



Interviewees: Rebecca and Russell Dobash, Professors
UoS Dates: 1972 – 1991
Role(s): Lecturers in Sociology 1972 –
Reader in Sociology (Rebecca) 1985 – 1991
Senior Lecturer in Sociology (Russell) c1987 – 1991



Interview summary:

Summary of content; with time (hours:mins:secs)

Start 0:00:00 – Rebecca and Russell Dobash [often known as The Dobashes] came to the University by accident. Finishing PhDs at Washington State University, they wanted to go to Europe for a year financed by any available work (e.g. grape-picking) before continuing academic careers in the USA. They saw an advertisement for two part-time foreign academics for one year in sociology at Stirling, having no idea where that was. They applied and after a long time received a positive response from Prof Max Marwick (Head of Department, anthropologist).

0:05:10 – Arrived looking like hikers/hippies: delayed at immigration in Heathrow. Camped at Cornton Vale. University found them a flat in Bridge of Allan. The bank at the University said they could start writing cheques even though no money in account till salary came in. Difficulty with local accents. In tutorials some students 'translated' for them. Culture shocks: lack of hot water, shiny toilet paper.

0:13:30 – Rebecca given teaching on the family, seen as linked to Max Marwick's anthropological interest in kinship, and Russell taught on crime and deviance.

0:15:07 – More culture shocks. No supermarket. The fancy grocer would select for you, wrap and put in your basket. The fishmonger put purchases on account. They assumed the whole country was like this small university town.

0:17:18 – Semester system not strange to the Dobashes, unaware this was unique in UK. Only when moving to other universities did they become aware of Stirling's peculiarity in semesters and in continuous assessment throughout the degree, including essay grades that counted for the degree and exam marking after each semester.

0:20:17 – Tutorials were new for the Dobashes, not common in USA. Amazing students, including mature and diverse students who came with knowledge. Went to a dance at the University in first week or two, staff and students integrated. Met mature sociology students like Monica Wilson. Mature students had a broad level of reading and experience: another unique aspect of Stirling, and perhaps especially notable in sociology.

0:26:28 – Interesting staff with experience, including Sheila Mitchell and Max Marwick: the Dobashes were their 'children'. Staff had relaxed dress code compared to USA and to expectations from British films.

0:28:18 – To tour Europe, they bought a car, but it had no reverse. Pushed on/off ferries in Norway. Looking

for jobs back in USA. Max Marwick offered them another year at Stirling.

0:31:11 – Saw newspaper article in library on ‘battered wives’. This would be a new research topic, combining Rebecca’s interest in family and Russell’s in prisons and violence. Went to Scottish Office and asked for small grant to study Women’s Refuges. Went to Women’s Aid groups in Edinburgh and Glasgow, e.g. Fran Wasoff in Edinburgh, who started this in her living room. When first refuges opened, the Dobashes interviewed the women. Scottish Home and Health Department were very supportive and willing to take the risk. £400 for pilot study, followed by full proposal.

0:35:16 – Also studied police records, before computerisation. Studied a year of box files: 30,000 cases. Of all the recorded violent crime, 25% was against wives. Nicholas Fairbairn MP had argued that the state should not be involved in the family. The 25% figure was important in drawing attention to the problem, along with interviews with the women. This combined two different methodological approaches to social research, and incorporated US (Chicago School) focus on social problems, a pragmatic approach.

0:40:22 – The Dobashes published ‘Violence Against Wives’. Showed what sociology can do. Included this research in their teaching. The research also interested Scandinavian countries and Women’s Aid. The 25% figure is still found now, though has to be understood in terms of greater reporting. The book was published by The Free Press, editor Charlie Smith, who emphasised the importance of including what women said. Researchers on this, gathering data and doing interviews, included Monica Wilson and Kate Cavanagh, both of whom studied sociology at Stirling.

0:46:56 – Russell was also doing prison research. He approached the Scottish Office, and they agreed to his interviewing prisoners and prison officers. ESCR funded it, with three researchers, all in Sociology at Stirling: Ed Wozniak, who later became Head of Research at the Scottish Office on Scottish prisons; Joe Sim, who became Professor of Criminology at Liverpool John Moores University; David [Macdonald, who was later Co-director of the Scottish Drugs Training Project at Stirling University 1985 – 1992]. Cooperated with Sociology PhD researcher Sue Barnes-Gutteridge on women’s prisons, focusing on Cornton Vale, which had parallels with Stirling University: an innovative campus institution. Sue wrote up the prisons research with Russell and Rebecca.

0:52:05 – They were outsiders, similar to anthropologists, seen as safe as they would leave, except that they did not leave. People could not assume they knew about things, and so would explain in more detail in interviews. Had to sign Official Secrets Act, and had to be careful or could be joining the interviewees in prison! To undertake the fieldwork you had to be bought out of some teaching, especially the tutorials. Buying out was less common in UK than USA. Continued with lectures, informed by research experience, not just book knowledge.

0:56:52 – Studied the rise of the social problem and of social movements. Looked at the rise of Women’s Aid movement here and the women’s movement in the USA, again financed by the Scottish Office. They met Ellen Pence in Minnesota, and she argued for researching violent men, and programmes for changing men. The Dobashes started the CHANGE Programme, with headquarters at Stirling University. The first co-ordinators were Monica Wilson and Dave Morran, and Dorothy Anderson came as administrator. (A second experimental programme emerged from social work in Edinburgh: Lothian Probation Project.) The Dobashes wanted to combine social action with social research: delivering services along with studying them. They organised a big conference at Stirling and Ellen Pence was invited. The Principal, Sir Kenneth Alexander, attended. Ellen told the Principal he had to do something about the dreadful toilet paper.

1:03:55 – Their only research project that was not action research was the homicide study, started at Manchester University, looking at men who killed. Before Manchester they left Stirling to go to Cardiff University, just as the CHANGE Programme started at Stirling, with Russell supervising it, going to and from Cardiff.

1:05:37 – The size of Stirling and of Scotland made such research possible, as you could know and approach the right people. Stirling University was well placed to enable this as a University excelling in social science. Sociology had been on the rise as the Dobashes arrived. Sociology is now making a comeback, with a focus on empirical research.

1:09:40 – They had friends in Philosophy Department [Antony Duff and Sandra Marshall] with whom they cooperated in research. Again the size and innovative nature of the University helped. Another innovation was

Film and Media Studies: the Dobashes worked with the inaugural professor, Philip Schlesinger, on violence in the media, comparing the ways that sociology and media studies students responded to violence in the media.

1:14:03 – They had not mentioned the Queen’s visit, which occurred just after their arrival at Stirling, as it has tended to dominate discussions of the University: it is important not to make every reference to the University focus on this. The Dobashes were on the bridge, where the famous photo was taken out of context. The mature sociology student photographed was gentle, non-threatening, and was greeting the Queen with 'slainte'. He went on to teach sociology at Napier. The University and the Scottish media went insane in their response. Rebecca gave evidence at the trial of that student. The demonstrations at Stirling had not involved violence and seemed nothing compared to those in the USA. The Principal was wrapped up with the response and later died of a heart attack. The visit needs to be seen in context: the response was overblown and had a lasting impact on the University.

1:20:55 – The sabbatical leave system was the best at Stirling, and enabled the Dobashes to undertake research (including fieldwork) and publication that would otherwise have been impossible. Comparison between Russell Group universities (including Oxbridge) and others. Oxford and Cambridge have more support and lighter teaching workloads; tutorials may be one-to-one. You had to work hard at Stirling, but they honoured sabbatical leave.

1:28:29 – Summing up: their work was supported by Stirling University through the sabbatical system, acceptance of outsiders, and a relatively small country and university. Pragmatic research was also valued, and became reflected in the changing names of degrees and department: Sociology and Social Anthropology, Sociology and Social Policy, Applied Social Science, which showed the University’s flexibility. A smaller university also encouraged interdisciplinary cooperation, as with Film and Media Studies, unlike their experience at Manchester University. Cooperation at Stirling was perhaps similar to that in well-funded small private US universities. Danger for career of straying beyond disciplinary bounds. They cooperated with media studies, psychology, political science etc.

1:33:03 – The University’s setting: loch and beautifully planted estate, forming a unit that fits together as a whole. They recently visited a similar institution: University of Jyväskylä in Finland.

1:37:13 – Degree programmes at Stirling started with 3 subjects, while other universities specialise from the beginning. Wider exposure to other subjects helps your main subject. This is reminiscent of US liberal arts universities. Where criminology and women’s studies are taken out of sociology, it loses some of its strength and attraction. Criminology remains at Stirling. Another example of the pragmatic focus within Applied Social Science was Housing Studies, fostered by Dave Wilson. Women’s Studies remained integral to Sociology: gender as key area of 4711 introductory unit.

1:44:38 – Work and home: home was a work environment through the computer. They had a Wang computer. [Wang built desktop computers at their plant at Stirling University.] It got to a point where they did not have a life apart from work. So they made a rule, not always kept, of having Sunday as one day free of work, and the dining room as one room free of work. No holidays: just conferences and touring around the venue. Took a long time to realise they had to carve out some space. Retirement brings question of what to do with all the time that used to be filled with research. They are avid readers of The Guardian, and go for walks in Edinburgh.

1:48:38 – They finished their final book ‘Male-Male Murder’ during the pandemic. They had invitations to give talks, mainly to women’s groups, but the pandemic stopped this. This hiatus gave the opportunity to think about stopping their work, having said all they had to say. Also other things could not be published because of data protection, or because the topic would attract an overblown interest. A small part of their work on violence involved violent women, a media obsession, and they would not want their final publication to feed that and trash women.

1:53:41 – Returning to Scotland: this was considered on retirement from Manchester, but Rebecca said ‘too dark too cold.’ They drove south and went into the middle of Brighton, but Rebecca said ‘I’m not getting out of the car’ and ‘let’s go back to Scotland.’

1:55:37 – Leaving Stirling in 1991: the University took too long to promote, and perhaps felt two together would find it difficult to move to another university. Cardiff offered a Chair, and the Dobashes felt this should be Rebecca: more difficult for a woman to be promoted later. Stayed at Cardiff for 4 years. University of Manchester poached them, offering two Chairs, because of the value of research money and publications to

the RAE (Research Assessment Exercise). The Dobashes accepted, seeing this in terms of the recognition of their work. Compared to the UK, the US system had more professorships and more tiers of professorship.

2:00:50 – What they missed about Stirling: all the positives they mentioned were absent elsewhere. Stirling was a great place to be, and they left with regret. If they had both been promoted they would never have left: moving away was instrumental. They never had an affection about the other places that they had about Stirling.

[Ends at 2:04:04]

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