

17. Research on Old Age

Well, now how did the elderly come into my life, apart from myself?! That was because, at one point, the Sainsbury family set up a series of trusts. And they made it clear that one of the areas they were particularly interested in providing grants for was problems of the elderly. Well the man they appointed as their adviser on which grants to give and not to give was a man called Hugh De Quetteville¹. And Hugh De Quetteville said, "The one man who really knows about research is Mark Abrams. So why don't we get him to tell us what research is needed on the elderly?"

Okay, he approached me and I said, "Yes fine. I will write a paper for you on it, but give me a week to read what's available because I know nothing about it." except some research I had done in 1947 on the condition of the elderly, for old Seebom Rowntree, who refused, incidentally, to let it be published because it ran counter to his particular line of what should be done for the elderly. Anyway, I went through the stuff, and I said, "Really you don't need any more research on the elderly. There is enough research already done for policy makers. If they are concerned about the elderly, to start doing useful things, right away. There's lots of information available." And they said, "Well, that's not good enough, we've got to spend our money in this direction." So I said "Alright, two things you can do: first of all, produce a sort of compendium of available material, call them *Profiles of the Elderly*. And you will bring together all the research that has been done on their housing conditions, on their diets, on their standards of living, on their migration habits, and so on. All that is available, it is just a question of getting someone to go through all the material and bring it together in a series of profiles like this. And that will be one good thing. Then everyone can get a copy and will say, "Ah ah, we mustn't do that survey again for the third time, it has already been done twice". I said "The other thing that is important is that the real problem of the elderly for the rest of this century is going to be the old elderly – the people 75 and over. Whereas everyone so far, nearly everyone so far has done research on the elderly defined as 65 and over, or else of pensionable age. And people of 60, 65 - they are not really elderly, there are a proportion of them working, and there's, and those who are not working are pretty active. The 75s and over are going to be the real burden, the problem of the future. You get a high degree of dementia among them, a high degree of physical incapacity, you get a great deal of loneliness, you get a high proportion who are living alone, and you get completely inadequate residential accommodation for them. And none of this is aired and no one is yet apparently adequately aware of the fact that the great increase in the elderly population,

¹ Director of the Gatsby Trust

from now on, is not going to be the 65s to 74s, they are actually going to decrease in numbers. It is the 75s and over which are going to go up by 25%, 30%, 35% -- we don't know yet. But it is obviously going to be an increase of that order."

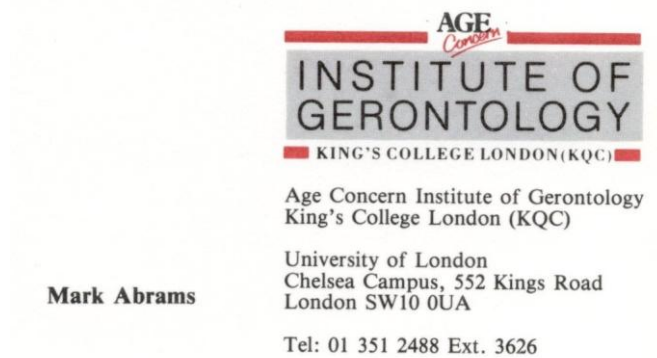
So De Quetteville said "that sounds fine ... those two projects we think are fine". I said, "Good, thank you". And he said, "Well, you know, we'll pay you for this?" I said "That's alright, I'll leave that to you for what it is worth". He said, "Of course we can't pay you as an individual, we have to dispense funds through an organisation ... a charitable organisation or an academic organisation. And, how do you feel about Age Concern acting as the intermediaries?" "Sure, that's okay with me, I don't care." He said, "Alright I will send them a cheque for £2,000". "How much?" " £2,000, and they will simply transfer it to you as a consultancy fee, they can call it that". He said, "Now the next thing is, who does the work, the research?" I said, "Well, any really serious, competent person who applies himself to what is available, can do the work". He said "No. The committee has met and we want you to do those two projects". I said, "Well I can't, I am busy with Research Services". And he kept on saying "Why don't you resign from Research Services? Why don't you retire? It's about time you retired."

DA: Is this after you'd already had time off for doing the SSRC work? You went back to Research Services?

MA: No, no. I am still at SSRC.

DA: But you are on Research Services books or their committee or something?

MA: I was on their pension, so I had contacts with them of a very, vague kind. So I said, they were already thinking of closing down the Survey Unit at the SSRC. First of all they asked me to stay on an extra three months, I did. And then they said would I stay on another year. Feebly, I said, "Yyes." And then, I said, "Enough's, enough, I am now leaving, I am going to join Age Concern as the head of their research unit. That's fine."

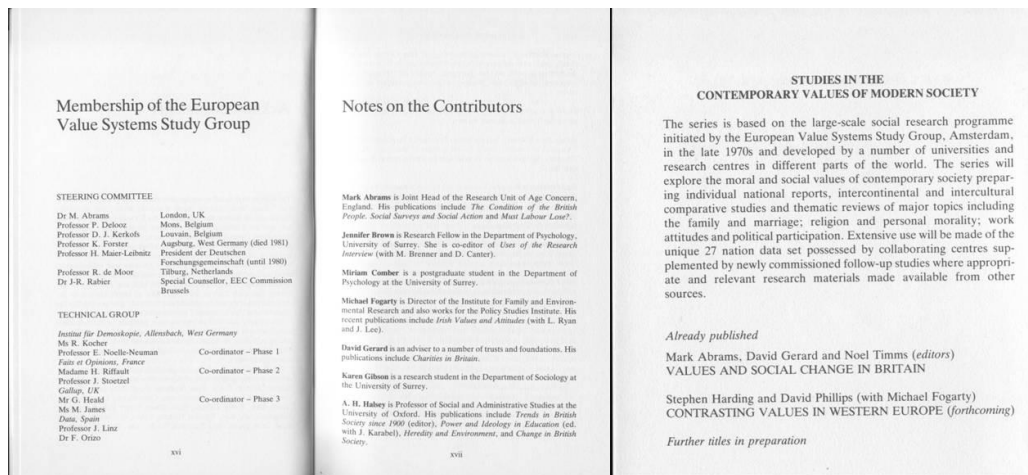
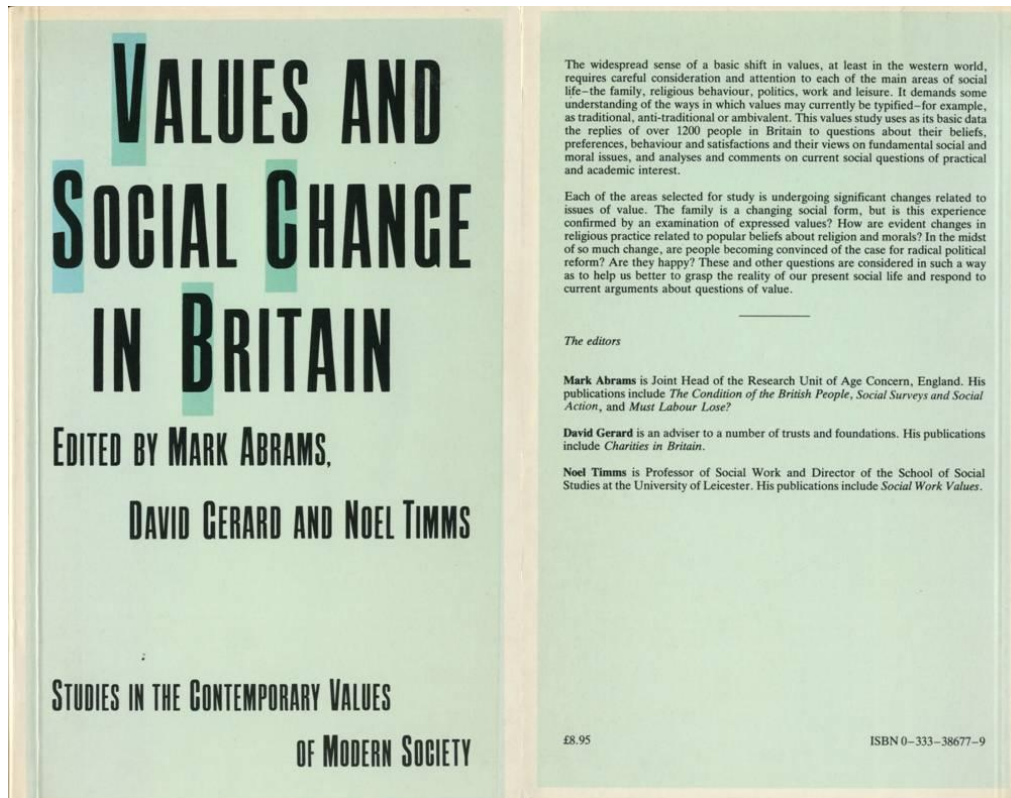


Mark's Business Card while with Age Concern

So I saw David Hogman of Age Concern. And he said, "How much time can you devote to this". I said, "Not a great deal, because I'm still interested in a lot of other things I want to follow up – two days a week, how's that?" He said "Alright, fine." Then we agreed a salary, which was pretty modest I think of £4,000 a year, which, compared to what I was getting at even at the SSRC, was pretty modest. And compared with what I'd have got if I'd gone back full-time at Research Services was extremely modest. But you know it seemed to me something that I would like to do. So he said yes alright they would pay that. And I said, "Oh, by the way, the cheque for £2,000 that De Quetteville gave you. He said, "Oh yes what we've done with that. We will send on a cheque for £300 and the rest we will keep for sort of overheads." I said, "What overheads?". He said, "You know you always have overheads they need in any organisation". And I thought, you bastard!. But it didn't make no difference, I took the cheque they sent me, and I never told De Quetteville, I should have done I think, that the money had gone not to me but to Hogman's outfit. And they produced, I think, £60,000, the Sainsbury Trust, which went to Age Concern. And then for about two years/three years I worked on these two projects of the *Profiles* series, and then *75s and Over*, which was a survey study. And since then I followed it up. There was a grant, again through Age Concern, from the Nuffield people, to do a longitudinal study of aging. What happens to people as they age, and so on? Can one find, in early material, predictors of non-survival, and can one find predictors of survival, but poor survival as compared to good survival? And I've done that and I think the material is good. The people in Germany at an international conference there said they thought it was extremely interesting and my data was unknown there, and would I please hurry up and publish it. And then I sent a copy to Bernard Isaacs, who was professor of psychiatric gerontology at Birmingham University, and he wrote back and that he thought it was fascinating and would I please prepare it as an article for the *British Medical Journal*, which I never have done. I keep thinking, well maybe

next weekend, when there is no one at Brighton, I will do it then. But I haven't done it yet. One gets lazier, you know, as one get older.

Audio Note²



Values and Social Change (1985)

² End of Tape 3