also informs perennial welfare issues and that an integrated programmes of overlapping studies is more likely to produce authoritative findings than a mixture of individual projects.

Introduction

When Roy Parker passed away in January 2017, the child care research world felt much as the people of the British Empire must have done when Queen Victoria died. Many of her political favourites, and of course her beloved Albert, had gone before but her demise undoubtedly marked the end of an era. Roy was similarly the last of a generation, in this case of pioneering social policy researchers, especially into children in local authority care.

The previous two years had already seen the deaths of five distinguished academics who started their work from a base where hardly anything was known. They were: Barbara Tizard, Spencer Millham, David Quinton, Jean Packman and Bob Holman and they were joined by Roy early in 2017 (see Appendix 1 for brief biographies). They had been preceded by others distinguished academics, such as John Triseliotis in 2012 and Olive Stevenson in 2013, but the loss of six original thinkers in this field in the space of 25 months is unprecedented.

Roy recalled that one of his first tasks as a young researcher was to help the old London County Council calculate the exact number of children it had in care and the number of people employed to run the service. The two figures came out as equal, leading the Chair of the Children's Committee to propose, "Why don't we all just take a child home?" If only life was that simple.

But this comment might not be quite as daft as it seems today. The evacuation of children from cities and seaside towns in the Second World War affected 1.25 million children. It was arranged by school but all residents in the receiving areas were assessed for spare bedrooms and ordered to go to the station and take a pre-allocated number of children. Spencer Millham, who was evacuated from the East End of London to South Wales, recalled his train being welcomed by George Thomas, who later became a much loved Speaker of the House of Commons, and how on arrival the locals rushed forward to pick a child. He heard his host family say, "Let's take him, he's got a tie on", teaching him, as he later joked, that to succeed in British society, "make sure you're wearing a tie, it doesn't matter about your trousers - it's a tie that matters".

These personal experiences should not be discounted. Bob Holman recalled his father returning from the War as a virtual stranger; “I thought who is this guy, and why does he keep chasing mom?” Sir William Utting, who became the Chief Social Work Inspector, recalled that a reason he went into the profession was to try and ensure that no child had such a rotten time as he did when evacuated. Lucy Faithful, the evacuation officer working in Plymouth, remembered two boat loads of French children being rowed across the Channel by nuns. When asked what she did, her reply was, “I commandeered a row of houses”. She recalled that in 1945 there were 750 children of unknown origin among the homeless thousands in that bombed-out city.

In addition to this, the six pioneers went through adolescence at a time marked by post-war austerity, the founding of the NHS, the establishment of the welfare state, a national mood of social concern and a desire for equality (income tax for the very wealthy was 97.5%). Hence, as adults they tended to be somewhat self-effacing with a strong sense of justice. These characteristics are enshrined Barbara Tizard’s Guardian obituary (January 13th 2016)

Always committed to egalitarianism, Barbara was a peace activist, a socialist and an atheist all her life. However, her political ideals never clouded her forensic intellect and her devotion to scientific research. Characteristically, she was self-deprecating about her contributions. She said in an interview following retirement: “I can see weaknesses in everything I have done ... I think I have opened up some quite important issues and drawn attention to them ... I wouldn’t put it stronger than that”.

Given these experiences, it is hardly surprising that they strongly believed that it was the Government’s responsibility to push through social reform and professional development. Thus, they tended to sympathise with left-wing politics and after 1979, became uneasy about some of the Thatcher government’s policies, such as privatisation and social markets. Indeed, Bob Holman had called his 1973 book on private fostering *Trading in Children*. But what is interesting is that these views never developed into a distinct political or social ideology. One of the reasons for this was that six individuals differed in their personal characteristics and the way they chose to contribute to national debates. For example, Bob Holman resigned his professorship after two years and was motivated by deeply held Christian beliefs whereas Parker and Tizard were the opposite: confirmed atheists and heavily involved in their universities. Millham, in contrast, had neither religious belief nor interest in the nuts and bolts of academia. Their styles of research also varied; Parker, Quinton and Tizard were meticulously scientific whereas Millham and Holman were willing to stretch the evidence to make a point, and Packman was always determined to speak up for struggling social workers.

The context in which the early researchers worked

They all began their research in the 1950s, a few years after the Government had implemented the 1948 Children Act and appointed a children’s officer and children’s committee in every local authority. Prior to this, the government departments responsible for child care were the Home Office and the Ministry of Health – but not Education. Locally, there were public health, public assistance and

education committees – all responsible to the parent local authority and its elected members. In the context of the post-war enthusiasm for social reform, and especially the dismantling of the Poor Law, this untidy legal and administrative arrangement soon became the subject of outside scrutiny. A major review of services for children was underway in the last years of the Second World War and the outcomes of them, the 1946 Curtis Report in England and the Clyde Report in Scotland, provided the necessary framework.

The 1948 Act brought together the three strands of provision for children who could not live with their families because their close relatives were unable or unwilling to look after them and moved responsibility into a separate specialist department. Child care was no longer associated with stigma and issues associated with cash benefits and matters to do with care became separated.

The establishment of this service structure is important as it made research easier, but equally important was the positive attitude of the early children's officers (chief local authority officers in charge of the new children's departments). Many of these were remarkable people, often women who not only challenged the dominance of males in senior local government positions but also quickly built up impressive departments virtually from scratch. Barbara Kahan, who had moved from the hallowed precincts of a Cambridge college to become a wartime factory inspector in the industrial West Midlands of the UK, stayed in the area and became the first children's officer in Dudley. Her status was the same as for the weights and measures officer, her office was a caravan in the town hall car park and she travelled by bus to visit families and children. Interestingly, on first arriving in the Midlands, she shared digs with a fellow inspector, Frances Drake, who later became children's officer in Northamptonshire.

In one of his historical articles, Roy Parker (2011) showed how these first children's officers inherited a dreadful system ravaged by war and austerity but were often forceful individuals, passionate about their work without being overzealous. I was privileged to know many of them in later years and found them totally unpretentious, open minded and slightly maverick in their attitude to bureaucracy. Despite their low status and lack of support, they had clearly stood up to criticism and put down reactionaries who thought they knew what deprived children really needed. Much has been written about the style of the old children's departments and there is a danger of viewing them as a golden age. The reality is that it wasn't golden at all but it is true that senior staff behaved quite differently from today's highly qualified managers. They were expected to know all the children personally and regularly put them up at home and took them out on trips. They placed children with families as they thought right, without a formal vetting process. Indeed, when I was invited to tea with one of them, I was warned by a wise old hand, "Don't go or you'll end up with a couple of foster children". But gossip aside, the important point for this article is that their personal attributes and professional behaviour (their Association was formed in 1949) made research possible.

It is important to note, however, that although ten years after the new Act a structure was in place, there was still little resembling a professional service. For

one thing, the newly created post of child care officer, which replaced the old term boarding out officer, took time to establish its role and the absence of any research and national monitoring meant that policies and practice varied widely both across England and the four UK countries. Much of this reflected local history and tradition: Scotland for instance had a different poor law and education system from England and had always favoured foster care. In England, placement patterns varied; in 1965 78% of children in care in East Suffolk were fostered compared with 30% in Worcester. A study (Bullock, 1965) seeking to explain the differences between the figures in the two authorities found that the child care officers tended to accept the practice they found as normal, as there was no overarching theory of what was good for children, no critical awareness of alternatives and little professional networking. In East Suffolk everyone thought that foster care was the 'natural' choice whereas in Worcester the same was said of children's homes. Again, it is easy to be critical in retrospect but the situation in Worcester might not have been totally bad, despite growing doubts about the merits of residential placements. The City is small and had 75 children in care. Thirty-eight of these came from two families that had a long history of feuding and intermarriage.

The work undertaken

So to move to the researchers. We have seen that very little information on children in care was available and the Home Office annual statistics only gave basic details of ages, legislation and placements. Follow-up evidence and background characteristics did not exist which made it difficult for those intending to conduct studies to draw suitable samples and select variables. There were also no agreed procedures to access files or interview people, so no-one knew the correct ethics. Even when the field work was finished, the analysis of data was tedious – there were no computers – and clipped cards shaken with a knitting needle were the state of the art technology for doing straight counts and cross tabs. Thus, individual studies were never likely to be large enough to produce authoritative findings and an accumulation of findings from separate initiatives by different people seemed a more promising way of building up knowledge.

The situation in 1970

In attempts to chart history, several approaches are possible, such as demarcating periods, identifying key events or mapping trends but, as Roy Parker says (2005) in his history of child care research, no single method seems adequate when theory, research and policy have to be covered. Nevertheless, one historical landmark is salient: 1970. By then several studies had been published, although there was nothing resembling a research 'industry' and investigations still tended to raise more questions than they answered.

Once the post-war chaos began to subside, there was a growing interest in studying social policy as a distinct academic subject and distinguished thinkers like the eminent social welfare philosopher Richard Titmuss led the way. But it was soon clear that these abstract discussions needed evidence to validate them. Academics like Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend (1965) began to help, in their case by defining and measuring poverty and conducting national surveys. Similarly, researchers such as Michael Young and Peter Wilmott (1957) looked at

the reality of community life and how decisions from the top affect ordinary people. While these studies certainly produced new empirical evidence, they now seem limited by modern standards and, of course, Britain was a simpler society than it is today with clear class differences, homogenous cultures, stable communities and little immigration. In child care, two European refugees, Tilda Goldberg and Mia Kellmer Pringle, pleaded for higher scientific standards, with the latter setting up the National Children's Bureau for this purpose. Publications on the needs of children and the effects of deprivation soon emerged.

This situation meant that concern with social issues tended to run ahead of evidence and it was still the case that, as Spencer Millham quipped "You can become a world expert by reading a couple of books; in physics we'd all be lab techs". Nevertheless, by 1970 some reliable information about children in care had been gathered and an agenda for further work was emerging, but its coverage was scrappy. Much of it was what Roy Parker called 'brush clearing' in that it opened the way for more sophisticated inquiry by disentangling the phenomena under investigation and spotting areas needing further work. Jean Packman (1968) had published *Child Care: Needs and Numbers*, Roy Parker (1966) had identified the factors associated with successful foster care and Royston Lambert and Spencer Millham (1968) had described the different styles of boarding schools and gathered pupils' views on their experience. In related areas, Barbara and Jack Tizard were showing how attachment and child development theories applied to early education and residential nurseries and the Home Office Research Unit was conducting studies of juvenile delinquency with Hermann Mannheim and Leslie Wilkins (1955) predicting successful Borstal training and Derek Cornish and Ronald Clarke (1975) investigating absconding from reform (approved) schools. In 1971, young offenders came into the care system and entered the ambit of child care research.

It has to be emphasised that at this time there was much greater optimism than today that widespread social reforms could greatly improve the national situation – the compulsory introduction of comprehensive schools and poverty reduction strategies being examples. There was also a belief that the rational scientific process would produce quick and effective solutions to enduring social problems like crime and unemployment. As Roy Parker (2005) explains, this optimism was greatly reinforced by Labour's election victory in 1964 and the appointment of ministers sympathetic to the role of social sciences as policy drivers.

So how can one portray the situation at this time? There was undoubtedly a growing interest in social issues, reflected in the launch of a new weekly magazine, *New Society*. Sociology had become a respectable university subject and there was public fascination with Gallup Polls and surveys. In addition, several publications challenged comfortable assumptions about what seemed 'natural'; for example, *Family and Kinship in East London* (Young and Wilmott, 1957) showed that nuclear families were not necessarily the norm, Erving Goffman's *Asylums* (1961) and Russell Barton's *Institutional Neurosis* (1959) highlighted the dangers of long stays in institutions, and poverty studies revealed the effects of chronic deprivation (Wedge and Prosser, 1973). TV current affairs programmes were also

widely viewed and I recall the shock created by one that showed high levels of psychosis among poor people – perhaps obvious now but not then.

It was in this climate of curiosity that the pioneers began their research but practical constraints meant that their subject choices were opportunistic. They also tended to work alone, hence their studies were often small and descriptive. As explained, data collection and analysis had to be done manually with reports typed and duplicated via carbon copies or Roneo skins as photocopiers did not exist until 1966. This is why these early authors wrote so beautifully – they needed courage to ask their secretary to retype a text. The dissemination process was also much slower, with the gap between submission and publication being around 18 months.

Where we have been lucky is that although the pioneering studies were about ephemeral problems, specific services or sub-groups of children, the issues they discussed were perennial and this makes them relevant today despite the very different political and economic context. Packman's work still helps managers assess need and plan services, Parker's findings can be seen in predictive models and Millham's concept of care careers is fundamental to system dynamics.

The situation after 1970

In 1971, responsibility for child care passed from the Home Office to the Department of Health and Social Security, an amalgam of two departments. The Health tradition meant that there was a positive view of research, structured programmes and academic networks. Other funders soon followed with the Social Science Research Council / Economic and Social Research Council allocating money for child care studies, the Nuffield Foundation supporting research in family law and The Association of British Adoption Agencies looking at the children's need for permanent families, as in the influential book *Children who Wait* (Rowe and Lambert, 1973). Individual researchers also made an impact. Bob Holman, who left a professorship for a community project, wrote *Kids at the Door* (1981) and others used their personal experience to describe the good and bad aspects being in care. Examples are Barbara Kahan's *Growing up in Care* (1979) and the National Children's Bureau *Who Cares?* (Page and Clark, 1977).

There were several other streams of work relevant to these developments. One, at the Institute of Psychiatry, London, focused on broad questions such as inter-generational continuities, recovery from deprivation and individual variation following exposure to environmental risks, but one project important for children's services followed-up women reared in institutions (Rutter and Quinton, 1984). Similar work at the Thomas Coram Research Unit assessed the effects on child development of placement in residential nurseries (Tizard and Joseph, 1970) and adoption (Tizard, 1977). These social psychological perspectives became more integrated into child care research in the 1990s as multi-disciplinary approaches were applied to studies of child abuse and adoption.

This auspicious climate led to an explosion of research activity and the founding pioneers soon found themselves heading research teams in their universities and institutes. It nurtured a new generation of social scientists that is still active.

Roy Parker was an adviser to the DHSS at this time and one of his initial recommendations was for a programme of three overlapping studies of the care system: one looking at decisions about whether or not to take children into care; another investigating the problems of maintaining links between children in care and their families; and a third assessing the factors affecting children's length of stay. These projects were given to Jean Packman at the University of Exeter, Spencer Millham at the Dartington Social Research Unit and David Fruin at the National Children's Bureau. This trio was complemented by other work on social services organisation and the economics of social care. Later topics included intermediate treatment (an alternative to residential care for young offenders), children who move in and out of care, leaving care, family reunification, long-term foster care, case reviews and adoption.

In the midst of all this, there were several government inquiries and one that was particularly influential followed the death of Maria Colwell in 1973 at the hands of her mother's violent partner after she had returned from care to live at home by order of the court. Up until then, people suspected the harm arising from abuse and neglect and tried to prevent it, but knowledge was scant. Interestingly, the term 'child protection' had referred to the supervision of children in private foster homes but this tragedy gave it a new meaning. The Inquiry Report (1974) highlighted poor service coordination and recommended establishing formalised inter-agency systems for dealing with child abuse. It also questioned whether the social workers had been incompetent, a charge challenged as unfair by Olive Stevenson in a minority section of the main report. The problem of when to remove a child from the birth family erupted more dramatically some years later when the Cleveland Report (1988) blamed professionals for acting too precipitately while the Orkney Report (1992) said they had dithered for too long. Given these uncertainties, child protection studies became increasingly common.

Because of the desire for reliable information, in the mid-1980s the DHSS asked Jane Rowe to review the findings from completed studies and draw out lessons for policy and practice. Her report, *Social Work Decisions in Child Care* (DHSS, 1985), set the pattern for a series of further overviews published under the collective title *Messages from Research*. Later topics included child protection, residential care, adoption, supporting parents, foster care, placement patterns and the working of the 1989 Act. In each case, the document opens with the findings and emerging themes, followed by summaries of each project and a series of 'true for us?' exercises to help social workers apply the conclusions. Other organisations soon took up a similar dissemination brief, with Barnardo's producing its *What Works* series and BAAF its *Ten Top Tips* booklets. There was an accompanying rise in organisations like Research in Practice and Making Research Count seeking to disseminate all this knowledge.

In the middle of all this activity, the DHSS decided to set up a review of child care law and many of the new findings provided information on how the system was working. Much of this was incorporated into the *Children Act 1989*, which was implemented in October 1991. Rarely had legislation been so research informed,

but equally significant was the accompanying guidance which acted as a virtual textbook on good practice.

In 1988, the DHSS was split into two departments and child care remained in Health. This was fortunate for research as it meant that the policy of commissioning new studies and development initiatives continued. These projects were now to be directed by the ‘research children’ of the pioneers and conducted by their much younger ‘research grandchildren’. It meant that it was possible to re-investigate problems and test previous findings. It also allowed studies to move into previously ignored areas, such as the education of children in care, which is now viewed as central but which was once seen as subsidiary to other welfare matters. Another is the focus on outcomes, the absence of which had been noted by many critics. The Department’s response was *Looking After Children*, an initiative designed to provide social workers with tools that charted children’s progress (see Parker et al., 1991). The academic journals played a role too, publishing studies that teased out interconnections and causes, thus responding to Michael Rutter’s (1996) recommendation that child care research needed to move from risk associations to risk processes.

Here the narrative of this article must end, which is a relief because responsibility for child care passed to the Department of Children Schools and Families, now the Department for Education, in 2007 and research policies changed. Programmes thereafter have been more of a potpourri of evaluations, in contrast to the coordinated programmes just described.

Their heritage

So what did the six pioneers contribute? Table 1 summarises their work.

Table 1: The theoretical interest, research topics and innovations of the six pioneer researchers

	THEORY	RESEARCH TOPICS	INNOVATION
ROY PARKER (1931-2017)	Analysing policies in their political and economic context Disaggregation of concepts and groups of service users Lessons from history	Foster care Adoption Disability Child care history Social Policy developments	Predictive factors Trend analysis Historical continuities and discontinuities

<p>David Quinton (1938-2016)</p>	<p>Concepts to inform follow-up evidence</p> <p>Risk and protective factors</p> <p>Chains of effects</p>	<p>Girls leaving care</p> <p>Adoption</p> <p>Family support</p> <p>Prevention</p> <p>Neglect</p>	<p>Child development theory</p> <p>Methodological rigour</p> <p>Measurement innovation</p>
<p>Jean Packman (1933-2016)</p>	<p>Measuring need</p> <p>Matching needs and services</p>	<p>Children considered for care but not admitted</p> <p>Children in care</p> <p>Child care history</p>	<p>Focus on different styles of social work</p> <p>Methodology to study decision making</p>
<p>Spencer Millham (1932-2015)</p>	<p>System dynamics</p> <p>Care careers</p> <p>Analysing children's views</p> <p>Organisational analysis</p>	<p>Boarding education</p> <p>Residential care</p> <p>Secure units</p> <p>Young offenders</p> <p>Family links of separated children</p> <p>Family reunification</p>	<p>Theoretical model of residential establishments</p> <p>Seeing cases within a system</p> <p>Ascertaining children's views</p> <p>Follow-up methodology</p>
<p>Bob Holman (1936-2016)</p>	<p>Studying need in communities</p> <p>Fashioning services from community needs</p>	<p>Poverty</p> <p>Children in need</p> <p>Community needs and services</p> <p>Private fostering</p> <p>Social care history</p>	<p>Methodology to understand communities and ascertain the views of young people and families</p>

Barbara Tizard (1926-2015)	Child development Attachment theory Identity	Early years education Racial identity Residential nurseries Adoption	Methodology to study child development Experimental studies to evaluate styles of care
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It may be sufficient praise to acknowledge the breadth of the research undertaken by these pioneers, to be thankful for the new knowledge they provided and for leaving the childcare world a better place than they found it. But there is more to their work than this, as illustrated in the following three examples.

A focus on the eternal not the temporal

It is tempting in research to focus on today's headline and the detail of a high profile case. Obviously, evidence has to rely on real-life material but what is significant about the early work is that by looking at the here and now, it also managed to inform the perennial. Hence, Millham's (1975) study of approved schools can be easily dismissed as irrelevant as the institutions were all closed in the 1970s but his research is far from moribund because it measures the effects of different interventions, a challenge that is just as pressing now as then. So the studies that survive are those that not only scrutinise the temporal but in doing so also inform the eternal. We might investigate how well bits of the 1989 Act are working but as the legislation is over 25 years old, on its own this is unlikely to be of much use. Seeing the Act in the light of the problems it was trying to resolve gives the research lasting significance.

Moving from risk associations to risk processes

The early research can easily be dismissed as descriptive and this is what concerned Rutter in his ISPCAN address. But the theoretical and methodological advances it made, although now seeming rather crude, did manage to lay the foundation for further work, whether into aspects of the care experience, such as returning home, or the identification of key factors and causal chains. In this sense, their work was a springboard rather than a dead end.

A mature view of objectivity

Finally, the idea of a programme of interlinked projects has an important message for understanding objectivity. I have always warmed to Robert Merton's (1957) discussion of objectivity in the social sciences. His argument is that it does not rest in an individual project because although we should strive to minimise distortion, there will always be bias in the methodology. Rather it is achieved by the institutional structure of science and the values that underpin it – communal ownership, organised scepticism, universalism and economic disinterest. The

more a series of connected studies is conducted along these principles, the more something resembling the truth will emerge.

This is exactly what happened in child care. Each of the pioneering studies could be criticised for its weaknesses but in combination they presented a tour de force, sufficient for Jane Rowe as early as 1985, and with Government backing, to tell social workers what constituted good practice (DHSS, 1985).

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Appendix 1 Brief biographies

Bob Holman

Bob Holman graduated from University College, London and the LSE and became a child care officer in Hertfordshire in 1961. After 1966 he held lecturing posts at the Universities of Birmingham and Glasgow and in 1974 was appointed to the Chair of Social Administration at the University of Bath. He resigned this post in 1976 to undertake community social work on the Southdown estate in Bath and moved to undertake similar projects in Easterhouse, Glasgow in 1987 where he was active until his death. During this time, he held visiting chairs at the Universities of Glasgow and Cardiff.

Spencer Millham

Spencer Millham graduated from the University of Cambridge and trained as a teacher at Oxford. He taught in secondary schools for 11 years before joining the Research Unit into Boarding Education at King's College, Cambridge in 1966. In 1968 the Unit moved to Dartington Hall in Devon and became the Dartington Social Research Unit. He was its director until 1994 and also Professor of Social Research at the University of Bristol.

Jean Packman

Jean Packman graduated from Cambridge University and became a child care officer in Oxfordshire. She became deputy to the children's officer Barbara Kahan and while employed undertook research into child care needs and numbers. In 1968 she moved to the University of Exeter to direct post-graduate training in social work. After retirement in 1990, she worked for six years at the Dartington Social Research Unit.

Roy Parker

After graduating from the London School of Economics (LSE), Roy Parker became a child care officer, housefather in a residential establishment, school teacher and college lecturer alongside undertaking research into foster care. He was appointed research officer at the LSE in 1960 and a year later promoted to lecturer. He became Professor of Social Policy at the University of Bristol in 1969 and after retirement in 1997 worked at the Dartington Social Research Unit in its Centre for Social Policy.

David Quinton

David Quinton graduated in Anthropology from the University of Cambridge and then studied at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. He joined the Institute of Psychiatry in London, working in the Medical Research Council Psychiatry Unit. He moved to the University of Bristol to be Professor of Psycho-social Development and after retirement continued to undertake research at the Hadley Centre in the University.

Barbra Tizard

Barbra Tizard graduated from the University of Oxford in Philosophy, Politics and Economics and acquired a post-graduate qualification in Psychology from University College, London. She then worked at the Institute of Psychiatry, London. In 1967 she moved to the Institute of Education, London and in 1973 joined the newly established Thomas Coram Research Unit which her husband, Jack Tizard, had set up within the Institute. She subsequently became the Unit's director until her retirement in 1990.