

Interview with Morag Macdonald and Deidre Forsyth

Part 3: Longer term reflections

So you didn't have anything more to do with the survey or the research after, you weren't invited to contribute to anything further?

Macdonald: No.

And when did you next hear about it then, when did you realise that it had been written up into a book or?

Forsyth: Probably when you got in touch, well did you know that?

Macdonald: I knew because I saw something much later about Professor Abel-Smith, and my husband's an economist, and he was actually quite interested that I'd done this study because he knew Abel-Smith, and that was the only reason that I knew that we'd actually contributed to anything of any importance.

Forsyth: I don't think I knew, or at least.

Until recently.

Forsyth: Yeah.

And now that you realise that it was an important study how do you feel about?

Forsyth: I feel like going and trying to read it properly actually.

Yeah, it would be interesting to see if you recognise any of the stories in there.

Forsyth: Well hopefully that's what I was trying to do when I looked on the internet, I think I maybe looked at the wrong one but there must have been other, I mean it did say poverty survey and the year, so I just assumed it was that one, but it might have been another one, or it might have been other people that were doing that bit. But yeah, I think it would be quite good to go and read it up, I mean is it accessible?

Yeah, it's actually online, the whole book, Poverty in the UK 1969, I think that should bring it up, by Peter Townsend.

Forsyth: 69, because by the time it was printed it would be then.

Macdonald: Yeah, because it was 68 we were doing the interviews.

The book came out in 1978 or 79, so yeah.

Forsyth: See my father died in 1968 so there was quite a lot going on in my life, and I think that might be why it's not in my head very much.

Macdonald: But one of the interesting things, I suppose the thing that really shows how little impact it has, the market, we were employed by a market research company, we weren't employed by the university or any research department or anything. And afterwards, after that survey, the market research company offered me another interview and then a full time job. But the session of interviewing was about paint samples, and it was in Greenock, and that was actually what put me off going to Greenock. But it shows how unimportant it was in that sense, in that the market research company were presumably doing lots and lots of things, and their next thing was paint samples, and the fact that it was a poverty survey was actually irrelevant, it was simply as a survey as far as they were concerned. And that I think must have influenced us, certainly the way we were treated by them, not badly but as far as they were concerned it was simply a survey.

Forsyth: I don't think it would have, I mean I think, I'm sure that we did our best to do it properly because we're both like that anyway, so we wouldn't have treated it in a casual way. But it might still have been just an interlude or an event in life rather than a life changing event.

Macdonald: Yeah, it wasn't important to us other than it was a job, although it was interesting and as Deirdre says we would have done it properly. But it wasn't of any great importance to us.

Did you find it useful in your later careers to, because you had examples in your mind about people in different situations, like say when you were a lawyer perhaps?

Forsyth: Well who knows? I mean I had to do work not long after that with compulsory purchase orders and a fund where people didn't want to sell their title, was very precious to them, houses that were probably like slums, so it may have made me more sympathetic to them, but I really couldn't say that it would be as directly connected as that. But I mean everything that you do in life affects you for the future doesn't it, I mean you can't say it did affect you but you can't say that it didn't. I'm sure it does affect you, you may behave differently as a result but who knows? It's quite hard to sort out that kind of, it's a very philosophical question actually.

Macdonald: Yes.

Because you've been involved with the Credit Union for some time haven't you?

Forsyth: Yes well true, I was always interested in the Credit Union because I tried to start a Credit Union in about 1978/79, maybe 80, unsuccessfully, so I have had a long term interest in them. But I'm not quite sure why, I must have just read about them and wanted to do it.

I haven't got any more formal questions but is there anything that you think I should have asked you that I haven't, or anything that you remember that you want to recount, or any point that you want to make about the study or about poverty?

Forsyth: Has it changed things, the study?

Are you asking me? I think it made a big difference to people's thinking about poverty but I think the levels of poverty, the form of poverty has changed to some extent but the levels of it haven't particularly changed, that's my understanding of it.

Forsyth: But it did affect political thinking or?

Definitely yeah, because at that time there was a move to say that poverty didn't exist because people weren't actually dropping dead on the streets of starvation, where they do in some countries. So they were able to show that people suffer a lot even though they're not dying immediately, there's still a health impact, still have psychological impacts, social impacts, impacts on crime, all that sort of thing. That was the beginning of it really, and the whole idea, those kinds of ideas of what they call relative poverty just spread throughout the world.

Forsyth: Well that's good to know that then.

Yeah, so it was great that you were part of it.

Macdonald: I don't think that's changed much Deirdre, I mean the idea of the level, say well everybody's got a television so they can't be poor, but I mean the level of poverty must still.

Forsyth: Oh yes, I didn't mean we got rid of poverty but I think it's still good if people started to recognise it more, even though they didn't do much about it. At least it's a step further forward than denying that it exists altogether.

Macdonald: Yes, or taking the attitude that because people have got a television they can't be poor, that there are different kinds. I did a bus tour of Glasgow on Saturday.

Forsyth: Oh did you?

Macdonald: Yes, on the number 90 bus, around areas of Glasgow that we had actually interviewed in, and I have to say I was quite horrified at how it's clear

that there are still in Glasgow large areas of deprivation. Yeah. There's no doubt about it.

Forsyth: I used to go on that bus quite a lot when Patrick was, before he went to school, because it was quite a good trip you could do for about an hour and a half, but yeah it was. And certainly then, and I'm sure still, you went through bits where you thought this is dreadful. I mean they tart up places and so superficially, especially if you go along the main roads everything looks okay, but if you go further in it's not great.

Macdonald: Yes, and the buses that go through the housing schemes go further in, and passed where the athletes village is going to be, which all looks very nice, but.

Forsyth: There was a television programme about a social worker called Kaka Michael who was married to an MP in a place called Daisy Bank in it must have been early 80s, and she went and lived there for a month, it was just, it was false but she did a television programme about it. The people who lived there, they had a community council and the chair of the community council was brilliant, he came and he was very emotional, he was always crying, and he said how can she say what it's like to live here when she knew that she would be leaving in a month? And I hope that we didn't make assumptions that, I mean I don't remember but I would hope that we didn't make assumptions based on what we would have done had we been in that situation, because you can't.

Yeah, because you don't always know the background.

Forsyth: Yeah.

Macdonald: No, you don't. I suspect we didn't, we were too young, we just wouldn't think about it really.

Do you think anything could have been done differently with regards to the survey, maybe to have given more support to you or to explain things more before, or have you got any ideas about anything that could have been done differently?

Macdonald: Well we were probably conceited enough to think we were doing a good job. I think we probably did, because we did take it seriously. But I wonder did anybody, would anybody have validated our answers, or would there have been any further check to see whether we'd made a lot of it up?

Not as far as I know but that's a good question.

Forsyth: Yeah, because I mean, well I don't think it would be easy to make it all up if you hadn't been to any of them, but I mean if you were doing 17 different ones or however many, you did 16 and the 17th wasn't in, we didn't do this, we did not do this, I know without even remembering that we didn't do this. But you could imagine that people might decide that they would just make that bit up, which would be awful. And obviously it would completely skew unknowingly the whole results.

Macdonald: But I do remember making up the answer to one question that I forgot to ask, I do remember that. Just one, not a whole questionnaire, just one question, and sort of guessing on the basis of the other interviews that we'd done what the answer was.

Can you remember which question it was?

Macdonald: No I can't, but I do remember that, probably because it was the only time we did it. But I said at the beginning the people we saw had already been interviewed, I remember Deirdre, that there was one, at least one family that when we went for the follow had decided that they wouldn't take part in the follow up, for whatever reason.

Forsyth: I think we might have been warned that this could happen, I mean you maybe say oh I don't know, we probably had a set of questions that we were able to ask to find out what the reason was or something.

So you didn't feel pressured to get all the answers.

Macdonald: No, I think we were probably told that if they said no we just accepted that.

Forsyth: I don't think there was to be any confrontation.

Macdonald: But yeah, I suppose there must have been some random checking on what we did, or on the, because I think it was done in five or six different cities, I mean it wasn't just Glasgow it was being doing, it was lots of places was it?

It was all over the country.

Macdonald: Yes, so I would have thought a random selection of them must have had a third interview to make sure that they hadn't been invented.

Well I know they do these days don't they, but it's easier because there's telephones.

Macdonald: Yes, and I would have been surprised if any of the people we saw had a telephone.

Any last thoughts? Well thank you very much, that was very interesting.