
Interview with Morag Macdonald and Deidre Forsyth

Part 1: Recruitment and interview process

So first of all if you could just tell me about whatever you can remember about how you were recruited to the Poverty in the UK study?

Forsyth: I don't remember very much about that.

Macdonald: My memory was it was a market research company, and almost certainly they were advertising in the student union and we were looking for a job for the last summer when we were students. And so it was a market research company who employed us.

Did you know each other already?

Macdonald: Yes.

You were students together.

Macdonald: Yes.

And where were you students?

Macdonald: At Glasgow University doing law.

And do you remember anything about how you were recruited, if you went to a meeting where they explained what you were going to do or anything like that?

Macdonald: Yes, there was certainly someone who talked to us about what we were to do, and about what had been done beforehand. Because all the people that we were sent to see had already been interviewed and asked if they were prepared to do a follow-up interview, and what we were doing was the follow-up interview.

Forsyth: So that meant that we knew that we weren't going to a hostile situation.

And had you done interviewing before or was this completely new to you?

Macdonald: I certainly hadn't.

Forsyth: I hadn't, no.

Was there training, did they teach you?

Macdonald: No.

And how long did you work on the project altogether, can you remember?

Forsyth: Was it a few weeks?

Macdonald: Yeah, I would have thought it was somewhere between four and six weeks.

And do you remember more or less how many interviews you did in the time, were you doing them every day or once a week?

Macdonald: It was more than once a week, and some days we did more than one interview.

Forsyth: I don't remember much about that, I have to say.

Macdonald: No, because there were two interviews on the same day that struck me, so I know that we did more than one. And we didn't do them all together. Sometimes we both went to the interview, and sometimes there was only one of us. There were a couple where there was one, maybe one of us couldn't make it or something.

So the idea was that you went in twos really, but sometimes when it wasn't practical one of you went, is that it?

Macdonald: Yes, and the ones we did at night we always did together.

And was that your choice or that's what you were told?

Macdonald: That was our choice.

And which areas did you do, can you remember?

Forsyth: Did we do Shettleston?

Macdonald: Merry Hill.

Forsyth: Did we not do Shettleston?

Macdonald: I can't remember.

Macdonald: Bits of Glasgow I didn't know at all.

Forsyth: I don't think we were familiar with where we were going, so.

How did you get there?

Forsyth: I had a car. Well I had access to a car, so I think I drove.

And what kind of areas were they, were they well off or?

Forsyth: Probably not.

Macdonald: No, they weren't.

Were you in contact with other researchers at the time?

Macdonald: No.

None of the other researchers on the project.

Macdonald: No.

Did you have a supervisor that checked how you were going on, and that you could report back to after?

Forsyth: We must have had that surely.

Macdonald: Well I think we sent our completed questionnaires off to somebody, I think we must have posted them, I can't remember.

Forsyth: I'm sure we didn't gather them up, I'm sure we posted them back as we went along didn't we?

Macdonald: Yeah, because I remember one lot coming back and being asked if we could, or some question that hadn't been properly answered and we had to go back and ask it again or try and remember what the answer ought to be. So there was that kind of feedback, they were either happy with what we sent in or on that one occasion they wanted some more information, but that was all. And this was done by post, we never met anybody.

Forsyth: At the beginning.

Macdonald: Well at the beginning but after that I'm sure we didn't.

And what did you think about the research questions, could you understand what they were getting at or were you thinking I wonder why they ask that, if you can remember?

Forsyth: Well I don't actually remember the questions, but when I looked at the internet and looked at a questionnaire which may not have been this one but looked vaguely familiar, I thought the questions were all fairly obvious as to why they were being asked. So I guess, and this is a guess, that we would have thought that there was a reason; it wasn't that difficult to work out the reason for the questions. I mean we were law students in our final year, we weren't, we did have some intelligence to be able to work that out.

Macdonald: But I remember being very surprised at one question, which was the one about how often do you eat meat. Because this was Glasgow in the 60s, we didn't meet many vegetarians, so I couldn't understand the point of the question because everybody had meat every day, except Fridays when you had fish. And I simply couldn't understand why this question was being asked until I got some of the answers, and people said once a week or not at all, and I realised then what the point of the question was. But when I started I simply didn't.

So you thought that everybody ate meat every day because that's all that you knew.

Macdonald: Yes, unless they didn't feel like it, so therefore it was a pointless question I thought to begin with.

And how did you feel when you found out that some people didn't eat meat every day?

Macdonald: I suppose I was surprised.

Forsyth: I don't remember being as surprised about that, because I'm sure we had macaroni quite a lot, so it may not have come. But I suppose if you know that you're better off, clearly better off than people that you're interviewing, I suppose you feel sorry, it might change how you view life I suppose, I presume it must have affected us that way. I'm sure it did actually.

Macdonald: Well yes, I know it affected me enormously because of the interviews that we did, but also we got, after a little while we realised we should leave the car around the corner.

Forsyth: Did we?

Macdonald: Yes, because we suddenly realised I think after a few interviews that we were final year law students at Glasgow, and that was very unusual for young women at that time, because there was fewer than 10% of our class was women. And it seemed very intrusive for...

Forsyth: Showing off almost.

Macdonald: Yeah.

To have a car?

Macdonald: Well yeah, and to be asking these questions when we were clearly, or no, we were almost certain perceived as being much better off than the people we were.

Forsyth: And probably were actually.

Macdonald: Yes, well we certainly were perceived as being, whether we were or not, because people asked us, sometimes they asked us about our backgrounds and why we were doing this. And you can hardly say you're doing it for holiday money, which is what we were, for pin money. So yes, it had that kind of impression I think.

Did you tell them about yourself when they asked questions?

Macdonald: Yes.

Forsyth: It wasn't a secret.

And did you feel a bit awkward in general if the people were, you said they were from a different background you felt a bit awkward about that or?

Forsyth: I think we got used to it, I mean there probably was, the awkwardness might have been our inexperience at the beginning, of not being quite sure just putting these questions to strangers. But I think because it wasn't the first interview, you then realised that actually they're quite keen to talk about themselves. I think people are, I mean this is just a perception I've got over the years, not particularly from that but I don't think people mind talking about themselves if they think it's for a reasonable reason, good reason.

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.

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.