

Interview with Andrea Cordani

Part 2: The interview process

And I wanted to, I mean as you know we're particularly interested in the marginalia and what you all kind of wrote in the margins of the scripts. I mean can you remember sort of how you decided to write in them? The sort of decision making process around putting notes in the margins, how that sort of came about?

Well I think it definitely came about through the difficulty of asking some of these questions, at a time when personal privacy particularly regarding money, and how difficult people found their lives financially; it was not an open topic.

Of course, yes.

And so there were many questions where, I mean my most abiding memory is actually that most people, when you finally sat them down for a three hour interview, usually at the kitchen table, that everybody went all round, the women went all round the houses sort of metaphorically. They would tell you every dot and comma about their sex lives that you didn't really want to know, but they would not tell you anything about their finances. It was very, very difficult to get any information out about them. There was also the particular sort of social thing now that I don't think we even remark on, but was very common back then that many of the people who were targeted for the interview, the women, did not know what their husband earned. So a lot of the margin notes I remember making were Mrs Blogs gets this much, £2 a week or 50 Bob, I think we called it then, wasn't it, 50 Bob a week to manage the food and shoes for the kids and everything, but does not know how much her husband earns down the shipyard.

And so there was a lot of that sort of explanation because the information you got was very, very sparse in many cases because people themselves didn't know, or if they did know sometimes they wouldn't tell you.

So that was the kind of question that prompted the para data. And I mean thinking about sort of either the training, or through the information or however, were there any particular areas you were encouraged to write about, say, for the benefit of the survey? Were you asked at all to make notes in the margins about particular issues?

No, I think what we were encouraged to do was to account for where there was an absence, or a sort of dearth, of information. I mean I did get the impression from, and I'll call them head office for want of a better word, that questionnaire had been devised by people who were more fluent in both language, and sort of socially comfortable, than the people we were asking what was what. And that when we couldn't get an answer out of them I think we felt, as interviews and field workers that we had to explain more why the entries were so sparse, you know, had we failed at our job? And if so, why? I know that there was one particular field worker that I had who was very shy youngish man. I mean he was the same age as the rest of us, but he had that sort of demeanour of a slightly diffident young man.

And I had to encourage him a bit by talking later when we went through the questionnaires because he had very minimalist sort of responses, and I had to say look, Mike, whatever his name was, can you tell me what was going on here? Did they not want to tell you? Did you press them a bit? And those were the sorts of questions that we had to justify back to head office that we'd kind of done all we could to get the answers.

That's interesting because what you described there is going through questionnaires together as a group, did that happen? Or was it when there was a problem? Or was it continued in...

Well when there was a problem, I mean I don't think, we certainly didn't sit down routinely and go through all our questionnaires together, not at all. There would be a problem, I think what would happen in this last situation would be that I would start to sort of backtrack the questionnaires from that area, and you'd just sort of flip through them and you could see a lot of white space. And then knowing, as sort of team leaders we knew the sort of strengths and weaknesses I suppose of the people in the team, so seeing this was a lot of white space, and knowing this was one of this chaps interviews, then you would ask him a few

questions. And then maybe he would annotate a bit more, you know, like why isn't question eight filled in, David? And he'd say well point blank refused. I said well you must actually write that down, but I mean that was only in the beginning. We all got very practiced I suppose at sort of socially doing the right thing, and the timing of choosing the right time for the interview was key because it was so damn long.

So that's interesting. So there were times of day you favoured rather than...

Yeah. I mean there were times of day because I mean life was hard for people. You were going to take three hours out of their day, sitting at their kitchen table or in their front room, or whatever. They were trying to look after children, or get meals for husbands and boyfriends, and families members, and so often you would make the appointment in the day, you'd knock first in the morning and try and make the appointment for the same day. And I think the timing of the interviews was, we certainly were not allowed to do the interviews over more than one occasion, but we were allowed to make a sort of first contact, and then go and book a time when we could do it. Now I think that the favourite time was the afternoon, hopefully sometimes when the, if there was children of school age they would be at school.

So they wouldn't be running around distracting usually mum, but also there was this watershed where the man of the house would come home, and start to throw various spanners in the works, like what's all this, Mabel? You never told me that you was going to be sitting here with, who is she? Because there wasn't really social services, but there were worries that we were from the authorities.

Yeah, I can imagine.

And then there were a couple of occasions where things got really quite unpleasant, where the man snatched a questionnaire of his wife or off me and said what is this? And then it was obvious he couldn't actually read it, and so that was blustering, so I said well perhaps we should continue this another time. And you get all this sort of posh women, we're not answering any questions about our money that's for us to know, what does the Government want to know about

it for anyway? And all of that, and you'd have to sort of gradually diffuse a bit of a tirade sometimes.

It sounds like it could have been pretty intimidating actually? Or maybe not.

Well I mean it could be potentially, I mean to my knowledge nobody in our team was sort of attacked. We were verbally given a bit of tongue lashing sometimes because by and large also, I don't know if this is sort of something that one thinks about these days, but we were university. We were well educated young people who probably, although we were of mixed sort of class, if you like, but we were perceived as posh toffs even though some of us, including myself, were from an equally working class backgrounds, but we were perceived sometimes as a bit of threat, and not often as any sort of help, not leading to anything good. Sometimes the women would think that this might be a good thing sometime in the future, but mostly we were an intrusion, a nuisance and invading their privacy, although privacy was not a concept; it's a modern concept.

That's interesting too. I mean just when you say there, just to hold you there for a minute, about some people thinking that it might be a good thing, I wondered about making decisions to intervene on behalf of some of the people that you interviewed. Was there any possibility to try because I mean some of the circumstances, from looking at the questionnaires that you saw and were in were difficult, and were there arrangements in place to sort of intervene?

No, there was nothing official. I mean when the interviews came to an end, now I don't know whether this, I honestly can't remember whether this is something that we did off our own sort of backs, as it were, or whether we had been spoken to about this. You might find this in some of the training notes, I don't know, but when the questionnaire was closed up there was often time where you could say well, Mrs Smith, have you taken the youngster to the doctor? They look like probably they seem to be a bit poorly and it's been going on, from what you say, it's been going on for a long time, have you been to the doctor, or this that and the other, but we could only do that as individuals, sort of as we would to a neighbour. And because we'd been in their front rooms for about three hours,

sometimes you did build up a very good rapport but, no, there was no official things of us reporting specific circumstances outside the questionnaire.

Not within the team, so not up say to...

No, we didn't, which actually in the context of modern day things I suppose would be quite different but, no, I don't think there was any intervention, certainly nothing that we did. I don't know whether area managers looked through, or the coders looked through. No, but I don't think people did intervene downwards, I don't think so.

And did you get a sense, whenever you wrote your marginalia, of any particular interest that others in the team had that you were looking out for? I mean might you be looking out for interesting cases for the book that was planned, or anything like that? Did that inform any of the notes that you wrote, or not particularly?

Not particularly, except that we knew that child poverty was one of the key sort of drivers; the effect on children of deprivation.

And you knew that from your training?

And we knew that from our training but, no, we were not looking out for specific circumstances. I mean my overriding remembrance of the places we went to is that they were almost; they were to me startlingly bleak places. And I think that many of my colleagues were also quite shocked by the extent of the deprivation we encountered, even though we might have come from sort of relatively poor areas of London or Manchester, or whatever.

Was that something that you noted down at all? Or that you talked about among yourselves?

We talked about it amongst ourselves. And I remember that when I was myself at university, I was in Manchester University and for a while I volunteered, while I was still an undergraduate, to volunteer with something called the university settlement, which was in an area called, a very poor district of Manchester called Ancoats. I did things like visited old ladies, and had a cup of tea with them and

chatted, and stuff like that and this was while I was still an undergraduate. And Ancoats was a very bleak place and quite a shock to me, and when I came to do the poverty survey at the end of my, three years later I suppose I found that some of these places sort of mirrored that experience. And I think I discussed that with colleagues that I hadn't really sort of encountered those sorts of areas until Manchester, and then in the survey locations.

I mean you've said quite a lot already, but I'm just wondering can you say a bit more about what it is like to actually do the interviews, and kind of interact with the interviewees? Is there anything else that we haven't said already?

I suppose it was very, it was quite humbling in a way and I think that, I mean first of all you had to sort of door step people, I suppose rather in the manner that sort of chuggers do these days in shops. We had to actually knock on doors, and then we had a good bit of training about stepping back just in case what came through the door, what came at you was a punch on the nose. It didn't, but just in case, and to engage with people and I found, I mean that was the hardest part to say hello, Mrs Jones, I'd like to interview you I'm from, identify yourself and all this and the badge and everything. And to explain how important it was, and to get their acquiescence in being interviewed that was the hardest part, and that was the thing that always gave you great pleasure if they said well alright, yeah, come back at four o'clock or something. And then you'd say, you'd think ahead and you'd think 4:00 is a bit late, not because you've got other things to do, but because of the coming home from work business.

So you'd say do you think we could make it three o'clock? And she'd say oh alright then come in at 3:00, she said I might be a bit busy, but come in at 3:00. And so once you'd started and you'd got in there, and you'd sort of softened up the atmosphere that was fine, and then when you opened the questionnaire, which as I recall I think was blue, it had a blue cover on it. You got into this detailed bit where they realised, and some of them realised that they'd wished they hadn't said yes because they were going to be put on the back foot about whether or not they wanted to answer questions. And also there was this rather unpleasant situation of them feeling that you were somehow the authorities or someone in authority, and that they could or couldn't say no. And you were trying to work out whether you had to be even more nice, I mean obviously we

tried to be decent human beings, but we did have to get the answers or try to. And sometimes it was just hard to gain their trust, and it was very emotionally draining. I remember that we were all very tired, and sometimes at the end of a day, and particularly at the end of a week, we were pretty clobbered with the sort of emotional sort of adrenaline of it.