

Interview with Morag Macdonald and Deidre Forsyth

Part 2: Conducting the interviews

And then you referred a couple of times to one or two interviews that you remember, do you want to say why they were memorable in particular?

Macdonald: Well it was two interviews we did on the same day with two families who were similar in size and had similar incomes, and lived my recollection is quite close to each other. And the first family in the afternoon we went to see, we saw a woman and several children in an absolutely filthy house with the, there was a baby lying on a mattress on the floor, and the baby was eating bread and jam, and the mother looked, well at that time really ancient, obviously worn down or whatever. And there was clearly absolutely no money. And the husband she said either gambled it or drank it. And it was so awful I remember we went back to the union and showered because it was absolutely filthy, we went straight back to the student union and had a shower. And in the evening we went and saw the second family who were exactly the same and they were in the house that clearly didn't have a lot of money because of the furnishings and things, but the house was immaculate, the husband and wife were both there, and what they were doing was they were saving their money because their eldest daughter was clever and they wanted her to go to Notre Dame High School, catholic girls' school. And although it was a council run school I think, they needed money for uniform and all sorts of things. And even at the age of 20 I think that this really struck me about the difference between the two families with exactly the same sized family and exactly the same income, and how they reacted completely differently to the same situation. I've never actually forgotten that. I think whenever this comes up in conversation, that's what I remember is these two interviews; I thought that was quite astonishing.

So what was your conclusion then about why they reacted differently or you just noted that they reacted differently?

Macdonald: I noted that they reacted differently, that was very noticeable, and also I think that probably, I couldn't articulate what I drew from it but it probably was about strength of character, that in exactly the same circumstances people can react very differently, and the fact that you're poor doesn't condemn you forever, or else it does. But it's you that makes the difference.

And do you remember of the interviews at all?

Forsyth: I don't, sorry.

Are there any other interviews you remember?

Macdonald: I remember one where we were interviewing a woman and her daughters were there, and one of the things that we asked was about how much money the other people who lived in the house contributed. And there was a son who was working and living in the house, and we had to ask how much he earned and how much he gave his mother each week, and she knew how much he contributed to the house but she didn't know what he earned. But the sister did for some reason, I think she helped the brother out, and we had cards if people wouldn't give us an answer, we had cards we showed them with bandings on them. And I remember showing the sister and her telling us which band it was, and the son earned a great deal more than his contribution, and I remember that quite clearly, and obviously the mother had no idea how much this guy was earning

Forsyth: but his sister knew.

So it was a bit of an awkward situation sometimes, kind of exposing things within families, the secrets.

Forsyth: We may have changed their lives forever.

Macdonald: Yes.

Forsyth: Sister would go and give her brother a really hard time.

And then you said you went together then, did you find that useful in terms of when you came out you had somebody to offload to or compare ideas?

Macdonald: Yes.

Forsyth: I think it was quite good, I mean I don't remember much but I think it was good that we could make sure the form, because sometimes it's a bit difficult, I mean you do fill in the form but it's sometimes quite difficult to write everything down, and make sure that you've signed it off properly.

And then I think both of you wrote some notes on the actual questionnaire, can you remember why you did that?

Forsyth: You mean on some specific questionnaires?

Yes, just to give some additional information.

Forsyth: Well probably just felt it was needed, I mean I do vaguely remember that, I think we must have just thought you need to know a bit more about, I mean the answer to the question wasn't enough in itself perhaps, and that would be our own judgement I suppose.

Macdonald: And I think there was a space at the end for comments or something, and that we would put in, because sometimes there were things like impressions that we got that were worth recording, that the answer by itself didn't, as Deirdre said it wasn't enough.

Did you find it valuable that you had that space and you were encouraged to do that, if there hadn't have been anywhere that you could write notes would you have written them anyway?

Forsyth: Probably would have but I think it's better if it's officially part of the form.

Macdonald: Because it makes you think about it.

So after the research did you have any kind of official debriefing from the people that were organising the research or from the market research company?

Macdonald: No, but they offered me a full time job.

Did they?

Macdonald: No I didn't take it, I was a lawyer, or was going to be. But yes, I often wonder what life would have been like if I'd said yes. But no, we didn't have, other than a thank you.

Forsyth: I don't remember much.

So you got a thank you, was it a letter or?

Macdonald: Probably yes, well it certainly wouldn't have been an email, but I don't recollect any phone calls, so yes it must have.

Do you think being involved in that research together bonded you as friends, or would you have stayed in touch anyway do you think?

Macdonald: Well given that she's forgotten, laughs

Forsyth: I think we were going to be in touch anyway, we were friends, we'd been friends for three or four years, and then we've always been friends ever since, even though we've lived a long way apart for a long time. Morag's just quite recently come back to, well very recently come back to Glasgow and quite recently come back to Scotland so.

Macdonald: Yeah, I was in London for 30 years.

And when you were visiting some of the houses where people weren't very well off did you feel that you wanted to do anything to change it or you just thought that's not my job?

Macdonald: No, I can't say, it didn't fire me up to crusade against poverty.

Forsyth: No, not specifically, but I'm sure it would have affected, well I don't know if that's that affects the way I feel about what I would say are the duties of the community to other people, I could maybe call it that, I may have felt like that anyway actually, I'm not sure.

Macdonald: Well it's quite interesting because I was talking about this to another friend of ours who was at university with us, Moira, and she assumed that we had done this survey because of our general attitude,

Forsyth: I don't think it was, no, it was just a job to earn some money,

Macdonald: it was either that or sell encyclopaedias.

Forsyth: Or working in the Post Office as Christmas.

Macdonald: Yeah, but I suspect that our memories, it may have played subsequently a bigger part than it did at the time, but there was no way at the time it made any difference because we went on to.

F: That's right.

F: Yeah, went on to practice our..

When you say subsequently it may have made a difference, in what sense?

Forsyth: I just think just in the general, just your general feeling about the duties of looking after people who are less able to look after themselves, I think that's.

Do you think it might have had an impact?

Forsyth: It's hard to tell, I mean I came from quite a left wing background anyway, and fairly political, so it might have, I mean that would probably have

been something I would have thought possibly anyway, I don't know. It's quite difficult to, when you're 20 you're not thinking about other people all that much.

Macdonald: And also you can't separate that really from things that have happened since.

Forsyth: No, that's right, of course.

Macdonald: I think that I found it an eye opener, because my family weren't at all, looking back on it well off, they certainly weren't poor. And I was astonished really I suppose at how much poverty there was in Glasgow. I mean we'd had four years together at university in the 60s in what was really now a very privileged atmosphere, where none of us ever thought about money except that there maybe wasn't enough to buy today's cigarettes or drink or whatever, but money was not a problem to any of us. And we lived a very privileged life actually, compared to the people that I suddenly saw lived a mile, two miles from the university, I mean that was perhaps the astonishing thing that this was happening so close to where we were spending our days. You don't articulate that at 20.

Did it just kind of wash over you, or did you make sense of it somehow, did it have any emotional impact on you, make you feel guilty or?

Forsyth: It might, I can't remember much about it. I don't know, I mean this is just guessing, I would think that you would, after particular interviews you might go home feeling worried or sad or it might be going round your head, but then probably the next day you're doing another one or you're doing something else, it's only a momentary thing isn't it?

Macdonald: And also it was our last summer as students, and what we were thinking about was the future really.

Forsyth: Yeah.