

Interview with Ann Neligan

Part 1: recruitment and interviewing

Do you remember anything about how you got involved in the Poverty in the UK survey?

I think it was, I was at college in London, I was at University College, and I had a very good friend who was at LSE doing sociology, so I'm fairly sure that what happened was that they were asked about doing these surveys. And they wanted people in Newcastle, which is where my family were from, and so she suggested me and so I got in touch. I think that will have been the route.

So you did you research in Newcastle, did you?

Yes.

And do you remember how long you did it for, more or less?

Well it was over a summer, but I can't remember how many interviews I did. Not many; I think probably three-ish, but I'm really not sure. It could have been five, it could have been two, I don't remember.

And it was a summer job, was it?

It was a summer job. I did it as a summer job, yes.

So you were a student at the time?

I was a student.

What were you studying?

I was studying geography, so I was there between '65 and '68, and I think it was probably not my last year; I think it was probably the first, second holiday.

And did your friend do it as well? Was she involved in the research?

Not as far as I know. I don't think, I didn't know anybody else who did it.

Were you connected to anyone else who was doing it?

No, absolutely not. It just felt like very, quite remote really.

And had you been living in London then, and you went up to Newcastle especially?

Well my parents, my family still lived in Newcastle, so I went back there every holiday anyway and it was a holiday job, so I just did it during my summer holiday.

I see, yeah. Do you remember anything about the questions that you asked, or the interviews themselves?

I remember that it was a very, very thick questionnaire. I was quite staggered, I'd agreed to do it, and I can't remember the process of that, and I don't know how much they knew about me, if anything, but I remember getting the questionnaire. The way it comes into my mind was telephone directory, it was very thick and so I was daunted by that, and what I do remember was that there was a lot of questions that I think were kind of, it started off with lots of questions about housing. My memory is housing and bathrooms and bedrooms and things like that, and then there was money questions kind of embedded in it because I remember reading through and thinking oh and then we get to those. And they were quite intimate questions about money, well quite detailed questions about money, which is seen as intimate. Those are what I remember.

And how did you feel about asking those intimate kinds of questions?

Well I felt very daunted by the whole thing, never mind the questions, because it was called The Poverty Survey, so that was a bit am I going to go and ask poor people about being poor? That felt a funny thing to be doing. Again, I don't remember if they knew what they were being, what the survey was, but I was from Newcastle but I was from Jesmond, which is a very middle class area of

Newcastle, and I was going to a local direct grant school, so I was from a very sort of comfortable background in some ways. And I was young, I was only a student, and I was going off to interview people living in a bit of Newcastle that I wouldn't have been to, often, about their incomes and lifestyles.

So I think I found it quite intimidating the whole thing. I remember kind of having to psyche myself up for each interview, and I was quite nervous. I'd done some survey work when I was doing my A-levels, I remember, and I'd enjoyed those surveys. That was surveying farmers and this felt much more, you know, they weren't people I knew, it was potentially quite contentious my asking those sorts of questions, so I think I was probably quite cautious about it.

Was some of that because you saw them as possibly being from a different background to you?

It was just a strange background. It wasn't the background, it was a strange, you know, it was a bit of Newcastle that I didn't know. They were living lifestyles that I wasn't familiar with, and I felt very aware of that. I felt very aware of being middle class, and coming in as this young thing asking them about how much money and space they had in their lives. So I think it was an odd. It must have been an odd dynamic, I don't remember it well.

Do you remember any of the interviews? Do you remember going to the houses?

I've got vague memories of the houses and sort of sitting in front rooms in this slightly uncomfortable way. One of them I remember was a very green room, that's all I can remember about it. I think I spoke to the women mostly. I remember talking to women and having a man in the background, that's what my memory of it is. I don't know how prepared they were, I must have made some appointment with them because the interviews took I think, I don't know, 40 minutes, something like that, to go through so they must have been invited. I don't know what the process was, but it couldn't have been a cold call, official.

And did you notice that their lifestyles were different? Or their housing conditions were different to what you were familiar with?

I don't remember being struck by poverty. I'd been in really poor houses in Newcastle when I was at school, and we used to deliver Christmas boxes to elderly people and stuff, and that was a completely different level of difference so, no, it wasn't. I didn't notice it physically, I just noticed, I think I must have had the social feeling of discomfort, and I think it was to do with age as well, of being younger than them, and at university and I think that was, yeah, I was quite privileged.

Were you interested in the topic of poverty particularly? Or it just happened to be some work?

I think I wasn't. Again I was thinking about that because I'd been very active politically around issues like poverty all my life since then, but that didn't happen until, that wasn't true when I was at university. I was just getting my degree, I had my head down and I was getting, I'm just kind of interested in social geography. That's the kind of geography that I enjoyed, so it wasn't that I wasn't interested in poverty or economics. I did some economics, but I wasn't very challenging. But it may be that in being involved in that was one of the things that led me to being a lot more challenging, which I can much more clearly identify after that. I went and worked in Ethiopia for three years, and that was real poverty experience so that was a much more dramatic effect on me.

And do you think doing the research kind of helped you to sort of carry on with social geography, and working with people?

I really didn't see it as doing research. I could have been doing marketing survey on the high road really because I was just asking the questions. I didn't know about the, you know, I wasn't part of what those questionnaires had come out of, and I didn't know what happened to them next and I didn't pursue what happened to them next. I don't know why, it seems extraordinary to me now, but I think I felt very, I wasn't confident, I wasn't a confident person, I don't think I would have assumed that almost I was entitled to know more I think. I didn't have conversations with people about the survey, I don't remember there being a process where we were encouraged to think about why it was taking place, and how it might be useful.

Do you remember any kind of induction process at all?

None! I'm absolutely sure, well I'm never absolutely sure, but I'm as confident as I can be that I didn't have any personal one-to-one. There may have been, I may have been sent stuff that I read that gave me the background, which I could have forgotten, but I think I would have remembered if there had been any personal connection. So I didn't even know if there were other people carrying out surveys in Newcastle, I don't know how many was carried out there, I don't know.

And I think you wrote some notes on the questionnaire itself, most people did it, do you remember doing that? No. Because we're interested in why people write these notes as well.

Do you know what any of the notes were that I wrote?

I don't, no.

It would be very interesting to know; I haven't a clue. I have no recollection of that; it would be very interesting to know what we'd written. I don't know.