

Interview with Andrea Cordani

Part 1: Training and supervision

Okay, Andrea. Thanks so much for agreeing to be interviewed; we're really thrilled that you did. Now thinking about the poverty in the UK study, can you remember how you were recruited to the project? How you came to be part of it?

I can't remember in detail, but I think it was to do with when I came to the end of my university studies, I think that it was part of getting notifications through possibly the university careers office or something, but I can't actually absolutely remember.

And do you mind me asking, was your career, was your university degree in social sciences, was that your background?

No, my degree was in English literature and philosophy.

Ah interesting.

And then I did a Postgraduate Certificate in Education, and didn't like teaching so I was casting around for something else to do.

And that's how you...

And the poverty in the UK survey came up, so I thought that sounds a bit like me.

And that's really interesting for us to know that they were recruiting through universities. And can you tell me as much as you can remember about what your job involved? What the work on the Poverty in the UK study involved?

Well it was quite, although in those days things were quite new I think about surveys. And I remember that myself and colleagues that I worked with, when

we found the length of the interviews, and the amount of data that was being collected, we were absolutely a bit gobsmacked because I mean we were aware that Brian Abel-Smith and Peter Townsend were doing this work, but I don't think any of us had an idea that the interviews would take as long as they did, and require so much detailed information.

I mean that's one thing we've been struck by, just how detailed they were. Were you aware of the work that Peter Townsend and Brian Abel-Smith had been doing because of just general information? Or when you were recruited?

Yes. I mean I think we had some very good induction courses. I don't think I was aware of it before, I mean we were asked if we wanted to take part in a UK wide poverty survey. It was put to us that it was very important for sort of social history purposes and so forth, but it was when we were engaged to do the project that we started to get more and more information, and see the scope of it.

I really want to ask about that in a minute, but did you have an interview then for the post? Or how did it...

Yes, I had an interview. I can't remember where it was, it was probably in London, I don't think, it was probably at London, it may have been at LSE, I don't remember going to Essex. Sorry, I can't remember.

And you said that the induction training had been good and thorough; can you say a bit more about that?

Yes. I mean it was impressed upon us that we must adhere very strictly to the rules of the interviewing. I don't think any of us had done interviews before, sorry, had conducted interviews before. And so training was vital, and we were taught various sorts of tricks I suppose to put people at ease, and how to introduce ourselves on the doorstep because literally we were door stepping people, and so I felt that we did need the training. I don't think I would have been happy to go out into the hinterlands sort of unarmed.

So the training was around kind of interview technique?

Yes.

And getting people to talk?

Yes, getting people comfortable. Making sure that people talked, and also particularly making sure you got the right person in the household was very important. And I mean maybe we'll come to that later about some of the...

Or actually even you could say a little bit about that now.

Well I mean in many cases we were asked to interview the woman in the house, and often in practice it was very hard if the husband, or boyfriend, came home for them to start answering on behalf of their wives. I think it was quite clear in the training that we received that the poverty survey, I think we were aware even then that we were talking about the way that poverty related to sort of child poverty, and that therefore the female side of the story, if you like, was going to be, much of the key information was going to be forthcoming.

That's interesting. So there was a kind of sense of family poverty, of concern around children, and that was something?

Absolutely, yeah.

So there was a kind of training in the techniques, and was there a kind of, in the training was there anything about the kind of ethos of the project? Or the ideas that were informing the project, did that form part of the training at all?

Yes, and as I recall we had a sort of introductory spiel that we were, if you like, required to explain ourselves to the people who were being interviewed. And, yes, the ethos was that the project was trying to, if you like; get to the bottom of what the true story and scale of poverty in the UK was at this period. And I mean remember that the period of time was the '60s, was the sort of so called swinging sixties when everybody was supposed to be bursting out of the post war gloom, and yet and yet there was the feeling that all was not entirely well up and down the country.

That's interesting. And how long did you work on the project for? Do you remember how many years or months?

I think I worked from 1968 to 1969, but I can check that and get back to you on that.

And during that period did you detect any kinds of shifts in what was required of you? Or what the project was about? Or was the kind of task fairly enough...

Yes, it was consistent throughout that period, as I recall, yeah.

And so you were kind of all sort of trained together, what were the other field workers like? Were they kind of similarly recruited to you? What was the...

I mean we were all fairly young. We were all fairly I suppose happy to not exactly rough it, but bear in mind we were out of university, we were required to travel up and down the country, we lived in B&Bs and sometimes it felt as if we lived in the car, and we were sent to various districts, which were sometimes quite stark and so we became I think a team or a unit of people. I think our car took five, so I think there was me and four other people. We became quite a close knit unit for the duration of the project.

That's really interesting. So the people actually were kind of working together, travelling together, sort of living together effectively?

Living together in bed and breakfast accommodation, I think that was organised for us, and we were sent to a location, Coventry, Salford I remember we went to. And I remember that it was part of my task, at the beginning of the period, to allocate the questionnaires and the numbers to other sort of team members.

And from your understanding, most of the people who worked on the project as field workers were graduates, and had been recruited through university?

I think so. I think they were either graduates, or they were from polytechnics maybe. I mean I think it was from higher education.

From higher education?

Yeah.

That's how you think it was meant to be, okay. So that was the kind of contact with the field workers, which sounds like you were quite a band actually.

Yes.

In terms of kind of contact with other members of the team, who had different roles, so for example we've noticed that there is people who coded the work and checked the work, how was the kind of contact? Or to what extent was there contact between people who had different jobs or different kinds of jobs on this?

You mean when the questionnaires were completed?

Yeah, for example, or when you were out on the field, if there was any kind of queries or anything?

I think we were very much on our own. I think there may have been a few queries in the beginning about how we dealt with things like, for example, people's refusal to answer certain questions, or refusal to answer anything at all. And it was established fairly early on, I can't remember quite how, but I think I must have had an area worker that I reported to, and this business of the numbers, can I explain that?

Yeah, please do.

Well we had a sort of list. The questionnaires were numbered with, I don't know, four or five, six digit number at head office or the controlling end of the survey. We had been matched up with addresses that corresponded to these, so if we arrived in an area and we were told that we were going to do a certain street, you

know, that this episode of interviewing was going to be concentrated in two or three streets, say, in Salford then there was a checklist and the numbers of the houses was given to us against the printed copy of the questionnaire. And a couple of times I know that colleagues said to me well I've banged on number 22, but they're never in, can I do number 23? And it was my job to say, no, absolutely not, you must process that questionnaire against that address, and if after the requisite number of attempts, and there was a scenario for each situation like that, then we have to sort of send that back blank with either refused or whatever it was, or no answer, but you can't just pick another house, or another flat or another property, to go and interview so there was those sorts of queries.

That's interesting because what you've described there, there seemed to be a designated person on the ground, as it were, that the others could ask and then you mentioned an area that you dealt with.

I think there was an area leader as well, yes, or somebody who visited the area. And as I recall, I think we got, because the boot of the car was full of these things, and so when they were completed they had to be sort of taken off us, in order that we could then be sent to another area with a fresh batch. And I suppose if there had been queries, we all kept lists of which numbers, which of the questionnaires we had been responsible for. So if there were queries back from the survey coders or headquarters, I suppose, then we would do our best to answer it, but I don't recall keeping any very comprehensive notes. I think all of the notes that we kept were part and parcel of the documentation we handed over to the...

And those notes would be kind of queries that had arisen from the fieldwork?

Yes.

Rather than kind of any other kind of information?

How do you mean?

I'm just kind of possibly thinking ahead to the marginalia, but not kind of impressions of the field or anything like that? Impressions of the interviews, or kind of concerns? I mean the notes that you made, were they mainly about, I suppose questions about procedure or about kind of sampling?

No, there was some background info. I mean when we went to area, I really can't recall in detail, but you may find from, I have a slight memory that we had to say, well what the streets looked like and I do remember, I mean this sticks in my mind, is that before ever Coronation Street was screened I knew what those streets were like because when it was on the TV in later years, I thought I've been to places like that for the poverty survey. And I think we had to say this area is back to back houses, they do not appear to have internal bathrooms, they've got loos out in the back alleys and stuff like that. I think we had to do a sort of quick geographic sketch. I mean bear in mind there was no photography done; we're talking a time before there were cameras, pocket cameras or anything like that, or video. There was nothing like that, so an area description was probably needed by people back at headquarters to know what places in Newcastle or Coventry, or Salford were like.

That's really interesting. And these area descriptions would be separate from any notes that you would make?

Yes.

Right, that's really interesting. I mean from what we've picked up, there seemed to be pretty thorough checking processes for the questionnaires, do you have any memories about how those worked, once you passed the material onto the area supervisor about kind of how the checkers, or coders, would communicate with you? Or how you would, any kind of interaction that you would have?

I think mainly only with regard to whether or not we had completed our task properly. So I mean they wouldn't ask us anything like Mrs Jones says she's got no money, do you know the reason for this? There would be never any contextual questions like that, but there would be things like we see that Mrs Jones refused to answer questions about whether or not they had any savings,

did you form a view whether this was because her husband was in the room, or whether she just didn't want to tell you? We would sometimes get second questions; I would get those from the area person and then I would have to ask.

If they'd undertake the...

Yeah, if they'd ever undertaken it.

Because you would be the one that had a view of that?

Yeah, and then there was a way of feeding that back.

Which would be via the supervisor?

By these area people, yeah. I think it sort of, I mean I remember them as being very harassed and delivering bunches of questionnaires, which they'd got from somewhere, I mean LSE or Essex I suppose. And they'd come up to meet us in these various -

Locations?

- locations in the Midlands or the North.

Interesting. So you had contact with the area supervisors in terms of, but kind of contact with say the coders or checkers, or Brian Abel-Smith Smith or Peter Townsend, or anybody like that there was none?

No, there was no direct contact. I mean I think from time to time, maybe every month or so, there was a way where we were informed how the survey was going, but that was really just in terms of the numbers that had been completed, and whether we were behind schedule, but those in the North East were not or whatever, and how it was generally going, but there was never any personal intervention from either Brian Abel-Smith or Peter Townsend.

Or from others in those specific roles?

No.

So I mean thinking about kind of debriefing about how the work was going, or kind of just talking about the work, from what you've said that seemed to be something that was within your field work team, or if at all, is that right?

Yes, or possibly with the area person. I mean sometimes we did have some quite difficult problems. I remember one time where word of our knocking on doors in certain areas had become known, I suppose, and there were issues where people both wanted to do a survey and we said I'm sorry you're not on our list. And they said well you know I've got a contribution to make, and who can I talk to about, I want to fill in one of these, Mrs Jones down the road has done one, and I want to do one. And we had to deal with sometimes quite difficult situations, so most of our sort of training and interventions were about feedback, and trying to get advice about what to do where you had sort of sticky situations.

And then you've either kept it in your team, or gone to the area supervisor?

Yeah.

That's interesting.