
Interview with Una Widdett

Part 2: personal impact

And when you went into these, and you saw people in these difficult circumstances, did you feel like you wanted to do something to help them or did you not think about that?

Well, in a way you do but I wasn't, I can't remember whether I ever wrote on that something should be done. I mean some houses were like backhouses and things like that. I can't remember. I'm sure I would have felt compassionate about it, but I can't remember whether I actually wrote down my own thoughts, because I thought I've got to keep myself away from getting personally involved. You know, I thought the purpose of the interview was to get a non-biased questionnaire done, so it's difficult to do these things and not get your own sort of person involved in it.

And did you sometimes feel overwhelmed or that you needed to talk to somebody about if you'd seen somebody suffering or something; did you feel that you had, did you have anyone to talk to, someone at home?

Well I might have gone back home and discussed it. You know, I know it's all confidential but I might have just discussed a certain situation, but I never actually got in touch with the people that I was doing the work for, I don't think, separately and said something should be done. I can't remember. I'm more worldly wise now than I was then and I think I would respond very differently now to what I did then.

So were you very young then, you were more or less?

Well, how old would I - oh it was done in 1969.

Yeah.

'68/'69 wasn't it?

'69 yeah.

Well, I was born in 1933. Can you work that out?

Okay so that's about-

I was 36, but immature 36 really.

[Recording interrupted]

So, did you meet any of your colleagues, other people that were doing the research?

I don't remember meeting any other interviewers, whether I did when I went to London, but I think we were all so widely spread out I don't think there was anyone else in my area doing the work. I might have met interviewers at the actual, if we did go for briefing, and I can't imagine doing a survey like that without the briefing. But then if you're at a briefing you're busy all the time aren't you? You don't have a lot of spare time to talk to other people. I mean it is all confidential so you wouldn't be discussing any particular cases with other interviewers anyway, would you?

You said in one of the emails that you sent that it had had a big impact on your life doing the research.

Yes, because I never stop talking about it. I mean before I had the letter which came out of the blue I just could not believe it because I was talking about it to some friends, not about actually the confidentiality, I wasn't talking about anybody in particular, but I was just talking about poverty, and I said oh I worked on this survey once about poverty, and I was saying about it's a different sort of poverty now to what it was then. Well, we were talking about food banks and things that people were in poverty then and there weren't food banks and things and Social Services have improved a lot, you know, and we were saying we couldn't understand why there was a need for food banks, and it sounds very unsympathetic and all the rest of it, you know, but we were just discussing it, and I said oh I worked on this big poverty survey once and it was very, very interesting but it was nothing like what the sort of poverty they talk about today.

What do you think the difference is then between now and then?

Well, it seems as though, then it seems as though, I mean it's awful to distinguish, and I've read the book now, I've borrowed the book from the library and some people think people in poverty it's their own fault and they've got to do something to get out of it, but it depends a lot on circumstances doesn't it? And I felt we were in poverty at one time and I had so many jobs going when we first got married, I'd got three or four jobs going, and I did all I could to help myself. I mean we never had anywhere to go and say I can't afford this and I can't afford that, you either afforded it or went without it!

The difference is now that I think they tend to expect that they're going to get support from somewhere, which in some cases I'm sure they thoroughly need it but in other cases you sort of think, well, we had to do it ourselves in our day, most people in our situation. It was a general thing, it wasn't just, you weren't on your own, and I think if you live in an area where people all more or less live the same sort of way don't they, and you don't feel any different to anybody else because you tend to be in this area. I know I was in a poor area when my father managed to get this house. He was working for a building firm and he managed to get a house, and it was the first time we'd lived together, and I was in my late teens and I'd never lived with my brother and my father before, we'd all lived separately, and we lived in a little redevelopment area, and so everybody else was more or less the same way we lived.

So although I could sympathise with some of the people I was going to later on, I mean we managed to get enough deposit to buy a house and then we moved on, and then that's when I started taking extra jobs to help out, you know. We never got any help from anyone; we just managed on our own. My husband would go to work in the day, and then when he come home I would go off and work in the evening. But it's not about me, but I'm just saying about how it would affect my attitude you see.

Okay yeah, that's interesting. And do you feel that actually carrying out the project had an effect on you as in, did it affect you at all the fact that you were involved in it?

It certainly made me much more interested in social studies and social situations. It made me much more observant of what was going on and how people were living and this sort of thing.

And did that affect your choice of jobs or your way of living after?

I think it's had a lasting effect on me because when I decided that I would go into nursing, I had left school without any qualifications, and so I went and did sociology, human biology and English language and English literature to try and get some qualifications to enter nursing later on. Because I couldn't start, when I was 18 I couldn't get into nursing because you were expected to live in and be there and I couldn't, when I was living with my father and brother I couldn't do that. So I did it as a mature student. So after I'd done this survey I started thinking more deeply about it. So I went and got an O-Level in sociology and I really did get very interested in everything, and then when I finished nursing I started working in the community, and I think having done this survey helped me with my career really and I often think if I'd have done this career first and then done the survey after I'd have been a different person anyway. It was a life experience really.

Yeah definitely. Right, just looking at my questions again.

All right.

So, other than doing the fieldwork, did you have any chance to contribute to anything that was written about the work that you did or did you have any?

No.

No. So you didn't really have any communication with the people that were receiving the surveys?

No.

But you said you did get a letter after.

I had a letter from Professor Peter Townsend because I wrote to him. We moved house, I can't remember what year it was but it must have been not long after we'd finished, we only just moved around the corner up to Hayley Green from Halesowen where we were living, and it suddenly occurred to me that I possibly

was going to be invited to the launch of the book. I'm sure that had been suggested somewhere that we would be getting together. And I wrote and said oh I'd moved house and I'd not managed to get a copy of the book or I'd not managed, I didn't hear any more about it. And then I had a letter come through to say, you would have definitely been invited to the launch of the book, from Peter Townsend, it's a shame we sort of lost contact because you moved address, you know. So that was all, I can remember that and I've been trying to find the letter, I'm sure I've got it somewhere because I've got that other letter there.

It wasn't from Peter then, the letter; was it from Peter?

Yes, yes it was.

Oh great! So, did you find when you were talking to the people, because you had to go to different houses, people from different backgrounds, did you find it easier with some people than others or?

It must have been, but I don't recall any - one thing I learnt from doing market research interviews, and I started on quite a small basis really, that I always adapted to the circumstances I was in, you know, and tried to be comfortable with them wherever I went. I might have been more, can't say properly behaved, but you adjust your attitude to try and be comfortable with who you're talking to, and I'm sure that must have happened that I'd be more aware of, more sensitive of atmospheres in some places than I might be in others. You tend to go by people's body language as well or if they're hesitant don't they, or if they seem a bit worried and that, when you're talking to them you tend to pick up that, don't you?

Hmm, and did you feel any sort of class difference, that you were more different with the people from a similar class background to you or you didn't really think about that?

I've never been really class conscious because I think everybody's the same really, but obviously the attitudes are different aren't they? You do find that, but I can't remember feeling that much out of place really.