

Interview with Una Widdett

Part 1: recruitment, training and interviewing

So if you just say what you can remember about how you got involved in the Poverty in the UK study to begin with.

Right, I think I'd been doing quite a lot of research interviewing, and I seem to remember somehow my name had been recommended to the people that were conducting the survey to do some interviewing, so as far as I can remember I had a letter saying would I be able to participate in that.

Okay. Who were you researching for before?

All the various different market research companies; I started off doing food diaries, what sort of food people were shopping, which I think was buying on a weekly basis, like preselected addresses, and regularly visiting them to monitor what products they bought, and that ranged from all the household products, like soap powder, right through to the food they were buying, that sort of thing. That was for Consumer Research, if I remember rightly, and I used to just get people getting in touch and saying would you like to be involved in this project here and there. I remember doing some work for Barton Research when we interviewed people that were taking rail journeys. So we went on the train and we were interviewing there and went around different places.

Was it an agency?

AGM was one company I did a lot of work for. This is going back 50 years isn't it?

And that's an agency is it, that?

They were market research companies, as far as I can remember, and they were obviously doing the work for other unknown companies that we didn't know, and then as I said I got involved with, I did some work for the breweries I imagined; some company was doing a project to find out what stocks public houses had got. We had to go around and ask what sort of bottles of brew they'd got there and what was selling, and then I got involved more with the health, interviewing

doctors about what drugs they prescribed, and then it led onto the one where we went round maternity hospitals interviewing the heads of the hospitals about this new formula baby milk. We never knew who the jobs were being done for obviously; it was the market research companies that employed us.

So you started working on the Poverty in the UK study as part of your work with the market research company?

Yes.

The same company that employed you normally, they asked you to do this project as well?

No, that was an individual thing. I think somehow my name had been referred over, and I don't know whether I worked on the school meals – you know the letter I've got to show you there – I don't know if I worked on the school meals project before this one, I think maybe. There might be a date on that letter. So I don't know if I worked for them first and maybe Professor Mike Reading, I think the name was, might have said that I'd done some interviewing in that, and maybe, I don't really know how I got involved in the, you know, but it was quite an achievement to do that. That was like the biggest project I've ever worked on really.

Okay, biggest in?

What it entailed because it was quite a long interview and you did wonder whether people would be willing, but generally I was surprised how helpful people were. I'd like to remember if they had a letter to say we were coming but I can't remember. Surely with an interview like that we wouldn't be just knocking on the door cold calling would we? I can't remember that.

Yeah, I think they did know in advance, I think, yeah.

Yes, might have had a letter to say someone was going to come and talk to them, yes, I hope so.

So do you remember anything about what happened after, whether you were trained or you had to go anywhere to meet the researchers, or how were you inducted into the whole process?

I wish I could remember because I can't imagine doing a survey of that length and an interview of that length and that nature without having some sort of briefing for it, but I really have got a complete blank about that. I can't remember it at all. We usually went on briefings before we did any interview and research but.

Some people have said they went to London, but I don't know if that applied to everyone. They went for the day in London.

Do you know I have been to London once or twice for briefings so I imagine...

It might have been...

I can't imagine doing an interview like that and not having really thorough briefings for it.

Yeah. No, that's fine. We don't expect you to remember everything after all this time! Can you remember how long you worked on the project?

No.

Which area did you do; was it this area I would imagine?

Oldbury and Halesowen, Halesowen and Oldbury, but I do seem to remember going outside those areas a little bit, because I've got memories of going to places that were outside that area, but maybe it would have been in a radius of that area anyway.

And what kind of areas were they?

Some areas were sort of almost redevelopment areas, some of them that I went to, and some of them were sort of everyday general areas. I don't remember going to any what you would call upper middle class or anything. It's hard to

remember everything. You remember some of the people you've met and you remember if you have a bad experience, you don't forget that! But I can just remember going round Halesowen and they were all sort of, well, I lived in that area at one time and I just took it that that was just a general everyday sort of area, you know. But Oldbury is more like an older area and part of it might have been, well, it's probably been redeveloped by now anyway.

So how did you find the process of doing the research; was it easy, difficult?

No, I really felt very business-like about it. I felt as though I adjusted according to the household I went into and I tried to be very professional really, and I did hold my breath at some of the questions and wondered how they would respond to it, but generally I found people were marvellous and I can just remember thinking, well, they've been very tolerant and very helpful.

Which kind of questions did you find a bit difficult to ask and what was?

Well, personal questions like financial income, because I thought well they're not going to tell me all this, you know. Their bank accounts, their income and output and all that sort of thing, I thought was really digging deep into their own personal circumstances, but generally I found people were very good. I have a vague memory of going to a house and I really can't remember, it must have been in the Oldbury area, but it was a nice area, of going into the house and the lady was very welcoming and she took me into her front room and she was very responsive and she was gentle and kind and very nice. It was pouring down with rain the day I went, but I think the appointment must have been made to go there.

So I took my raincoat off and we left it in the hall and she was saying, oh put it there and come into the lounge and all that. And we were going through the questionnaire and suddenly the husband came in and he was furious and he said get out! And he just pointed at the door and he said, get out, and she said to me, I'm very sorry. And he came to the door and he opened the door wide, the front door and he picked my mac up and he was going to throw it out onto the drive, you know, and I tried to keep as calm as possible. And she was obviously

feeling very awful about it because she was quite willing to carry on with it, but I took the mic off him and put it on and tried to remain calm and walked out.

And then when I got to the car I broke down a bit because it was quite a nasty experience, you know, and I thought I must carry on, carry on doing the job because this sort of thing can put you off, and I went to the next house and they were wonderful and they sat me around the table and they answered the questions and I said oh I've just had a nasty experience, and they were very sympathetic about it. But, you see, those sort of things do stay in your mind and obviously the husband objected to all of his personal information being given out I should imagine. You can understand.

And did you have anyone to talk to after from the market research company, the employers, about what happened?

No, no, no. I might have made a note, I can't remember, I might have made a note of, well, I would have done if the interview hadn't been finished I would have explained why, but I just can't remember now all that. But on the whole I thoroughly enjoyed it and I thought it was quite a challenge to do a job like that for London School of Economics and Political Science, I thought it was, to know what I was doing and to have input from Professor Townsend himself, you know, letters and things, I thought that made it all worthwhile, and yes, so it was quite a thing. I remember towards the end of the survey it was getting a bit, because we were trying to get finished on time and I think I had a telephone call from somebody to say would I mind going back to one of the houses for some reason and redoing it, and I did that. But generally I've just got good recollections about doing it and I thought it was quite an achievement, you know.

And were you very interested in the topic, did you think it was a really worthwhile topic?

Yes. I did, but if I did it now, if I could go back all that time, I mean I can remember going to people's houses where I felt quite shocked about the circumstances they were living in. I mean I've lived in poverty myself, so if I was doing it now I'd probably be more shocked than I was then because I'd been there, if you know what I mean. Although I was sorry for the circumstances some of them were in I knew what it was like to be there, so that must have had

an effect on my attitude to it, I don't know, and it shouldn't have done I'm sure, but because I'd been poor earlier on I sort of knew the circumstances in a way.

But there were people that I saw, I went to one bedsit where there was a middle aged man living in awful circumstances. The bed was in the one room, he'd just got a one room bedsit and he was living in awful circumstances and I just felt so sorry for him and I thought, well, I shouldn't be in the room on my own with this man because I don't know what he's like or anything. But he was very polite and everything, but he was obviously down and out really. But I don't know whether that, I don't remember the questionnaire, you know, whether I made any comments about it on the questionnaire, I don't know.

Did you tend to do that if you felt strongly about something or you noticed something, you tended to make notes on the questionnaire?

Yes I think so. Yes I've been, you know, sometimes all the different interviews intermingle, but I've had letters back saying that they appreciated the extra notes that I'd put on when I've done interviews and things like that. Sometimes everything doesn't fit into the box, does it? You know, everything doesn't fit into the category that you're asking them about, so I tended to do a lot of writing where I thought it was reasonable to do so.

So that was the main reason that you wrote the notes then was, if it was difficult to tick a particular box then you gave more information to justify the way that you'd ticked it or something.

Yes.