
Interview with Ann Neligan

Part 1: recruitment and interviewing

Do you remember anything about how you got involved in the Poverty in the UK survey?

I think it was, I was at college in London, I was at University College, and I had a very good friend who was at LSE doing sociology, so I'm fairly sure that what happened was that they were asked about doing these surveys. And they wanted people in Newcastle, which is where my family were from, and so she suggested me and so I got in touch. I think that will have been the route.

So you did you research in Newcastle, did you?

Yes.

And do you remember how long you did it for, more or less?

Well it was over a summer, but I can't remember how many interviews I did. Not many; I think probably three-ish, but I'm really not sure. It could have been five, it could have been two, I don't remember.

And it was a summer job, was it?

It was a summer job. I did it as a summer job, yes.

So you were a student at the time?

I was a student.

What were you studying?

I was studying geography, so I was there between '65 and '68, and I think it was probably not my last year; I think it was probably the first, second holiday.

And did your friend do it as well? Was she involved in the research?

Not as far as I know. I don't think, I didn't know anybody else who did it.

Were you connected to anyone else who was doing it?

No, absolutely not. It just felt like very, quite remote really.

And had you been living in London then, and you went up to Newcastle especially?

Well my parents, my family still lived in Newcastle, so I went back there every holiday anyway and it was a holiday job, so I just did it during my summer holiday.

I see, yeah. Do you remember anything about the questions that you asked, or the interviews themselves?

I remember that it was a very, very thick questionnaire. I was quite staggered, I'd agreed to do it, and I can't remember the process of that, and I don't know how much they knew about me, if anything, but I remember getting the questionnaire. The way it comes into my mind was telephone directory, it was very thick and so I was daunted by that, and what I do remember was that there was a lot of questions that I think were kind of, it started off with lots of questions about housing. My memory is housing and bathrooms and bedrooms and things like that, and then there was money questions kind of embedded in it because I remember reading through and thinking oh and then we get to those. And they were quite intimate questions about money, well quite detailed questions about money, which is seen as intimate. Those are what I remember.

And how did you feel about asking those intimate kinds of questions?

Well I felt very daunted by the whole thing, never mind the questions, because it was called The Poverty Survey, so that was a bit am I going to go and ask poor people about being poor? That felt a funny thing to be doing. Again, I don't remember if they knew what they were being, what the survey was, but I was from Newcastle but I was from Jesmond, which is a very middle class area of Newcastle, and I was going to a local direct grant school, so I was from a very sort of comfortable background in some ways. And I was young, I was only a

student, and I was going off to interview people living in a bit of Newcastle that I wouldn't have been to, often, about their incomes and lifestyles.

So I think I found it quite intimating the whole thing. I remember kind of having to psyche myself up for each interview, and I was quite nervous. I'd done some survey work when I was doing my A-levels, I remember, and I'd enjoyed those surveys. That was surveying farmers and this felt much more, you know, they weren't people I knew, it was potentially quite contentious my asking those sorts of questions, so I think I was probably quite cautious about it.

Was some of that because you saw them as possibly being from a different background to you?

It was just a strange background. It wasn't the background, it was a strange, you know, it was a bit of Newcastle that I didn't know. They were living lifestyles that I wasn't familiar with, and I felt very aware of that. I felt very aware of being middle class, and coming in as this young thing asking them about how much money and space they had in their lives. So I think it was an odd. It must have been an odd dynamic, I don't remember it well.

Do you remember any of the interviews? Do you remember going to the houses?

I've got vague memories of the houses and sort of sitting in front rooms in this slightly uncomfortable way. One of them I remember was a very green room, that's all I can remember about it. I think I spoke to the women mostly. I remember talking to women and having a man in the background, that's what my memory of it is. I don't know how prepared they were, I must have made some appointment with them because the interviews took I think, I don't know, 40 minutes, something like that, to go through so they must have been invited. I don't know what the process was, but it couldn't have been a cold call, official.

And did you notice that their lifestyles were different? Or their housing conditions were different to what you were familiar with?

I don't remember being struck by poverty. I'd been in really poor houses in Newcastle when I was at school, and we used to deliver Christmas boxes to elderly people and stuff, and that was a completely different level of difference

so, no, it wasn't. I didn't notice it physically, I just noticed, I think I must have had the social feeling of discomfort, and I think it was to do with age as well, of being younger than them, and at university and I think that was, yeah, I was quite privileged.

Were you interested in the topic of poverty particularly? Or it just happened to be some work?

I think I wasn't. Again I was thinking about that because I'd been very active politically around issues like poverty all my life since then, but that didn't happen until, that wasn't true when I was at university. I was just getting my degree, I had my head down and I was getting, I'm just kind of interested in social geography. That's the kind of geography that I enjoyed, so it wasn't that I wasn't interested in poverty or economics. I did some economics, but I wasn't very challenging. But it may be that in being involved in that was one of the things that led me to being a lot more challenging, which I can much more clearly identify after that. I went and worked in Ethiopia for three years, and that was real poverty experience so that was a much more dramatic effect on me.

And do you think doing the research kind of helped you to sort of carry on with social geography, and working with people?

I really didn't see it as doing research. I could have been doing marketing survey on the high road really because I was just asking the questions. I didn't know about the, you know, I wasn't part of what those questionnaires had come out of, and I didn't know what happened to them next and I didn't pursue what happened to them next. I don't know why, it seems extraordinary to me now, but I think I felt very, I wasn't confident, I wasn't a confident person, I don't think I would have assumed that almost I was entitled to know more I think. I didn't have conversations with people about the survey, I don't remember there being a process where we were encouraged to think about why it was taking place, and how it might be useful.

Do you remember any kind of induction process at all?

None! I'm absolutely sure, well I'm never absolutely sure, but I'm as confident as I can be that I didn't have any personal one-to-one. There may have been, I may have been sent stuff that I read that gave me the background, which I could

have forgotten, but I think I would have remembered if there had been any personal connection. So I didn't even know if there were other people carrying out surveys in Newcastle, I don't know how many was carried out there, I don't know.

And I think you wrote some notes on the questionnaire itself, most people did it, do you remember doing that? No. Because we're interested in why people write these notes as well.

Do you know what any of the notes were that I wrote?

I don't, no.

It would be very interesting to know; I haven't a clue. I have no recollection of that; it would be very interesting to know what we'd written. I don't know.

Part 2: reflections on the experience

And so after you finished the research then, was there any kind of follow up? Did you get a letter saying thank you? Or any invitation when the research was published or anything?

No, not that, but I would have been away by then I think. I would have been in Ethiopia. I might have got a thank you letter, I really don't remember.

So when did you next hear about the Poverty in the UK study then?

Well I think when I came back. I came back in 1972-3 and I think a lot had happened in that time and I think that probably the poverty survey was part of that. There was a kind of, and I had politically changed a lot when I was away, so I think I didn't relate particularly strongly to that survey. I think I'm just aware of that there was the Townsend survey, and I was kind of glad to have been part of that. I didn't see my role as research, I have to say; I saw my role as being an interviewer kind of thing, and I haven't followed it up systematically since.

Were you aware of the impact of the study?

No, I don't know so I'd be interested to know.

Well basically it helped people understand that the fact that there was still poverty in the UK because at that time some people were saying that there wasn't because people weren't literally dying of starvation, but it showed the other impacts of poverty. Well not particularly subtle, but a bit more subtle impacts like ill health and psychological impacts and stress, and inability to participate in the kind of everyday life of the society. So it kind of changed people's thinking internationally about what poverty actually was. That it wasn't just...

Not enough money.

Yeah.

I think I was probably quite aware of, my father happened to have been running a longitudinal study. He was a paediatrician and he'd done a longitudinal study on poverty and child health. So that looked at achievements in school and a lot of social so I think, and that had been running all the time I was a teenager at home, so I was kind of aware that had been a longitudinal study. I think there were children born in the early '50s, so I kind of knew, I'm just trying to think it may be that's why I sort of saw it, I thought it was quite a normal thing to be doing in a way. I thought it was just...

Oh that's interesting. Well quite a lot of my questions are about the notes that you might have written, about whether you kind of felt you could empathise with the people you were interviewing, and things like that?

I think I was too nervous to be empathising. I was just thinking can I ask the next question.

And was it difficult to knock on the door?

Well that's what I mean. I can't remember how I got there; I was trying to think about how I got to these houses, but I know there was this kind of, and as I say

there must have been some preliminary contact, but I do just know that I was nervous about the whole thing. So it wasn't, I felt like I was kind of, I don't think I will have made a very strong social connection with them because I think I was too nervous to. I don't think I'll have been a good interviewer in that sense, in terms of making them relaxed or feel important, or feel what they said mattered, which I think I couldn't have done until I was older.

So do you think there's anything that could have been done differently, in terms of research from the part that you know about, sort of improved it kind of thing?

Well as I say, I think if I'd had some physical contact, even if it had been only over the phone, some social contact rather than just written, encouraging me to think that it mattered. I mean I certainly didn't have any training or advice about interviewing techniques, it was just the questions. And I think, well things just like what I said about the importance of people feeling comfortable, and being able to say more. My memory is that there must have been an, because it was such a fat long questionnaire, that it must have been very question and answer, rather than encouraging people to talk about what was going on in their lives.

Yeah, there was.

And I suppose that might have then engaged me more, if I'd been able to have even just a preliminary discussion, encouraged to have some sort of conversation with them about why we were doing it and what I was doing it for, and how they felt about being interviewed. Those sorts of questions really, encouraging to help me because I'm sure they were nervous too, but I was certainly nervous, you know, some help in getting us through that bit might have produced more, I might have written some notes then. As I say, maybe I did write notes, but I don't know.

So that's about it really. Is there anything else you want to say about it, or the impact of the study?

I don't think so. You know, it's quite ironic that you're talking about the impact of that at a time when people are being plunged into poverty with all sorts of side effects, without any reference back to all of those discoveries that have been made, you know, all that we know about poverty, and how poverty destroys

people's ability to deal well with life in all sorts of ways. And we're back in a culture...

[Recording interrupted]

And they're being blamed for it. So it feels like we're way back before things like the Poverty Survey was carried out in terms of compassion or believe in an equal society or. So I don't know if people are doing studies like that again now to try and influence poverty...

We've got one on the go at the moment that's why we're comparing it, to some extent, with this in terms of methodology anyway.

Well I think I'm sure that people's understanding now of interviewing and stuff, never mind the academic side of it, but just the social side of what makes a good interview must be mammothly different now.

Did you do any more interviewing after, or was that the end?

Oh different sorts of interviewing I've done, yes, like later in life, not that much, well a bit later in life I became a teacher of self defence to women, and I did write a book for that, which was based on interviews with women, but that was people that I knew. And that was a very different sort of interviewing because that was, in fact I've just come back recently from Palestine interviewing women there about their lives, but that's based on a really different model. It's not a statistical, neither of them were statistical, they were qualitative interviews which was based on having a relationship and encouraging people to talk, and then abstracting from those conversations what seemed important, but there wasn't any, there wouldn't have been any statistical, but it didn't put me off interviewing for life, certainly, clearly, but I think now I feel like I'd like to have a relationship with somebody.

Is there any last things you want to say?

I don't think so, except it was a completely, I mean I really had to rack my brain to think of what my involvement had been at all. And of course, as soon as you start thinking these little bits of memory come out, but it amazes me how little thought really I must have put into it for the fact that I remember so little of it.

Well it is a long time ago as well.

It's nearly 50 years ago I think. It is, it's nearly 50 years.

Well that's great. So I'll turn everything off now.