

Interview with Ann Neligan

Part 2: reflections on the experience

And so after you finished the research then, was there any kind of follow up? Did you get a letter saying thank you? Or any invitation when the research was published or anything?

No, not that, but I would have been away by then I think. I would have been in Ethiopia. I might have got a thank you letter, I really don't remember.

So when did you next hear about the Poverty in the UK study then?

Well I think when I came back. I came back in 1972-3 and I think a lot had happened in that time and I think that probably the poverty survey was part of that. There was a kind of, and I had politically changed a lot when I was away, so I think I didn't relate particularly strongly to that survey. I think I'm just aware of that there was the Townsend survey, and I was kind of glad to have been part of that. I didn't see my role as research, I have to say; I saw my role as being an interviewer kind of thing, and I haven't followed it up systematically since.

Were you aware of the impact of the study?

No, I don't know so I'd be interested to know.

Well basically it helped people understand that the fact that there was still poverty in the UK because at that time some people were saying that there wasn't because people weren't literally dying of starvation, but it showed the other impacts of poverty. Well not particularly subtle, but a bit more subtle impacts like ill health and psychological impacts and stress, and inability to participate in the kind of everyday life of the society. So it kind of changed people's thinking internationally about what poverty actually was. That it wasn't just...

Not enough money.

Yeah.

I think I was probably quite aware of, my father happened to have been running a longitudinal study. He was a paediatrician and he'd done a longitudinal study on poverty and child health. So that looked at achievements in school and a lot of social so I think, and that had been running all the time I was a teenager at home, so I was kind of aware that had been a longitudinal study. I think there were children born in the early '50s, so I kind of knew, I'm just trying to think it may be that's why I sort of saw it, I thought it was quite a normal thing to be doing in a way. I thought it was just...

Oh that's interesting. Well quite a lot of my questions are about the notes that you might have written, about whether you kind of felt you could empathise with the people you were interviewing, and things like that?

I think I was too nervous to be empathising. I was just thinking can I ask the next question.

And was it difficult to knock on the door?

Well that's what I mean. I can't remember how I got there; I was trying to think about how I got to these houses, but I know there was this kind of, and as I say there must have been some preliminary contact, but I do just know that I was nervous about the whole thing. So it wasn't, I felt like I was kind of, I don't think I will have made a very strong social connection with them because I think I was too nervous to. I don't think I'll have been a good interviewer in that sense, in terms of making them relaxed or feel important, or feel what they said mattered, which I think I couldn't have done until I was older.

So do you think there's anything that could have been done differently, in terms of research from the part that you know about, sort of improved it kind of thing?

Well as I say, I think if I'd had some physical contact, even if it had been only over the phone, some social contact rather than just written, encouraging me to think that it mattered. I mean I certainly didn't have any training or advice about interviewing techniques, it was just the questions. And I think, well things just like what I said about the importance of people feeling comfortable, and being able to say more. My memory is that there must have been an, because it was such a fat long questionnaire, that it must have been very question and answer, rather than encouraging people to talk about what was going on in their lives.

Yeah, there was.

And I suppose that might have then engaged me more, if I'd been able to have even just a preliminary discussion, encouraged to have some sort of conversation with them about why we were doing it and what I was doing it for, and how they felt about being interviewed. Those sorts of questions really, encouraging to help me because I'm sure they were nervous too, but I was certainly nervous, you know, some help in getting us through that bit might have produced more, I might have written some notes then. As I say, maybe I did write notes, but I don't know.

So that's about it really. Is there anything else you want to say about it, or the impact of the study?

I don't think so. You know, it's quite ironic that you're talking about the impact of that at a time when people are being plunged into poverty with all sorts of side effects, without any reference back to all of those discoveries that have been made, you know, all that we know about poverty, and how poverty destroys people's ability to deal well with life in all sorts of ways. And we're back in a culture...

[Recording interrupted]

And they're being blamed for it. So it feels like we're way back before things like the Poverty Survey was carried out in terms of compassion or believe in an equal society or. So I don't know if people are doing studies like that again now to try and influence poverty...

We've got one on the go at the moment that's why we're comparing it, to some extent, with this in terms of methodology anyway.

Well I think I'm sure that people's understanding now of interviewing and stuff, never mind the academic side of it, but just the social side of what makes a good interview must be mammothly different now.

Did you do any more interviewing after, or was that the end?

Oh different sorts of interviewing I've done, yes, like later in life, not that much, well a bit later in life I became a teacher of self defence to women, and I did write a book for that, which was based on interviews with women, but that was people that I knew. And that was a very different sort of interviewing because that was, in fact I've just come back recently from Palestine interviewing women there about their lives, but that's based on a really different model. It's not a statistical, neither of them were statistical, they were qualitative interviews which was based on having a relationship and encouraging people to talk, and then abstracting from those conversations what seemed important, but there wasn't any, there wouldn't have been any statistical, but it didn't put me off interviewing for life, certainly, clearly, but I think now I feel like I'd like to have a relationship with somebody.

Is there any last things you want to say?

I don't think so, except it was a completely, I mean I really had to rack my brain to think of what my involvement had been at all. And of course, as soon as you start thinking these little bits of memory come out, but it amazes me how little thought really I must have put into it for the fact that I remember so little of it.

Well it is a long time ago as well.

It's nearly 50 years ago I think. It is, it's nearly 50 years.

Well that's great. So I'll turn everything off now.