
Interview with Angela Avens

Part 1: preparing for the interviews

So if you could talk first of all about how you were recruited to the project.

Do you know, I really can't remember how I heard about it! I really have no memory of it at all.

Can you remember what you were asked to do?

I went to a briefing session in London in early January of 1968 it was, and as I recall I think they spelt it out there exactly what we should do. And we did have the questionnaires beforehand I think, to look through them, so that we were a little bit familiar with what they were asking.

And what was your situation at the time, were you a student or?

Well I was a married mum with two actually quite young children, because my children were born in 65 and 66, and my husband was a full time teacher. So I had to have a child minder at certain times or I went in the evenings.

And which area were you working in?

Well it would have been, it included Barnstaple and the surrounding area really; up as far as Linton and Lynmouth, Barnstaple itself and then a lot of the villages, a lot of working villages round about actually.

So was it an area that you knew already?

I knew vaguely but I go to know it a lot better. It was quite exciting actually, going round to find these different places.

And how did you get around?

Well I could drive, and my husband didn't mind me having the car, so that was fine.

And how long did you work on the project for?

Well I think it was probably from about January to July, and I've looked through my diary for August and September and I can't see any reference to it, so I think I must have finished in July, about six months then.

So you've still got your diary going back to that time.

Well that's the very year I started keeping a diary, but it's very brief and trite really, so there's no great detail about what happened, a few references to where I went.

What kind of things does it say, just the name of the place that you went to or?

Occasionally there's a comment, nobody in or somebody was a widow perhaps, or somebody else was uncooperative, that sort of thing. One of them I did an interview and it was hilarious, but there was only one.

Do you actually remember that interview?

A little bit about it but not a great deal.

So you can't remember why it was hilarious in particular?

It probably was that I was asking such difficult questions of them. I can remember it was always very difficult when it got to the section on savings or have you any objects that are worth something, and that was a difficult part. I suppose we got round it by laughing at it.

Was it you that felt awkward or you felt that they felt awkward, or both of you?

I felt awkward having to ask them really, I'm not fully certain how they felt. But possibly other interviews it might have been that they felt awkward, because they're quite searching questions really.

And was it the first time that you'd done this kind of research?

It was actually, because when I was a student I had digs with people who did sociology and so on, and they were involved with doing a questionnaire from the university at Exeter. And they would go out and then they'd come back and discuss what they'd found and so on, and I found that actually very interesting. And it was something that I could do with children that stretched me a bit, a little bit different from thinking about childish things all day, which was great.

And did you feel that you were part of a team, did you know the other researchers or the research supervisors?

I didn't really feel part of the team. I went to an initial meeting and I noted down a few people that I met. And I had quite a lot of refusals at the beginning, and so there was a Mrs Jones, and I think she either stayed nearby or stayed with me, and she did an interview that I couldn't do because I knew the people. And she also went with me when I did another one, which made me feel rather nervous. But she was quite reassuring, and I think I had reassurance from somebody else later on.

So did they, how did they train you then, did you do mock interviews before you set off or?

No, no mock interviews at all.

So it was assumed that you'd be able to do it kind of thing.

Yes it was really, we just went in at the deep end really.

Did you feel that you understood what the research questions were about, what the research was about, was that explained to you at the beginning?

Yes, we had this briefing up in London, Skipper House it was called, and they explained it. And I thought they did it quite well, you'd be able to forecast what future needs were going to be and so on.

Did you think this is a very worthwhile project or it was just a job?

Oh no, I thought it was very worthwhile actually, it wasn't a sort of trite market research interview at all, this was something with quite some depth.

Part 2: conducting the interviews

And when you were actually doing the interviewing, what was that like?

I quite enjoyed it generally, meeting different people and so on.

Did you find some of the ways that people lived interesting or very different to how you lived?

Well there was one where I felt they really were a really poor family with the children sleeping on the settee beside me, and you just realised that that was normally that child's bed. But on the whole I didn't feel that most of them were suffering, obviously suffering immense poverty. Yes, one or two, I remember interviewing one postman and with all his circumstances I thought to myself how on earth do you manage to keep going on this. And one place was really quite a Dickensian farm that I was a bit nervous going into, very untidy dirty and dark, and you just wondered being there on your own if this was a safe thing to be doing.

Did you think that from time to time anyway or just in that one particular situation?

That particular one I found quite worrying, but I think it was all right in the end, can't be fully certain but I think it was.

You can't remember anything bad happening.

No, even now I'm not fully certain that I succeeded, I did seem to get an awful lot of refusals.

What percentage would you say roughly?

I find that quite difficult to know, I can't really remember how many I did, whether it was 20 or 30, I really can't tell now.

And when you saw people in these difficult circumstances, did you find it upsetting at all?

No, I don't think so, because I think most of them were people who seemed to be coping, I didn't feel that, apart from the one, but even they seemed to be coping with it and living at a certain standard. They weren't pleading with me for help or anything like that.

And when you were going through the questionnaire with them, you wrote some notes on the questionnaire because we've still got the original questionnaires, so I was just wondering what made you want to write those notes. Was it because you thought that you'd need some extra information there or?

I suppose it was to give whoever was reading them rather more information than the simple yes/no or tick box answer, it was what the people had said.

Did you sometimes feel it was a bit limiting then just having this tick box sheet?

Well I felt it was in a way, because as I understood it they were trying to find out not only what people earned but what they'd saved and what things they'd got in kind and so on, which actually all contribute towards people making their way in the world. So it didn't always fit, it wasn't a simple thing at all.

And did you ever have a chance to feed that back to the researchers?

I'm not certain, I know when Mrs Jones came down to do some interviews that I couldn't do, we did have a good discussion at the time about it, so probably I did.

And did you feel that there was support there if you had a difficult interview or anything like that, did you know when you could speak to someone about it?

I know I did refer some things back occasionally, so I had two lots of help over that. But I didn't ring up regularly and say I've had a refusal here and what should I do about it. I did feel really I was a bit on my own with that.

And was it difficult approaching people to get them to participate?

Well, you know, I would stand on the doorstep [unclear 13:26] let's hope this is going to be all right lord.

What were you worrying about?

Just about your reception really, you're coming unexpectedly, I think unexpectedly, certainly we must have had some letters that we delivered to places, because I've noted that I left the letters and occasionally I would fix up appointments, so there must have been something like that.

And were you aware of what happened after you'd carried out the research, that it had been written up?

No, I didn't know until just the other day that a book had been written.

Oh really?

I used to see, is it Peter Townsend's or Professor Abel-Smith's name occasionally in the paper over something they'd done, and I used to wonder what happened with all of that, but I never actually saw anything at the end.

So are you aware now of the impact of that book?

I'm not aware of its impact at all.

Well we can talk about that after then. And what happened to you after you'd done the research, did you go on to do more research or did you?

When my children got more demanding, and when they went to school I started part time biology teaching, because I've got a degree in biology, at my husband's school. And later on when they got bigger I did it full time, but I did do a little bit more, I did a census one year, which was much simpler.

In what sense?

Well the questions were, it was all shorter and so on, but it was the same sort of adventure, finding out places and looking people up and so on. It did strike me actually when I looked through my diary, I think quite often I went back more than once, because I would check them through afterwards and if there were any inconsistencies I think I went back and ironed them out before the questionnaire was sent off.

That was very diligent of you then, yeah.

Part 3: on any difficulties encountered

And what do you think could have been done differently with regards to the research?

I really don't know, I haven't got anything much to compare it with. The sort of interviews or not interviews, the sort of surveys you get asked to do now are much simpler, and obviously just ticking the boxes and not interested in any extras that you might add on and so on, on the whole. So I felt that probably it was a very difficult kind of interview to do.

Because it was a sensitive or it was the way the questions were written?

Well I think it was sensitive, I think people were quite happy to tell you what they do and if there are national pay scales and so on you could roughly work out what they were earning perhaps, but the other questions were much more intrusive, what are your savings, is there anything of value in your house? I don't know whether you could actually do that nowadays.

Did people, although they accepted to do the interview did they sometimes not want to answer some of the questions?

Oh yes, you might get to a certain section and they would jib, and you'd have to go onto the next one.

And did they do it in a nice way or did they get a bit?

I don't think anybody got really nasty, I mean there could be refusals but there was nobody ever shouted or get out of here, that sort of thing.

Is there anything else you want to say about, do you think it had any effect on your life doing the research?

It made me realise how very different people are, and how unexpected life can be. There's some things you think oh this will be easy and it's difficult, and sometimes when you think it's difficult it turns out to be easier. But I found it very very interesting.

Was that because you got to see the kind of range of people that there are?

Well yes, it broadened my range of people, understanding perhaps say how a farmer feels compared with somebody who has, or living with a disability or something.

I haven't got any more questions but is there anything else you want to say, anything you want to tell me from your diary or any other memories that you have?

You get unexpected little things, like you would go down to Lynmouth and I remember asking somebody who their landlord was, and being told that it was British Rail, it's just so astounding, some answers were surprising and interesting.

Did you feel you had to give an impression of neutrality all the time or did you just react in the way you would normally?

I was slightly conscious that I'd have to be fairly professional, and to stick to the job in hand rather than go off on a tangent, so that the interview wouldn't take too long, because I think people would jib if you extended it with small talk. It

used to take quite a long time I think, so you've got to appear fairly professional even if you weren't.

So you were worried about the people being interviewed thinking it would take too long, or your superiors, your managers thinking you were taking too long?

I wasn't very conscious that I had a manager timing me at all, but I was a bit conscious that I might be keeping people too long, and that's why I think I preferred to fix an appointment at a time when they would have time to do it really. I didn't feel it was any good trying to interview someone who was in a hurry about something, and I was always prepared to come back and finish it another time if they'd had enough. And I think some places I must have been several times.

Any last thoughts?

No, I feel the one last thought, I suppose one property in Barnstaple I used to feel rather guilty about I think, there was a group of prefabricated houses still left from after the war and I had an address there and I used to knock on the door, and I used to be fairly certain there was somebody there but they weren't answering. But I went back several times, and I'm fairly certain I never got in there, and I think to myself I wonder if there was some poor terrified little old lady inside thinking what does this stranger want that she keeps coming back, so I do feel slightly guilty about that.

Were you worried about the amount of refusals then, did you think it might reflect badly on you, or you just felt that you really wanted to try and get all the people that were required?

Well I tried to work through the list that I had, and I was sorry that there did seem to be quite a few refusals. But there was never any additions, you didn't sort of say well try these alternative addresses or anything. So I never had any comment afterwards about how many had been completed, and really I can't remember now how many there were, and how many were refused.

Would you say it was an enjoyable process overall or?

Yes, I would actually, I did enjoy it. It was stretching and it was enjoyable, and I felt it was worthwhile.

Brilliant, well thank you very much, I'll just switch it off.