

Interview with Angela Avens

Part 2: conducting the interviews

And when you were actually doing the interviewing, what was that like?

I quite enjoyed it generally, meeting different people and so on.

Did you find some of the ways that people lived interesting or very different to how you lived?

Well there was one where I felt they really were a really poor family with the children sleeping on the settee beside me, and you just realised that that was normally that child's bed. But on the whole I didn't feel that most of them were suffering, obviously suffering immense poverty. Yes, one or two, I remember interviewing one postman and with all his circumstances I thought to myself how on earth do you manage to keep going on this. And one place was really quite a Dickensian farm that I was a bit nervous going into, very untidy dirty and dark, and you just wondered being there on your own if this was a safe thing to be doing.

Did you think that from time to time anyway or just in that one particular situation?

That particular one I found quite worrying, but I think it was all right in the end, can't be fully certain but I think it was.

You can't remember anything bad happening.

No, even now I'm not fully certain that I succeeded, I did seem to get an awful lot of refusals.

What percentage would you say roughly?

I find that quite difficult to know, I can't really remember how many I did, whether it was 20 or 30, I really can't tell now.

And when you saw people in these difficult circumstances, did you find it upsetting at all?

No, I don't think so, because I think most of them were people who seemed to be coping, I didn't feel that, apart from the one, but even they seemed to be coping with it and living at a certain standard. They weren't pleading with me for help or anything like that.

And when you were going through the questionnaire with them, you wrote some notes on the questionnaire because we've still got the original questionnaires, so I was just wondering what made you want to write those notes. Was it because you thought that you'd need some extra information there or?

I suppose it was to give whoever was reading them rather more information than the simple yes/no or tick box answer, it was what the people had said.

Did you sometimes feel it was a bit limiting then just having this tick box sheet?

Well I felt it was in a way, because as I understood it they were trying to find out not only what people earned but what they'd saved and what things they'd got in kind and so on, which actually all contribute towards people making their way in the world. So it didn't always fit, it wasn't a simple thing at all.

And did you ever have a chance to feed that back to the researchers?

I'm not certain, I know when Mrs Jones came down to do some interviews that I couldn't do, we did have a good discussion at the time about it, so probably I did.

And did you feel that there was support there if you had a difficult interview or anything like that, did you know when you could speak to someone about it?

I know I did refer some things back occasionally, so I had two lots of help over that. But I didn't ring up regularly and say I've had a refusal here and what should I do about it. I did feel really I was a bit on my own with that.

And was it difficult approaching people to get them to participate?

Well, you know, I would stand on the doorstep [unclear 13:26] let's hope this is going to be all right lord.

What were you worrying about?

Just about your reception really, you're coming unexpectedly, I think unexpectedly, certainly we must have had some letters that we delivered to places, because I've noted that I left the letters and occasionally I would fix up appointments, so there must have been something like that.

And were you aware of what happened after you'd carried out the research, that it had been written up?

No, I didn't know until just the other day that a book had been written.

Oh really?

I used to see, is it Peter Townsend's or Professor Abel-Smith's name occasionally in the paper over something they'd done, and I used to wonder what happened with all of that, but I never actually saw anything at the end.

So are you aware now of the impact of that book?

I'm not aware of its impact at all.

Well we can talk about that after then. And what happened to you after you'd done the research, did you go on to do more research or did you?

When my children got more demanding, and when they went to school I started part time biology teaching, because I've got a degree in biology, at my husband's

school. And later on when they got bigger I did it full time, but I did do a little bit more, I did a census one year, which was much simpler.

In what sense?

Well the questions were, it was all shorter and so on, but it was the same sort of adventure, finding out places and looking people up and so on. It did strike me actually when I looked through my diary, I think quite often I went back more than once, because I would check them through afterwards and if there were any inconsistencies I think I went back and ironed them out before the questionnaire was sent off.

That was very diligent of you then, yeah.