

The Roundabout

Danny Dorling

One story I remember is a very mundane story. It is a story that was first told by the sociologist Peter Townsend in his book *The social minority*, London: Allen Lane. Page 22 (1973). Peter was born into poverty in 1928 in Middlesbrough, and died much better-off, but unsatisfied with what had been achieved, in 2009. Had had done many things in his life including, with others, setting up the Child Poverty Action Group.

Peter's story concerns the summer in the 1958, when he was aged 30 and was visiting a fair. There was a wrought iron roundabout that parents could pay a penny for their children to sit on. The roundabout was pushed round by hand, hour after hour, by a man who used his brute strength to propel it. A young girl on the roundabout became upset and her parents demanded that the man help the child off the ride. The man rushed to help, but suffered a terrible blow to his back when the roundabout hit him as he passed the child to her parents. Rather than thank the man, the child's parents were indifferent to his suffering, they did not see him as being like them. Instead, Peter heard them talk about how their daughter was special, was sensitive, and how terrible it was that she had been upset by the fairground ride.

Why does the story stay with me, and why did Peter think it was worth telling? After all, it's just a story of one instance amongst millions everyday of callousness and indifference – of everyday nastiness. That, I think, is the point. All the time, all around us, there are people who just don't care about others. In polite society they disguise their feelings, but those feelings are occasionally revealed when they are flustered. I'd like Peter's story to be better known. It is about the moment when you suddenly realise that some people among you simply do not give a damn. And that this indifference is why it can be so hard to secure positive change. Today we still don't really know how many people feel like this, do not see others as being as human as them. We don't know what it is that alters that proportion and how it can be increased or decrease in any society. But we do know that some hearts and minds are far harder to win over than others.

Footnote: If you are interested in Peter's story of the roundabout, I say more about it here: Danny Dorling (2011) *Underclass, overclass, ruling class, supernova class*, Chapter eight of A. Walker, A. Sinfield and C. Walker, (Eds.) *Fighting Poverty, Inequality and Injustice*, Bristol: Poverty Press, which is open access here: http://www.dannydorling.org/?page_id=2446