

Interview with Andrea Cordani

Part 3: the personal and political impact

Because I imagine there's the emotion of actually kind of, like you say, being in that situation and having to keep the kind of trust, without being exploitative, but also I mean as you described I mean it takes its toll kind of being confronted by some of the bleakness -

Oh absolutely.

- and some of the stories that you...

But in a way that sort of helped because it brought home to us that this was a serious project because it was a serious problem in the UK, in a way that I think even though we've been on the training, we'd signed up for it, we knew it was a poverty survey. We listened to lectures in the beginning from Professor Abel-Smith and Townsend, and we knew that it was an important project, but when you were actually doing it on the sharp end you realised, my goodness, there is a need here to get to the bottom of what needs to be done to improve people's lives.

So it sounds like you were very kind of engaged with the task and kind of with the vision of the project as well?

Oh absolutely, yeah. I think everybody was very enthusiastic. I mean I don't think I heard anybody in my bunch, as it were, that said oh I'm not doing this. Everybody stuck with it, and I think everybody was affected by it.

I mean in terms of thinking about the emotional toll that it took, and sort of debriefing, was there any kind of, I don't know, was there any sort of outlet for the kind of difficulties maybe that it brought up out of it?

Not really. I mean only just we all sat round in the evening, or we went down the pub, but we had to be careful not to be sort of like hung over in the mornings obviously.

Yes, of course.

I mean we'd all not long been students, and so we had to be careful. Also we were not that well off; I was paid money for the petrol for the car and things, but obviously that wasn't being spent on frivolities.

You needed that for petrol.

Yes, exactly. I mean the actual logistics were also quite, I'm sure they wouldn't give us that sort of carte blanche nowadays, but we were packed off in a car. I think one of the reasons I think I got to be team leader or something was because I could drive and I had driven for a couple of years when this project started, but then they put me in a car that I'd never seen before, which had a steering column gear change. I think it was a Vauxhall Victor or something, and so I got all these keen interviewers in the back, and a trunk load of questionnaires and I couldn't get, I think I didn't get out of second gear until we got past the North Circular somewhere near Watford, so it was highly embarrassing.

That's really interesting. But the kind of emotional sort of, this wasn't necessarily something you'd write, I mean this sort of engagement that you described, you wouldn't necessarily, did that find its way into the marginalia as well? Was there things that you kind of wanted to bring to people's attention in the team from that?

I think we did want to make it clear where people were, I know I keep coming back to this, but it was very important to us to make it clear when people were sort of qualifying their answer. In other words, when they wouldn't answer it at all, and we often said what reason we thought that might be, or where we thought, sometimes I remember that we thought that people were not actually telling the truth. I know that sounds rather severe, but what I mean is that people sometimes didn't want to declare how badly off they were. There was a sense that they would inflate their own sort of living money that they had, or they

would play down the hardships because they were ashamed. And there was a great link between being ashamed of being poor, and just being in poverty, and so I think we were quite keen to make it clear to people back at HQ what we thought the situations were. And I mean it was quite sad in some ways when people would not talk about how much they, it was the housekeeping money. I can't remember whether the questions were actually framed like that, perhaps they were in those days, you'll know from the research, but how much housekeeping does your husband give you? Or how much housekeeping do you have? Or whatever the terminology was, and sometimes you could see them pause. And also we became quite aware that there were these double standards that they, sorry these double tracks that some of the women had. In that they were consciously thinking will I tell her that I get 10 shillings a week because if I tell her that she may not know this, but I keep 2 shillings back that he don't know about either, you know, that women had these sorts of private pots of money that they keep separate.

And sometimes they would tell us of these, and sometimes they wouldn't and you'd think that doesn't add quite up. And it was all part of a sort of, I don't know, it was a very sort of emotional sort of rollercoaster of realising the sorts of lengths that people went to maintain themselves. And I mean you did come across some households where you realised that given their head, as it were, the men would give the women a very little amount, or half way through the week sometimes, and I think we annotated these, I'm not sure whether this had been thought about at head office, but the women would get their housekeeping money, and then half way through the week the guy would run out of money, down the pub or the bookies or something, and would claw some of it back. And sometimes the women would admit to hiding the housekeeping, or pretending they'd spent it, in order to not to have to give it back.

And so as an interviewer you were kind of complicit in a lot of, and people would say to you do you have to put that down? And I think we, do you have to say that I keep 2 Bob back just in case? And I think that those were some of the queries that we might have, that they might have written about, yeah.

That's really interesting. I mean I'm thinking also about the kind of overall sort of impact of the project, was envisaged for the project. And you mentioned that there'd been lectures given at the start of your

training, start of your contract, and I mean thinking about the sort of overall sort of impact envisaged for the project, did you have a sense of that, as a whole team that you all hoped to achieve?

I don't think I quite understand what you mean.

No, I phrased it quite badly. What I'm interested in is what was hoped for the project? What the project hoped to achieve? Did you have a sense of that all the way through, and from the start?

Well I think we had the general sort of mission, if you like, firmly embedded in us that this was going to be a ground breaking sort of project that was trying to, well to end poverty in the UK for once and for all because the Government would get hold of the report and that action would be taken to address some of these issues. Many of which, of course, were to do with, many were to do with employment or the lack of it, but many also were to do with housing and terrible conditions that people lived in, you know, notwithstanding whatever they did or didn't earn down at the docks, the shipyard or wherever but, no, I think we did have a bit of a sort of missionary zeal, if you like, that this was going to be useful. And you needed it, I mean speaking to you now I can recall that it was very, very hard emotionally, and you really needed to think that you were doing something that was fairly important in order to get your through.

I know that at the beginning of a week in a new area, we would all sort of collectively sort of have to take a deep breath because we were going to have to start knocking on the doors of these new streets, new to us, and make the appointments. And the first day of that was always very hard because you so often got the door slammed in your face, and you then had to sort of figure out what that meant, if you'd seen somebody and somebody said no and just slammed the door, or whether you, you'd got to try again. I mean I think that was fairly clear from our instructions that you couldn't just take one no for an answer, you had to knock again and risk worse.

So you had to really believe that what you were...

You had to really believe that what you were doing was useful. And I mean this is where people said I've had the door slammed in my face five times today,

maybe different, can't I try this end of the street; they're all looking what's happening and they seem quite keen? And you'd have to say no, you've got to do number 23 or fourteen.

And as the week progressed, and people became more accustomed to the survey being in the area, then things got a bit easier, sometimes got a bit easier?

Yes, and as I said to you before, sometimes it got the other way around where people tugged on your sleeve to say can we do your survey? And I'd say worry, no, you're not on our list, and then of course when you say things like you're not on our list, people then wonder what the list is all about.

Exactly, and how it was...

And how it was...

Developed?

Well why is she doing it and not us? And all of that, and as quite junior individuals sort of in quite tough areas that was quite a big thing to handle.

Yeah, I can imagine that. What do you think the impact actually was? I mean you've told us a little bit about what you'd hoped for, when you were undertaking the field work, do you have any sense of...

Well I know that as a result of it the Child Poverty Action Group was formed, and I was really pleased. I can't remember how long after that happened, but I was really quite heartened by that. And I thought, when you look back on work that you've done, and you think that organisation has kind of grown out of it, and was advising Government and various things then, yeah, I was very pleased about it, but I suppose at some stage later as years went by, and my interests weren't sort of focussed on that anymore as I different jobs and careers, but I was always aware of it in the back ground and thought, yeah, I've worked for that. We've now moved into the modern age and we still haven't solved it, one begins think that you're kind of going round, or as a society we're going round in circles but, no, I did think it was worthwhile, very much so.

And now you've reflected back on your feelings, do you think about anything within the survey that worked particularly well? Or alternatively, anything that you would have done differently with hindsight, that could have been done differently about any aspect of it?

Well I don't know. I think that with, I'm not knowledgeable enough about survey methodology to know what would or wouldn't have worked. As a sort of interviewer, it would have been possibly good if an area had been sort of pre warned that we were going to be -

Be knocking on the doors, yeah.

- appear, but then again in practical terms, or in research data terms, that may have actually kind of affected the results. I mean obviously presumably one wouldn't have then gone for people to self-select to go forward to be interviewed. That would not be probably kind of statistically correct, and also it might have given people the opportunity to sort of over think what they were going to say, but I mean certainly as a researcher, just knocking on those bleak doors for the first time, when the door opens four inches and a nose pokes out, and somebody says what do you want? It can be very daunting, and so if you can say you may have heard that we're doing dah de dah that might have helped us, but I'm not sure it would have helped the survey.

It just occurred to me, were you given any kind of identification or anything like that?

Yeah, I think we had a badge.

You had a badge?

I think. We certainly had something, which we produced, and we had, I can't remember whether they signed anything or not. I think we sort of showed them the questionnaire, but I remember one of the things was we were not to let go of it. People were not to...

Really?

Yeah, people were not to rifle through it themselves. We couldn't say this is what we're going to ask you, do you want to have a look at it or anything? We had to keep it in our possession but, yeah, we had our identity but I don't think, I mean all that did was ratify that we were somehow the authorities, and it probably wasn't clear to everybody on whose behalf we were doing it because again, you're talking in a time when there wasn't much general sort of communication knowledge of who was who. There was the council, there was the NSPCC, there was various officials who might bang on your door, but mostly in those localities people only banged on your door when there was trouble, if you see what I mean?

Yeah, I can totally see.

So the first job was to, as I say, to step back, to smile and to introduce yourself. I think the women actually, the girls did better than the boys because the young men who were on the team, I think I had half and half, two boys, two young men and two young women. The young women were perceived as less of a threat than the blokes were, inevitably in those days, but then again maybe the blokes got more sort of an authority, were more authoritative in the sort of social perception.

I think that's nearly everything I was hoping to ask you. It's been really fascinating, but is there anything that I haven't asked about that you'd like to add, or anything you'd like to say?

No. I think I'd only like to ask how big the coding operation was because I don't think I've ever known.

Right.

But maybe you can tell me that later?

You know what, I'm going to have to get back to you on that, but I'm sure I can find out. I don't have that information at my fingertips, but actually it's interesting that it's a little bit of a mystery to you that sort of layer up.

Yes because all I can remember is week on and week out a bunch of these things were handed by me from the boot of this car to the area person, and I don't know what precisely happened to it next. I know of course that the Child Poverty Action Group finally resulted, but the kind of process is a bit of a mystery to me.

Sorry, just one final question. Was there ever any question of you contributing, or any of the field reps contributing, to any of the publications or being involved in anything like that?

No, I don't know any of that.

Lovely! Andrea, thank you so much. That's been brilliant. Thank you.