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# **Interview with Una Widdett**

## **Part 1: recruitment, training and interviewing**

**So if you just say what you can remember about how you got involved in the Poverty in the UK study to begin with.**

Right, I think I'd been doing quite a lot of research interviewing, and I seem to remember somehow my name had been recommended to the people that were conducting the survey to do some interviewing, so as far as I can remember I had a letter saying would I be able to participate in that.

**Okay. Who were you researching for before?**

All the various different market research companies; I started off doing food diaries, what sort of food people were shopping, which I think was buying on a weekly basis, like preselected addresses, and regularly visiting them to monitor what products they bought, and that ranged from all the household products, like soap powder, right through to the food they were buying, that sort of thing. That was for Consumer Research, if I remember rightly, and I used to just get people getting in touch and saying would you like to be involved in this project here and there. I remember doing some work for Barton Research when we interviewed people that were taking rail journeys. So we went on the train and we were interviewing there and went around different places.

**Was it an agency?**

AGM was one company I did a lot of work for. This is going back 50 years isn't it?

**And that's an agency is it, that?**

They were market research companies, as far as I can remember, and they were obviously doing the work for other unknown companies that we didn't know, and then as I said I got involved with, I did some work for the breweries I imagined; some company was doing a project to find out what stocks public houses had got. We had to go around and ask what sort of bottles of brew they'd got there and what was selling, and then I got involved more with the health, interviewing doctors about what drugs they prescribed, and then it led onto the one where we

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went round maternity hospitals interviewing the heads of the hospitals about this new formula baby milk. We never knew who the jobs were being done for obviously; it was the market research companies that employed us.

**So you started working on the Poverty in the UK study as part of your work with the market research company?**

Yes.

**The same company that employed you normally, they asked you to do this project as well?**

No, that was an individual thing. I think somehow my name had been referred over, and I don't know whether I worked on the school meals – you know the letter I've got to show you there – I don't know if I worked on the school meals project before this one, I think maybe. There might be a date on that letter. So I don't know if I worked for them first and maybe Professor Mike Reading, I think the name was, might have said that I'd done some interviewing in that, and maybe, I don't really know how I got involved in the, you know, but it was quite an achievement to do that. That was like the biggest project I've ever worked on really.

**Okay, biggest in?**

What it entailed because it was quite a long interview and you did wonder whether people would be willing, but generally I was surprised how helpful people were. I'd like to remember if they had a letter to say we were coming but I can't remember. Surely with an interview like that we wouldn't be just knocking on the door cold calling would we? I can't remember that.

**Yeah, I think they did know in advance, I think, yeah.**

Yes, might have had a letter to say someone was going to come and talk to them, yes, I hope so.

**So do you remember anything about what happened after, whether you were trained or you had to go anywhere to meet the researchers, or how were you inducted into the whole process?**

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I wish I could remember because I can't imagine doing a survey of that length and an interview of that length and that nature without having some sort of briefing for it, but I really have got a complete blank about that. I can't remember it at all. We usually went on briefings before we did any interview and research but.

**Some people have said they went to London, but I don't know if that applied to everyone. They went for the day in London.**

Do you know I have been to London once or twice for briefings so I imagine...

**It might have been...**

I can't imagine doing an interview like that and not having really thorough briefings for it.

**Yeah. No, that's fine. We don't expect you to remember everything after all this time! Can you remember how long you worked on the project?**

No.

**Which area did you do; was it this area I would imagine?**

Oldbury and Halesowen, Halesowen and Oldbury, but I do seem to remember going outside those areas a little bit, because I've got memories of going to places that were outside that area, but maybe it would have been in a radius of that area anyway.

**And what kind of areas were they?**

Some areas were sort of almost redevelopment areas, some of them that I went to, and some of them were sort of everyday general areas. I don't remember going to any what you would call upper middle class or anything. It's hard to remember everything. You remember some of the people you've met and you remember if you have a bad experience, you don't forget that! But I can just remember going round Halesowen and they were all sort of, well, I lived in that area at one time and I just took it that that was just a general everyday sort of

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area, you know. But Oldbury is more like an older area and part of it might have been, well, it's probably been redeveloped by now anyway.

**So how did you find the process of doing the research; was it easy, difficult?**

No, I really felt very business-like about it. I felt as though I adjusted according to the household I went into and I tried to be very professional really, and I did hold my breath at some of the questions and wondered how they would respond to it, but generally I found people were marvellous and I can just remember thinking, well, they've been very tolerant and very helpful.

**Which kind of questions did you find a bit difficult to ask and what was?**

Well, personal questions like financial income, because I thought well they're not going to tell me all this, you know. Their bank accounts, their income and output and all that sort of thing, I thought was really digging deep into their own personal circumstances, but generally I found people were very good. I have a vague memory of going to a house and I really can't remember, it must have been in the Oldbury area, but it was a nice area, of going into the house and the lady was very welcoming and she took me into her front room and she was very responsive and she was gentle and kind and very nice. It was pouring down with rain the day I went, but I think the appointment must have been made to go there.

So I took my raincoat off and we left it in the hall and she was saying, oh put it there and come into the lounge and all that. And we were going through the questionnaire and suddenly the husband came in and he was furious and he said get out! And he just pointed at the door and he said, get out, and she said to me, I'm very sorry. And he came to the door and he opened the door wide, the front door and he picked my mac up and he was going to throw it out onto the drive, you know, and I tried to keep as calm as possible. And she was obviously feeling very awful about it because she was quite willing to carry on with it, but I took the mac off him and put it on and tried to remain calm and walked out.

And then when I got to the car I broke down a bit because it was quite a nasty experience, you know, and I thought I must carry on, carry on doing the job because this sort of thing can put you off, and I went to the next house and they

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were wonderful and they sat me around the table and they answered the questions and I said oh I've just had a nasty experience, and they were very sympathetic about it. But, you see, those sort of things do stay in your mind and obviously the husband objected to all of his personal information being given out I should imagine. You can understand.

**And did you have anyone to talk to after from the market research company, the employers, about what happened?**

No, no, no. I might have made a note, I can't remember, I might have made a note of, well, I would have done if the interview hadn't been finished I would have explained why, but I just can't remember now all that. But on the whole I thoroughly enjoyed it and I thought it was quite a challenge to do a job like that for London School of Economics and Political Science, I thought it was, to know what I was doing and to have input from Professor Townsend himself, you know, letters and things, I thought that made it all worthwhile, and yes, so it was quite a thing. I remember towards the end of the survey it was getting a bit, because we were trying to get finished on time and I think I had a telephone call from somebody to say would I mind going back to one of the houses for some reason and redoing it, and I did that. But generally I've just got good recollections about doing it and I thought it was quite an achievement, you know.

**And were you very interested in the topic, did you think it was a really worthwhile topic?**

Yes. I did, but if I did it now, if I could go back all that time, I mean I can remember going to people's houses where I felt quite shocked about the circumstances they were living in. I mean I've lived in poverty myself, so if I was doing it now I'd probably be more shocked than I was then because I'd been there, if you know what I mean. Although I was sorry for the circumstances some of them were in I knew what it was like to be there, so that must have had an effect on my attitude to it, I don't know, and it shouldn't have done I'm sure, but because I'd been poor earlier on I sort of knew the circumstances in a way.

But there were people that I saw, I went to one bedsit where there was a middle aged man living in awful circumstances. The bed was in the one room, he'd just got a one room bedsit and he was living in awful circumstances and I just felt so sorry for him and I thought, well, I shouldn't be in the room on my own with this

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man because I don't know what he's like or anything. But he was very polite and everything, but he was obviously down and out really. But I don't know whether that, I don't remember the questionnaire, you know, whether I made any comments about it on the questionnaire, I don't know.

**Did you tend to do that if you felt strongly about something or you noticed something, you tended to make notes on the questionnaire?**

Yes I think so. Yes I've been, you know, sometimes all the different interviews intermingle, but I've had letters back saying that they appreciated the extra notes that I'd put on when I've done interviews and things like that. Sometimes everything doesn't fit into the box, does it? You know, everything doesn't fit into the category that you're asking them about, so I tended to do a lot of writing where I thought it was reasonable to do so.

**So that was the main reason that you wrote the notes then was, if it was difficult to tick a particular box then you gave more information to justify the way that you'd ticked it or something.**

Yes.

## **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.

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**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

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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



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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?**

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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.

### **Part 3: reflections**

**Is there anything you think could have been done differently either regarding the way that you did the research or the way the whole project was conducted now you know a little bit more about it, and you know looking back?**

Well, of course we're going back so many years aren't we, and I can't remember really how I felt when it had all finished. You know, I thought it was a big achievement but I can't remember thinking they ought to have done this or ought to have done that. I mean knowing that the study was going to be published I thought that would be explanatory itself really, you know, that would be the thing that we were doing it for, to make a, well, you can't make a conclusion of it, but that it was being done to publish this book and I thought that was the end result really. But I can't remember thinking oh I wish it had been done differently or anything like that. It was very in-depth and the main thing was to get it done, get the questionnaires completed properly and try and get it done in the time limit that we'd got.

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**Did you feel pressured at all to try and get it done in a certain amount of time or was it quite relaxed?**

Only the same as doing any other project when you've got a time limit, you know, and you'd perhaps think, well I must get out, because obviously with those sort of jobs you've got to go out in the evening a lot haven't you and I don't remember, oh I must have had a car at that time because when I first started interviewing I hadn't got a car and I used to go on the bus to different areas. Yes, that's right, and then one of the supervisors said to me, it would be such an advantage if you got a car to do all these different areas. That was when I first, in the early days, so I think that's what I did, I got a Mini and then I found I could whittle all over the place to different areas and it wasn't a problem.

**Was there any precautions about your safety, you know, that you might be going into houses of people you didn't know and?**

Well, I never had that sort of feeling, I never had, and I don't know whether it was this particular one, but when I did a lot of work in old areas where you'd go down entries in the evening when it was dark and you do all this, I never had any concerns. But I was only thinking or saying the other day, you couldn't do it now. You couldn't do what I did then. I did all sorts of things that you'd be very wary about doing these days. But I was very naïve and I just thought everybody was all right, as long as you were all right with them they were all right with you and you just expect to be treated as respectfully as you treat anyone else. But I'd certainly think twice about it now, some of the things I did, going in areas I didn't know. And as a health visitor if we were going anywhere alone we'd have to say where we were going and let somebody know where we were, but that was years afterwards. No, I never felt unhappy about it. I used to sail away and get on with the job.

**Oh great. So, did you realise at the time the impact that the book would have or the research would have, did you think this is going to make a big difference, this is going to help with poverty or did you just, it was just a job and?**

I think I was hoping that it would be a study which would enable the authorities to think of some sort of scheme to make things better for those people in those situations. But really I was just concentrating on doing the job and thinking, you

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know, I'm doing something that's important for somebody else to deal with really. I didn't really think too much about, you know, I felt they were the clever people, the people that were organising the survey, I was just one of the fieldworkers getting the questionnaires done, which I was very proud to do, but I didn't think that much beyond what was going to happen with it all.

**And at what point did you find out what had become of the survey; did you follow it up after or when did you find out that a book had been written?**

I don't know whether I got it in my mind that that was the purpose of doing the survey. I don't know. I just felt as though I knew all along it was being done, the study was being done to enable the book to be written, but I don't know whether that's just what I've concluded or whether it really was the case.

[Recording interrupted]

It's a shame it was so long ago. I mean if I'd have known this was going to happen these many years later I would have kept lots of notes about it, so I could have told you about it!

**Yeah I know, you never know, do you! So, at what point did you realise, or maybe you still don't realise, the major impact that the book had, at what point did you realise that it was well known and?**

Well, what was the major impact that the book had? I know it's a famous study and it's been the biggest one of its kind.

**I think it helped people understand what poverty was like in the UK, that there was what's called relative poverty, that people might not be starving but they still suffer because they can't do what other people are doing.**

Struggle in their life, yeah.

**It just gave a very detailed picture of poverty at that time and it was a basis for a lot of surveys that happened after, not only in the UK but all around the world, so it did have a really big impact.**

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That's good. Do you think there'll be another follow-up one?

**Well there has been, every so often there's other ones.**

Oh.

**They usually get called something else, like now it's called the Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey, and it's the same household survey but they do it differently now with computers and everything.**

I remember reading Inequalities in Health, by Black?

**Yeah, the Black Report.**

The Black Report yeah. That was when I was health visiting and then I thought, it comes back again you see, reminded me of doing that. But it's not easy reading, you've got to understand the situation, you know, you've got to be really into that. I mean the average Mr Joe Bloggs wouldn't be able to read the book and understand what was going on, would they?

**I'm not sure. It depends what kind of background.**

I'm asking you questions now!

**Okay, so I haven't got any more questions, but is there anything else that you want to say that I haven't asked you? Any kind of memories that you've got or thoughts about the study or?**

I can't, no. If I'd have really knew what you were going to ask I might have been able to scrape back a bit, but my only memory of it that was I felt very proud to be doing it and I felt very proud to be asked to participate in it because I didn't think I'd got that sort of level to be able to do that, and it's been like a tick on the board or something like that, what do they say, a notch on your gun or something! So it's been a good, I'm really proud that I was involved in it and to get this follow up was quite a surprise and I thought, well, it never goes away once you've done it, does it, it's always there, but I haven't got any particular, anything to ask you really.

**Okay, no that's fine.**

Are we going to get any information about what you're doing now and the outcome of interviewing all the people that you've managed to find that were involved in it?

**Yeah.**

Will there be anything?

**There will, yeah. We can talk about that after I switch the camera off, but yeah, obviously we're very pleased that you did the research, so it was very good to talk to you.**

Yes, quite a surprise after all those years!

**Yeah, well, I'll leave it at that then, and thank you very much, that was really interesting.**

Well thank you for coming.

**Thank you.**