

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.