
Interview with Ian McCannah

Part 1: Recruitment, training and process

I wanted to take you right back to when you were first recruited to the project, to the Poverty in the UK project. Can you tell me a little bit about that please?

When was it conducted?

It was between 1966 and 1969, so you were probably somewhere in there.

Well I would say that, I joined the LSE in October '66. I was very ill at the end of my first year, which was summer of '67. I had the whole term away from the LSE. So that would take me into the beginning of '68 which was my second year and '69 was my finals year. So I would say it was the summer of '68.

Right, okay, so it was after your second, you were still studying when you were recruited.

It was in the end of the second year. It was yes because I can remember some medical issues that, yes. That's right, yes.

Right, that was locating it for you, okay.

Yes, summer of '68.

And how did you find out about the study and that they were recruiting?

Well I'm pretty sure that I was involved, one of my tutors was Professor Abel-Smith. And I think I must have done, I was doing a sociology course. It wasn't my main subject but I did that. And I think that he approached some of his students to see if they were interested in doing the survey. And if I remember there was quite a financial incentive to it.

It seemed like a well-paid job, casual job at the time.

Yes, I'd like to say it was for altruistic reasons, but there was a hard pressed student. If I remember it was pretty financially lucrative. It was financially worth doing as well as being interesting.

Yes, and did you do, how long were you involved in the survey, how long?

Just that summer.

So it was just like a summer job.

As far as I can remember.

Yes, okay, and can you tell me a little bit about what your work involved on the project?

Well, as far as I can remember, I was given, you had to have a car, I'm pretty sure, I'm absolutely sure you had to have a car. Anyway I had a car and I was given a list of addresses to go to. Not where I lived in Manchester but Shropshire was one. Obviously I've had to go down towards Bristol, maybe in Birmingham. I can't quite in all honesty remember where I went.

But they were spread out.

But they were spread about and I'm pretty sure I was given addresses to go to, but I may be wrong on that. I can't think that I just sort of went to Shropshire, I think it was, was it Shropshire or, no it wasn't it was Oswestry. But I can't think I just went there and picked on houses randomly. I was given addresses to go to.

And did you work on your own, were you with a kind of team of your?

No, I worked on my own.

You worked on your own. Okay, fine. And can you tell me about any training you received before you went off or?

Well, you know, time is a bit of a problem on this, but there must have been some training. But I don't think there was too much. And it may have got elaborated in my mind over time but I remember Abel-Smith - now I don't know if you know anything about Abel-Smith.

A little, yes.

I hadn't realised this at the time but he was a [unclear 04:00] of a very like aristocratic family. His mother I think was like Lady in Waiting to the Queen Mother and this sort of thing. I think I went on a practice or dummy interview with him. But I remember one thing about this, as I say it may have been elaborated with time, but there must be a gist to it, but I was with him and he was doing the interview and everything, and this lady said, something to effect that, you know, she never had enough in her bank account at the end of the month and she always worried about that. And he said something, and it sounds incredible now because the monetary terms are just vast but, and he said oh yes, he said my mother's the same; he said she's very unhappy unless she has £1,000 in her current account! And this woman looked at him and I looked at him, I mean that was a lot of money then.

Yes, absolutely.

He wasn't entirely worldly I don't think. He was a Professor of Sociology at LSE. But that's the only memory I have of any sort of involvement with anybody else.

Right, so you were very much operating on your own without, not with other field workers, you were just, you took your addresses and you went.

As far as I can remember, that may not be the case but that's what I remember.

But that's your memories and that's exactly what we're interested in. So I mean just to check, there weren't any opportunities had you wanted them to kind of meet other field workers or anybody other than Professor Abel-Smith?

No. Not that I can remember.

Okay. What we've noticed, as I said before we started the interview we've been looking through the old booklets and we've noticed and they were very, very thoroughly -

Very thorough.

- checked.

Oh I see, sorry.

Well actually that's something I'll come on to because, or you might want to mention now, they were thorough in the sense of the questions as well.

Oh absolutely, I mean it was - I think some people said no. I'm pretty sure that some people said no. I had to spend some time I think explaining to them what was involved and it was a lengthy process. I can't remember how many questions there are but I seem to remember it was quite a wad of questions. Very, very personal and very detailed about the house and the circumstances. Not of a personal nature but, you know, in terms of sexuality or anything like that, but it was certainly about number of rooms in the house, I think, and what their financial circumstances were.

Yes quite a lot of detail about that.

It was quite intrusive. And it took some time if I remember.

To complete the whole questionnaire, it certainly did, yes.

Yes and I'm sure some people, once I explained to them what the situation was they said well rather not. Obviously people had the right to say no.

And what did you do with that actually because, you know, obviously people have the right to say no, but on the other hand it's your job to get them to say yes. Did you have to put some effort into persuading them or did you have any or?

I suppose I had to gain their trust. I had to gain their trust I guess.

And can you remember anything about how you did that or is it?

No, I don't know. I think it's a personal thing isn't it?

Yes.

They either like you or don't like you, and some possibly didn't like me and others were happy.

Yes, were able to take you in. Okay. And the other aspect of it because certainly the questions were very, very detailed but they were very thoroughly checked in terms of the code, you know, the coding and a great deal of precision around the calculations and really understanding people's circumstances. Did you have any impression of that side of the work at all?

No.

No, you did your questionnaires, and then what did you do, did you post them back or did you drive them back?

Yes, no, no I posted them back, I'm pretty sure I posted them back.

Yes, right, okay.

Yes.

And do you have any idea, I mean this might be sort of buried in the mists of time as well, but do you have any idea roughly of how many interviews you might have done, or kind of?

That's a good question, it's a very good question, and I honestly I can't remember.

Yes, it was such a long time ago, yes.

Time ago, yes. I don't think it was a great period of time. I would say no more than a month.

Oh okay.

I may be wrong on that, but '68. I just can't remember how many, but I know I went to a number of destinations. But each destination didn't have all that many houses to, addresses to go to.

Addresses that you needed to go to, yes. Okay. And I mean were there any communication, I mean if you had needed to communicate with anybody else on the team, were there any kind of communication channels open to you can you recall or?

I don't remember that, it was a summer, certainly it was vacation.

So actually the University probably would have been fairly quiet.

It would have been, yes. My impression was that you were left very much on your own, very much on your own.

And so you went for the dummy interview and you observed Professor Abel-Smith interviewing someone. Did you have any sort of sense of what the survey hoped to achieve or the rationale behind the survey or was that part of?

Well my understanding, which may be completely incorrect, was that this was a 10 year survey on poverty that was funded by the Rowntree Foundation. Now I don't know if that's true or not, but every 10 years, like a census, this survey took place to assess the changes in the degree of poverty in the country on a 10 year basis. That's what I understood. Now, well what's in my mind now, whether that's true or not I don't know.

But you were, that was kind of, there wasn't any kind of induction training into it and that, it was mainly the...

It would be wrong to say there wasn't, because it's hard to believe that they would let these young students out on the streets without some sort of training so there must have been something. But I don't remember.

Yes, nothing that sticks in your mind?

I don't remember it in terms of where it took place or. I can't think it was more than half a day or a few hours if it happened at all.

Well I imagine if you're not working on the study for a great deal of time I suppose it possibly doesn't take...

I was not a key part of the survey, I was a foot soldier! I was somebody they paid to go out and get some data. I mean I was not integral to the survey in any shape or form.

Well I mean I suppose we've been really interested exactly in what that sort of experience of going out there and being in the field was actually like as well. So that's something that is quite integral to what we're doing but. But you were aware of other field workers who were recruited through the same sort of way as you. Okay.

They may have chosen an area near to Manchester to make it easier for me, and also to reduce their cost because they paid mileage on the car.

Yes, so that's why they'd have sent you to...

I would think they, yes.

They'd have sent you to Shropshire.

Shropshire, yes.

And at the end of the interviews or at the end of your involvement in the study was there any kind of arrangements for debriefing you or kind of?

Not that I can remember.

Part 2: the interviews

Now I'm not sure how much of this you might be able to remember but as you know we are really interested in what people wrote in the margins of the survey; those kind of little notes on the scripts. Could you have any memory of the kind of writing anything beyond the coding that you were required to do about writing little notes or anything like that?

I don't remember that, but if you say it happened, it's not entirely surprising. I think one of the issues I faced was there was this vast number of questions.

Yes there are.

And in some circumstances the questions didn't fit the situation. Or the answers were not really, you couldn't put them into any categories that were in the survey. And I think I was conscientious and felt that every question should be answered. Although in some circumstances it just wasn't appropriate, so you'd say not appropriate whatever. So I would have thought that I, it's coming back to me, I mean I did, you know, I would have annotated the margins with information that I felt was important for the survey but wasn't covered by the questions that I had to ask. So there were subtleties in the responses which were not covered by the formal structure.

Can you say, do you have any memory of what they might have been, any type of thing, or anything like that? But it was, you had a memory of the questions not quite fitting...?

Yes, and they needed a bit more explanation. So I would think it was elaboration of a point. I mean I can't remember what it would be, but it may have been questions about the house and there were various questions about the house but, and if you tick the boxes then it didn't really give a flavour of the house. So I might have said something more about the house or perhaps the individual was not telling the truth and I felt they weren't telling the truth, I don't know, I don't know.

But you did that off your own bat -

Oh yes, yes.

- rather than being encouraged to do that.

Oh yes, well as far as I'm aware, yes.

Yes, and one of the things that sort of I alluded to a little bit earlier was we're really interested in what it was like to drive up and park outside someone's house and then actually try to get in and go in and have the experience of doing those sort of surveys. Do you remember what the field work was like, anything at all?

Well, youth is confident, so I suppose I went confidently and if they said no, then they said no, but you'd move on to the next one. I don't remember too much in the way of, well, I certainly wasn't nervous I don't think. You had to adapt with certain situations when we face the people we had to assess whether they really were going to be of any use because some people clearly would not be suitable for interview.

For what reasons, I mean can you?

I mean things like they might have been pretty frail. They might have been very busy, might have felt that it was too intrusive when you explained it to them. And so you just have to accept that's - I can't remember being rejected very often to be honest.

Right, okay, and what about the sort of circumstances you encountered when you were in the houses and doing the interview?

It was an eye opener. I mean I came from a lower, what we would call lower middle class background now, but it was a clean house and sort of happy family unit, and some of the things I saw didn't fit into that, so it's my first sort of exposure possibly to different, and it was a poverty survey so I guess that the people that were selected, I can't remember, were they, was it random, it can't have been the whole population, they must have selected people who were in the sort of category of potential.

But I think they were randomly selected so some would have been in the category and they certainly over-sampled people who they expected to be in difficult circumstances.

They over-sampled, okay.

They over-sampled certainly those that...

Could I have interviewed some people who were not in poverty?

In poverty, yes you could have done.

I had a feeling I did actually.

Yes, because not everybody in the survey that we've come across saw themselves as being in poverty.

Okay.

So that would have been possible, yes. So was that your general impression of the people that you saw that they weren't in very difficult circumstances?

I think the impression was there was a range of people. It wasn't all people who were in dire poverty. But I seem to remember interviewing some people who clearly were not. But I'm afraid, I'm trying to think deeply but it's 50 years ago.

No, absolutely and we absolutely appreciate that.

Well not quite 50 years, 45 years ago.

Yes, it's a really long time ago and it's a long, long time to remember so yes I can imagine it's difficult. But it's interesting that you have remembered that those, there was definitely a range of circumstances that you encountered. And you said that it was an eye opener in some situations.

Yes.

Was it quite, do you remember it being, I mean you was confident you said, but do you remember it being tough emotionally at any time or?

No, not really I don't think. I don't think so, no. Nope, I don't, I think it was possibly a different sort of poverty than now, maybe, I don't...

That's interesting; can you say a little bit more about that?

Well I wouldn't have thought we interviewed many sort of single parents. I can't remember that. I may have done, but I don't think that, not that single parents live in poverty but there may be a greater proportion nowadays -

Yes, sure, of course.

- of single parents that are on the poverty line. I don't remember, they tended to be family units.

And because you had your car they sent you to rural areas predominantly.

Possibly, although, well, yes I think I was in, I wasn't in cities I don't think, but I was certainly in towns, like Oswestry I seem to remember was one of the places, yes.

Yes, great. And how did you find the interviewees, did any of them, I know it's a long, long time, any of them stick in your mind at all or anything?

No, I think some people were a lot easier than others to interview. And I think, maybe another question you're going to ask, I don't know, but I think that there was real pressure I think to make sure that the questions were answered.

Yes, that's something we've picked up.

I think I was very conscious of the fact that they wanted an answer to every question. Now when you're in the field that is not always possible, so I seem to remember that I had to make some judgements, because if you are, if you're

going to tick every box, give an answer to every question, then you have to make some judgements. So I think at times I thought well I've got to make a judgement here I hope it's the right judgement. Maybe better just to leave the questions and answers, I don't know, but I think there was a pressure to have every question answered.

And that might have been something you'd have made a note about on the margins and, yes.

Yes. So that means that some people were more difficult than others. It was harder to get the answers out of them. So there may have been a bit of a temptation to make your own judgements on them - because if I remember you had to fill in most of the questions if not all of them.

I think there was a strong imperative that we've picked up from, you know, even just the questionnaire to make sure that the answers were as full as they possibly could have been.

Yes.

Part 3: the overall experience

Well we're talk about that later, yes.

Okay. I thought that it was part of a 10-year exercise so that they could see that any relative change in poverty, and then they would take that to the relevant government department and say this is what we've found and you need to address this, that and the other. So I felt that it was, particularly at LSE, given, in those days I'm sure now, that there were very strong links to government, and that it would have been used as a means of advising government.

But did you ever find that out, were you kind of?

No.

And would there have been a communication; was there a way if you'd wanted to find out?

Well I suppose if I'd done sociology as a degree and I'd stayed in academia then I possibly would have seen it. Yes, perhaps I would have seen more of its end result, if any, but no.

And I mean it sounds like there wasn't, but was there any opportunity to get involved in writing about it or kind of input into the analysis stage had you wanted to do that?

No. Well I suppose you could have done, if I'd been in the sociology department. If I was doing an MA or something, there may have been, but we had our subjects that we had to cover, and I don't think there was too much scope for deviation from the course to do some more like research or written work on a subject that's not within the degree.

I'm sure you had plenty to do on the course of your regular degree, and thinking back on the surveys, you know, on your experience of doing the fieldwork, is there anything in reflection you think could have been done differently or anything that you think worked particularly well either in terms of the survey or your experience of it?

Well, I don't know, just I've never really thought about it until you raised the question. It seemed to me a very expensive project. I think it must have cost a lot of money given the way it was conducted across the country and involving students. I think that possibly more mature students who had sociology degrees may be more appropriate to interview, just looking back now, that we were basically thrown out into the field with no real experience, and I'm not entire sure we knew quite what we were looking for. Then perhaps that was better that we were completely objective really. We were not subjective in our views, we didn't make any judgements, and we weren't trying to tailor things towards certain outcomes. I don't know, but it struck me as being a pretty expensive exercise. Very diversified across the country, I suspect, but perhaps that has to be in order to get the proper results and well perhaps students were cheaper labour than more qualified research people, I don't know.

Yes, but actually it is an interesting point you raised at the very start that actually and possibly in the range of summer work you could have taken on this was a relatively lucrative piece of work to have done.

Don't want to underplay that too much.

Yes, no well I mean I think it's...

That and you've got to be honest on these things.

Yes, and, you know, I think that if people were appropriately remunerated is not a bad thing. So, and I mean thinking more widely, do you have any sense of what the impact of the study kind of politically or socially, you said that, you know, the vision was that it would influence government and they would have a solid kind of body of evidence over time to do that. Did you have any sense of the actual impact of this study once it finished, or did you know anything about it when it came out?

None at all - when did it come out?

It came out about, the book came out about 10 years later.

10 years?

Yes, I mean there was impact that came from the work before then, but it's a really large and comprehensive one, which I can show you if you'd like to see it.

Be interested to see it yes.

Yes, great. Now I've taken you back a bit, anything else at all that occurs to you about the experience to kind of sum it up or to add to what you've already said?

I'd like to say there is, but really until I was contacted by Roz, I really forgotten about it quite frankly. It was not a bit part of my life and yes I'd rather forgotten about it to be honest.

Yes, great.

But no it's an interesting experience, I'm glad I did it, but it didn't lead onto anything else you see. It wasn't part of a career or. It was a summer job basically.

Yes, thank you.

I wish I could be more as I say altruistic about it so.

No, but actually I mean this is really important data for us to have a kind of how the various different routes people came into the work, that's really given us a real flavour of what it was like to be there.

Yes, be interesting to know how people were selected. I think it was pretty ad hoc to be honest, but perhaps it wasn't, I don't know.

Actually that is an interesting, now that we've spoken for a little bit, I mean are there any questions that sort of come to your mind that you would like to know the answer to now?

What I'd like know, really I suppose listening to you, is on what basis were people selected to do the interviews. I suspect a notice went up somewhere and Abel-Smith said, you know, you're in my seminar is anybody interested? But that may not be the case. Or perhaps he approached us individually. If he thought that we were suitable material, may have seen it in LSE magazine, I just can't remember where I saw the advert, or how I was approached.

Well when we find out more about that we'll certainly let you know.

Good.

Thank you so much for your time Ian.

A pleasure, a pleasure, yes.

That's been really, really helpful. Thank you.

Good, hope you get some good results.

Well we've already got some really great data so it's fantastic.