Oral history interview with Rachel Thomson for the Reanimating Data Project

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Key:

**I: Interviewer – Ester McGeeney**

R: Respondent – Rachel Thomson

**I: The first thing that I wanted to know about was you and your career and what you were doing in 1989?**

R: I think career is probably the wrong word. 1988 is when the project started and I finished my degree in Manchester in 1988 so I was 1985 to 1988.

**I: That was a degree in sociology?**

R: Yes, I did an undergraduate degree in sociology, in the sociology department and Sue Scott was my supervisor for my dissertation. I did a dissertation about women and AIDS which was provoked by personal experiences. My sister in 1987, I think or 1986, was diagnosed as HIV positive. That was a big moment and I was very involved with her and in her networks. She responded to her diagnosis with activism so she was involved in setting up an organisation called Positively Women which was the first self help organisation for HIV+ women. For my undergraduate dissertation, I interviewed three of the women, including my sister, about the experience of living with HIV and AIDS. That was the basis of the dissertation.

Sue Scott was my supervisor and I assume through that experience she chose me, I think it was a bit like that, for the project. I really don't have a memory of knowing that she was writing a bid for it. I wasn't really aware of it but I seemed to transition seamlessly into being the researcher for that project although I then had to be subsequently interviewed. I think I'd even started doing the work but I remember going down to Janet's office at the Institute of Education and having an interview because there was a kind of panicky moment, I think -

**I: That you haven't followed official process.**

R: Yes, though I think in those days there wasn't much of an official process but I remember that happening subsequently. I mean, I'd worked previously. But it was my first proper professional piece of work.

**I: Someone mentioned the other day that you did your masters at the same time.**

R: I did, yes. I guess I wasn't working full-time so I did a masters. There was a masters in the department called the MA (Econ) in applied social research. I did that at the same time as doing the research which is amazing looking back now to think that there was sufficient time to do all this. It was a two-year project, and I did a masters and my masters dissertation I used one of the interviews from the study for that. I did a Foucauldian conversational analysis of one of the interviews.

**I: Can you remember which one it was?**

R: I can yes, I've got it. I have it all in my personal files. Certain things you keep and I kept the stuff around my undergraduate dissertation and in fact, recently there's a guy doing an oral history around HIV and AIDS and he interviewed my sister. She told him that I'd interviewed her for my undergraduate dissertation, so he contacted me asking whether he could see the interview. I went and found it and then I shared it with my sister who then agreed she actually didn't want it shared *(laughter)* with him but that was a really strange moment. It suddenly felt much too personal and I think she said that was ‘one for the family.’ It wasn't to be. It wasn't to be shared.

**I: Could you just say something a bit more around Positively Women and what was happening around these community or DIY responses to the AIDS crisis and that time? How women fitted into what was going on?**

R: It seemed incredibly important at the time that there was something for women partly because the nature of the epidemic at the time was very much about gay men and much of the activism had been around gay men. Organisations like ACT UP. There'd been a lot of lesbians involved in it in terms of activism and that broadened the agenda but still it was gay men's communities that were really hit.

Positively Women was in a way a response to another kind of trajectory in terms of people and infection so my sister got infected through IV drug use and quite a few of the women in Positively Women had that kind of background. There was also the beginning of the understanding that African women were more affected so there were African women involved in the organisation. It was very tuned into networks around sex work, street drug use. Their first office was in Kings Cross and it was very much part of that kind of scene in Kings Cross. It was a bit different than the more gay men's-oriented work but there was a very strong alliance between all the organisations that were actually operational at that time. They all worked together and collaborated together.

It was a very heady time of activism but also very painful, and there was this kind of sense in which there was a strong thing around what we probably call ‘allies’ now as well, so people who were untested. That was a really important category of being untested, but there was a real sense in which everyone assumed they might die and many people did die, but there was a real sense of living *as if* you might die and *as if* there was no tomorrow, which made it all very exciting and very romantic as well. They were very heightened times. Lots of funerals. Lots of breaking the rules about how you did funerals and I guess young people learning really quick about stuff, about death, but also being very irreverent. In terms of a social movement it had a huge effect on really everyday things.

Now we take for granted that a funeral might have pop music and you might release balloons. That was all done at that time, that kind of transforming what it might mean to have a funeral or transforming how people lived, transforming how health services were delivered, how education was done, so it was a really interesting time.

**I: A lot of it was part in response to what was felt by the inadequate government response -**

R: Yes, I guess the government response was kind of euphemistic which was hilarious at some level so it wasn't able to speak about the thing that it was warning about - so the tombstone, ‘don't die of ignorance’ messages, but without telling people what it was that they should be worried about or giving them the information that they needed. There was a really clear project about explicitness which I think actually transformed the culture much more broadly in loads of ways and it was a young person's project. It really was. I mean, obviously there were older ... there were senior people involved but the networks were really networks of young people and it was -

**I: It was quite literally being explicit to stop people dying -**

R: Yes, and the whole phrase ‘silence equals death’, which was the ACT UP phrase, was just really powerful, about speaking out. Speaking out about sex, speaking out also about death, sexuality, about all the stuff that went under the carpet around drug use, around sex work around exploitation, power. It was all on the table and it was a political act to be explicit and to be lairy, in your face about it. I remember one funeral where at a certain point, everybody took out water pistols and were shooting water pistols and it was kind of dreadful. You felt for all the older relatives of this young man - that it was kind of an awful thing to do but it was also necessary, we were angry and funerals became a kind of performance, interventions, through being very theatrical.

But that was all happening in London. For me, that was all happening in London and friends' networks in London and I was studying in Manchester and for me, that wasn't happening in Manchester in the same way in terms of my personal networks.

**I: So, WRAP was your introduction to a lifetime of a career in academia and working within feminist academia so I was wondering how all that, everything you've described, for you how WRAP fitted in and how our academia fitted in with that or didn't fit. For you, was WRAP a way of living with and contributing to this activism?**

R: Yes, I think it was the notion that you could get paid to do this work. This idea that this is what you would want to do anyway and in many ways was what we were doing in a voluntary capacity. I think the notion of researching, everybody was learning how to research as part of their activism and the idea that you get paid, as a paid job, in this area was really exciting to me. I don't know, I certainly didn't think I was going to have a career in academia because if I had, I would have probably thought more pragmatically about how I did it so I could have probably easily done a PhD at the time. It didn't occur to me to do a PhD and then I had to catch up later to do a PhD. I wasn't thinking about a career in academia and I think probably would have struck me as incredibly boring at the time to do that.

But the idea of being able to make knowledge, that was very exciting, and then to work with people with getting involved with the research was really fantastic in terms of meeting people who, as far as I could tell, felt like they were all doing it freelance. We were all in universities and connected to universities but actually we met at home to do the work and it was all done round the kitchen table. There wasn't a sense in which this was work that belonged to the university and you went in and did it in the university offices. It felt like urgent work that you were doing and you got paid. Yay *(laughter).* I realise maybe that's this is still the case for me. That's how I think of academia, how I tried to make it ... I've always tried to make it because I've learnt from being involved in the WRAP project that you could do it like that. It's kind of like freelance knowledge work.

**I: I know you weren't involved in writing the bid, like you say, can't remember how it came your way but I was wondering if you could remember what you thought the WRAP project was all about?**

R: I can't remember what I thought it was about before I went into it. I can only remember really what I worked out what it was whilst I was in it. It was so difficult what you might have known then and what you later come to think about it. I think actually I was being inducted into a model of feminist research practice which it took me quite a long time to know I had been inducted to , because I just treated it like a fish in water, I just swam and yes, this is good, yes I'll do this. There were no limits given to me about what was appropriate in my role. I wasn't told you're doing this bit of research support but you wouldn't write, or whatever. There was real sense in which I was an equal around the table and I just totally took that up *(laughter),* that I was equal and you know, I was told that my ideas counted so I just took that.

Later on, when you've been in the field longer and you meet other researchers, you realise it's not like that for everybody and then I realised I'd had a very particular kind of induction, and then felt very grateful for that and felt a responsibility to then reproduce that. There are others ways of doing things. It's really difficult. I would be lying if I told you at that I knew this at the time. I was right at the start, the other members of the team were mid-career or late-career, and working in this way really had a meaning in contrast to everything they'd done. For me, I had nothing to compare it with so I just thought, it was just the next thing and I just took it at its word and then did it.

**I: I suppose I sometimes feel when I talk to you about it, that for Janet and Sue Scott there's a sense that their interest was in studying young women's sexuality with recognition that no one had really done that. Stevi Jackson had written one book and that was about it and that felt like a gap -**

R: - Simon and Gagnon’s ‘Sexual scripts’. There was a few.

**I: - but when I speak to you about it, I feel like you didn't come at it like that but you came at it as AIDS, and is AIDS an issue we are living with right now and it was much more connected to the issue of AIDS, whereas perhaps for Sue and Janet, that was the hook on which they managed to get funding.**

R: I think that's definitely the case. Because I was very open to the feminism as well, so I don't think I was angry with them about that or moralistic about that. But there was a generational politics as well around HIV and AIDS and we had a real sense of not only urgently trying to do something to stop people getting ill and dying, but this was potentially a moment for social change so we were going to transform everything as well. Sex was a really, really important part of that terrain. Not just sex, because I guess we were building on all the work that had happened before around alternative lifestyles and where you lived, like squatting and a whole range of things seemed really important, and equality and relationships and endless talking about power in personal relationships seemed really, really important.

But also, it was just after the miner's strike. There was a real sense of organising around things and making leaflets and campaigning, and doing stuff.

**I: Do you think you would have called yourself a feminist before you did the project?**

R: Yes, I remember Sue Scott telling me one time ... we had a conversation about what you've got on your passport and she said I have sociologist on my passport. I was like, woah, that you could have sociologist on your passport, and realising ... I'm not sure that I understood that you call yourself feminist and that had any meaning. I was very interested in feminism and radical ideas, I was really interested in sex and radical ideas about sex and had read quite a lot about that and around that, but I don't know that I had a real notion of feminism as a kind of movement or a lifestyle. It was only when I really, to be honest, met networks like Sue's network in Manchester, this kind of northern radical feminists. Then the north London not so radical, more socialist-feminists in North London - that I understood. The penny dropped about what feminism meant in a very different way which was a kind of lifestyle and a network of people.

Women who published, that was to me really profoundly interesting because I come from a family ... my dad's a writer and my mum did the typing so I was very interested in a culture where women were the thinkers and women published books and often men were actually making beautiful food *(laughter)* and looking after them. So, this matriarchal scene ... or there were no men at all so the Manchester network was much more rad-fem, lesbian, political lesbian ... so that was all really interesting. I hadn't come across that definitely ... previously. I mean, at 21, how much have you come across?

**I: What do you remember about your experiences of actually doing the interviews in Manchester? You did the vast majority of them so perhaps around 50, 60 interviews in Manchester, what has stuck with you about the interviews?**

R: I think something happens when you interview with people, kind of a touching of minds somehow that they become part of you in an odd way so you learn from every story that you hear. Not every single one, there's interviews where there is no touching, there's no touching of minds but before this project started and I went back to the original material, I had some very emblematic memories of the project. They were often from particular encounters with young women that I felt like I'd learnt something for myself, from them. Sometimes I'd learnt something that became a quotation, that we then used in an analysis and then a piece of writing, so literally a kind of snatch of the talk. Sometimes, they got mashed up as one person when actually there were three people, but there were some really strong connections.

**I: Have you got any examples of those ones that -**

R: For instance, there's the young woman who talks about sitting on the bus talking about when the boys ask her about do you masturbate and then she basically takes them on, on the bus, and she basically then talks about yes, I do, and it's based on the female anatomy and how it's really very different than a man's body, and the boys get redder and redder and quieter and quieter and the whole bus then becomes filled with her story ... it’s a heroic story ... whether it really was true or not, it was such a powerful story from a working class woman about taking up power and speaking out about sex in a way that was just amazing. Yes, that was one I never forgot.

There were various little snippets, and including, for example ones that in this project I have now seen other young women notice and pick out. There's the lovely one where a young woman's talking about being able to walk around naked with a partner and feeling at ease because she has space and I remember when hearing that, thinking that's really important, isn't it, having space or not having space and time. This was noticed by the Women’s Theatre Society project too. As a young person you don't have very much, so things that just become life lessons that you then learn about. Also, some nastier stories about people powerless and not understanding why something was so horrible.

I'm sure they made me, in lots of ways. It was like a really, really great version of getting the sex education I needed as a young woman, to be able to go round and ask other young women not very different in age from me but really different in terms of experience and background, pretty much anything that I could *(laughter).* I mean, it was an amazing opportunity. It does change you and I would say every project I've done since then as well, it changes you. Yes, those stories that you hear.

There were some young people ... there was once a young woman I took to the family planning clinic straight after the interview or ones where we carried on meeting up regularly. The young woman who only told me she had been raped after the tape was turned off. All the things that you learn as a researcher that's about boundaries and what's data and what's not data, there's always complicated things.

**I: Also, how to take care of the people that you're interviewing.**

R: Yes.

**I: There are lots of examples, I think, in the interviews in your field notes of how you're doing that.**

R: Or being totally out of my depth.

**I: Do you remember feeling ever out of your depth?**

R: Completely, particularly around social class. I was really made to feel that by some of the participants.

**I: To feel really middle class? Or to feel the gap?**

R: Yes, it is like touching minds with somebody and in doing that, you have to acknowledge your difference in order to see your similarity and so there's a lot of that kind of stuff going on but that was really fine. I mean, it's been interesting to go back to this group of young mothers in one of the sites, so it's a young mothers group that I went in and it's kind of like a comedy reading my field notes, but I remember that as feeling completely out of my depth. What am I doing here, who am I here, what have I got to say? Interestingly, in my field notes, I'm saying it's impossible, there's nothing for us to talk about, and I remember that feeling so it's very interesting then to go back and to see it in the field notes.

The version I have now is already different because I've done the work on this revisiting project re-piecing things together and I've discovered that what I thought was one person is several people, but also that I was doing three or four interviews in a day often and it’s like ‘phuffff’.

**I: You've got this lovely field note where you write (R laughs) It's like the shortest field note, you said something like ‘Third interview of the day like.’ Basically, ‘I'm knackered, and then that's the end of it. You can feel you've just got nothing left.**

R: *(Laughter).* There's nothing there.

**I: You've got nothing left to say because you must be -**

R: You know it as a researcher that anything is possible in social research. We dress it up in scientific language but there are these encounters between people and anything can happen and sometimes, it was just amazing things happen. I think there's a couple of field notes where I've put that ‘I think this is an important encounter’ and when I'm saying that, it's as important for me as for them. There's some kind of exchange and testing out that's going on and I guess at that time being researched or being invited to be part of an interview for research, was a really unusual experience. There wasn't much of that happening which is really hard for us to understand now where we're constantly researched and asked for feedback.

**I: And documented.**

R: And documented, but yes, it seemed like a really special, important thing and people spoke into this space in an important way, I think. I felt a really strong obligation to do stuff with what I'd been told. I felt a very strong moral imperative that people had expectations even though, actually when you're looking at the interviews now, there's very few questions asked well, what exactly is going to happen with this material. It felt very purposeful.

**I: Because around that time, there was the idea of the missing discourse of desire or about the female pleasure or just sexuality for women generally was something that was hard to talk about or we didn't have ways of doing that yet, I was wondering if you had a sense of that in the interviews, that certain things were hard to say? It doesn't feel like that when I read them -**

R: No.

**I: - so I was wondering what it was like at the time?**

R: It's really hard to say what it was like at the time. I can't tell you but I know that it was the subject. Female pleasure was politically where we'd got to in terms of trying to understand why women were so selfless around sex and so machoistic around sex, so willing to absorb risk, so uninterested in themselves. It felt like the answer was pleasure. The answer to everything at that historical moment was pleasure and it's so interesting then to go back and just to see that much more broadly in the popular culture. It's like this is the answer and of course, because the nature of women's anatomy, in order to even begin to think about what pleasure would mean for a woman, you had to get really explicit and you had to deconstruct penetration. You had to think about friction, you had to take terms like foreplay and describe precisely why it is seen as foreplay to start with - before what? And what exactly is that made up of. That seemed to be a really urgent political project and I think for all of us, was as urgent in our own beds as it was in the project. We were all really working on that and we brought that into the interviews. (laughter) I find it very funny, the (inaudible 00:32:34) -

**I: How much you ask about -**

R: How much. Yes, but also, we used to just call it NPS, or in the notes be NPS. We wouldn't even say non-penetrative sex. It had its own acronym because it was probably in every other sentence, you'd be talking about non-penetrative sex. I guess that was also the moment in radical feminism where at the act of intercourse would seem to be potentially an act of subjugation. There was a lot of politics about heterosexuality. Could you be heterosexual and a feminist, and what did the act of intercourse mean? There's the Andrea Dworkin book at the time, *Intercourse.* There were all these *Feminist and Psychology* special issues. There was some awful confessional writing and guilt about pleasure. What if you actually found intercourse pleasurable? Oh, that's really hard, so there's this kind of ... it's a risky thing, it's political symbolically problematic but it might be the pleasurable thing. Well, if pleasure is the answer, how do we deal with that? I think maybe a bit like anal sex is now. It's kind of like a particular ... it's always the sexual act that's the real focus. Then it was vaginal penetration.

It's interesting because actually anal sex was the act then that was the dangerous one. Well, unprotected anal sex. I think these were the conversations that most people were not having but were always there to be had as well, and it wasn't only ... I don't think it was only middle-class university feminists who were having the conversations. I think it was broader than that. There were a lot of people ... it was a very political time, but you can see in the interviews, sometimes it's responded to by yes, right, yes. You'll get a real connection and sometimes absolutely blankness around ... or that's disgusting. Because really, the thing we were promoting ... because we were being sexual educators in many ways as interviewers, we really wanted girls to be having loads of oral sex, getting loads of oral sex. That was pretty much low risk, really fun, and you’ve got to be able to deal with your body, you can't feel ashamed of your body and have lots of oral sex. It's a process. It was like the perfect sexual act.

**I: Were there other ways that you were being sex educators in the interviews other than around oral sex, or non-penetrative sex?**

R: I think around violence and consent and rape. One of the things happening in feminism at that time ... actually in 1991, rape became illegal in marriage so it was still legal at that time to do whatever you wanted to do sexually to your wife. That's really profound ... it's a big fact, isn't it, to deal with, and there was a sense in which women didn't really own their bodies ... in law, didn't own their bodies. So, there was a big cultural project about naming men's power and particularly, normalised ordinary, habitual, boring versions of power where you just think ‘let's get it over and done with’, and that that was no longer okay.

I think it was no longer okay and it's only two years after that actually that the law is changed, so I think that was a really important piece of work and Liz Kelly and those guys, the work they did on The Continuum of Sexual Violence, that was really, really important conceptually. Problematic maybe as well, because it meant that the whole of sexuality was -

**I: A continuum of violence.**

R: Sexual violence, yes, so one end you had your intercourse which is an act of subjugation. On the other end you have very violent rape and it's all one thing. But it was necessary as a political intervention because it was seen as just how the world was. This whole thing of denaturalising, taking for granted categories, and inserting into it negotiated democratic relationships ... and I think that's what was happening in the culture anyway. I think that's what was happening in the response to AIDS, in many ways. It was what was happening in lots of other areas, around children's rights for example. It was like, let's not take ‘because it's natural’, or ‘because it's always been like that,’ as good enough reasons, and let's get in there, name everything, give everything a word and work out what we think is fair, and not fair. But self-interest was a really important category as well, so for a woman to think that it wasn't okay to have unpleasurable, boring, possibly slightly painful Saturday night sex, then they had to have very different ideas about what sex was.

The other big thing for us was masturbation. It's like if you haven't learnt about your body through masturbation, how on earth would you know what good sex was.

**I: There's not actually that much on masturbation in the interviews, is there?**

R: No, maybe there's not much as given how important it was to the model. I think it might have still been hard to talk about.

**I: I don't think you ask about ... you can see the themes, although the questions aren't all the same, you can see the themes that you all ask about. It doesn't feel like masturbation was on the list maybe.**

R: Yes.

**I: Sometimes it comes out through conversation but generally not on the researcher's agenda.**

R: Maybe that's partly because we're talking about risk and transmission of disease. There's always that context of ‘we're allowed to talk about this now because there is this disease that is transmitted in certain kinds of ways so that's why this is on the agenda’. Otherwise it wouldn't be on the agenda. That's the kind of framework. But I think probably, for ourselves and for the politics and the culture of sexual pleasure, masturbation was absolutely central as a part of an alternative version where personal pleasure and personal arousal was the building block. If you didn't have that, how on earth would you know you'd had consensual sex or not. Perhaps we didn't ask about it. Sometimes people told us.

**I: I wanted to ask you about analysis but I also just wondered if there is anything you can say about how you found the young women, to interview them. When I spoke to Sue, she said that you ... she remembered that being you doing a lot of work around that.**

R: Yes, there were a few really, really helpful people who brokered access. There was a great woman called Pam Muttram who set up an organisation called Why-Wait and was part of the north Manchester health activism network, mostly run by lesbian women but providing services and working with working-class young woman right across north Manchester. But we used the questionnaire quite cannily and we got a number of big organisations to put the questionnaire in with people's payslips. The payslip's tiny and the questionnaire was big so I'm not exactly sure how they did that but there's a couple of trade unions, the city council, big organisations that we managed to -

**I: Then people would post them to you?**

R: Yes, a lot of that detail is lost on me. I can't quite remember. We were working at a pelt as well. Really fast, but I know that that was really good route and that we got quite a lot of feedback from that, as you can see it from the original sample. There are some really big blank spots ... accessing the sample which I can see in its traces so I can see where people came from because I recognise what that code work means, but I don't really have any memories of the precise processes.

**I: Do you remember it being hard? You're working really fast, you spoke to a lot of women -**

R: I'd never done it before. It's so difficult if you've never done something before. I don't have memories of it being hard which makes me assume that it wasn't that hard. We got a lot of people quite quickly. We definitely didn't want to get a sample of students. I think we had three or four students from Manchester University and I said that's enough, no more. There was this persistence in accessing a real diversity of young women in a way that perhaps we don't really do quite as well these days, I wonder. I mean, young women who are working so there's a lot of young women who work ... colleges were really important.

But there are no vivid memories. The vivid memories are much more of the encounters with the young women in particular places and learning about Manchester. I'd lived in Manchester for three years but I didn't, as a student, really know all these neighbourhoods so there was a lot of trekking around doing interviews in different neighbourhoods and just finding out about Manchester as a big, complicated city. I have quite a lot of memories of that. That's different from the access process.

**I: What do you remember about how you did the data analysis and I suppose I also wondering as part of that, how you did that collectively particularly given you were in different cities and different places?**

R: Because I haven't looked at the minutes and things, I can't quite piece it together but I think it's probably quite likely that for the two funded years, I was primarily collecting data. I know that Sue Scott and I wrote some things together in Manchester and that was based on… I mean we had a whole process of transcribing which took a long time so we often didn't really have the data when we were starting to do the analysis and so the analysis would have started during the funded part of the study but then it went on for years, literally years afterwards. I think probably the serious analysis only really happened after the end of study, by the time I was down in London and then I joined in working in London with Sue and Janet. But certainly, there's a couple of purple pamphlets that I worked with, closely with Sue Scott, which were based primarily on the Manchester data. So that was ‘Learning about sex’ and the historical and what was it called? Historical and something, hang on.

**I: Yeah. It's got AIDS in the title.Yeah.**

R: Yes, it was a kind of methody… it’s..

**I: It was ‘Researching some- sexuality in the light of AIDS.**

R: In the light of AIDS - historical and something issues, but what's interesting now for me to look at that, that's very much the approach of that sociology department, the kind of sets of ideas that we were working with. For me, both those are very Manchester and before the dataset was merged into one dataset, London and Manchester, although we were putting stuff into the Ethnograph as we went of course, sort of systematically as we went along. But the process of doing an interview, having the interview transcribed, getting it back, putting it into Ethnograph, coding it, was very slow and the desire to do papers at conferences came much more quickly. Or the desire to get some material out came much more quickly so we'd do that on the hoof in the early days. The purple pamphlets are much more based on material as we found it, as it was transcribed or even maybe before then. They were written very early and then it was a much more systematic process subsequently. We had a big dataset, all of which had been coded and then we could search it in different ways.

**I: That was after when you had MRAP as well?**

R: The chronological ... my job ended, the funding ended and I got a job pretty much straight away in London at the National Children's Bureau, the Sex Education Forum, which had just been set up. I moved down to London and continued to be part of the research team working alongside my job. It's interesting now to think back on it because that just seemed a very straightforward thing to do but I wasn't actually being paid to do this. Maybe time was longer, there was more time in those days but I must have ... it's really hard, I think these are things you have to talk to Janet about because she is holding the dataset. Leaving Manchester and coming to London was a decisive moment where I think I probably had much less control over what the material was so I would have brought everything I had in Manchester and left it at Dalmeny Road which was the kind of home of all the WRAP material.

**I: And where you were also living?**

R: I did at a certain point, yes, but I wasn't living there then. But I did at a certain point as everyone did at some point. Live and work in Janet's upstairs room.

**I: This is probably a bit of a geeky as a question, so Ethnograph was really new then -**

R: Yes.

**I: - and so how did it work? How did you work collectively? There would have been no cloud.**

R: No.

**I: You would have your own individual interviews and you would have them as a digital file that you would upload to Ethnograph and you would code your own interviews?**

R: I know I coded loads of interviews. Whether we had only one version of Ethnograph ... I have a feeling we had a copy in Manchester and a version in London and at a certain point, we merged them but that might not be true. Do you know? *(Laughter).*

**I: No, everyone's a bit hazy about how Ethnograph worked.**

R: I remember not liking it very much and that might be to do with it. I think I was a bit resistant to it. It was one of the first computer qualitative data analysis vehicles and in some ways, it was like this big solution to a problem. But of course, it was enormously time-consuming and it also involved chopping data up into small segments. My main feeling was at the end of it all, was that worth it? Did we get enough? Also, it's constantly churning out printouts ... so you might search for condoms and you get stuff comes churning, chucking out ... printing out at great length.

But that was the way we did it and I would have done a lot of the coding, I'm sure, but I find it really hard to remember. I mean, I look at printouts and I know who's handwriting is who's. There's my handwriting on there. There's Sue's handwriting on there. There's even Sean's handwriting on there so he must have at some point been paid to do some coding because I recognise his handwriting on it. Yes, we have pencil marks where somebody else would have been inputting it but really, really difficult to remember in what order and how we did it.

I think it was really important in terms of ... because Caroline didn't do any interviews and so for her to access to the dataset, Ethnograph was the way she did that so I think it was really, really ... and if you think about the kind of ... you know, we're a very flat hierarchy, Caroline was kind of at the top of the flat hierarchy. Her having access to the dataset was really important and so Ethnograph was really important because that's how she could get the material.

I think increasingly as we're further away from the field and further away from doing the interviews, we needed it too as a research team because initially, you can almost do it all from memory. You can start writing immediately. You can know the connections between cases but it became more and more important as time went by but I remember being a bit disgruntled about it at the time *(laughter).*

**I: I suppose I was interested in - one of the things I remember about coming across the WRAP, reading ‘Male in the Head’ and the purple pamphlets, is how explicit it is about the use of feminist theory and feminist methodology and a real sense that that was a big part of the project was about, showing how to do feminist research.**

R: Yes.

**I: I suppose I was just interested on your thoughts on that, either what it was like at the time or your thoughts now on how feminist theory played into-**

R: I think I was probably a bit of an unruly teenager in relation to some of it. We're a really different group of people in terms of some of those things. Caroline was very much the theoretician. She cared a lot and it was the kind of theory that was very much about that movement in sociology where the difference between ontology and the epistemology was really important so it linked very much also to knowledge building and knowledge claiming. She was very careful and determined that we had a very kind of transparent and reflective methodology so she led on certain things around that.

One was writing a pamphlet on methods of working together as a research team which was unheard of before then but the notion that that was something to be written about very much came from Caroline. I remember at the time not understanding why and also laughing a bit because she'd written it on her own *(laughter)* and hadn't really consulted. There's a funny little footnote where she clearly asks me a question and then she answers it in a footnote and says, Rachel says this which I remember thinking was quite funny.

It took me ages to learn really what Caroline was talking about and then I came to really admire and respect that sort of precision and the idea, the ambition, that feminists could build a different kind of knowledge and the authority for that came through their ability to make themselves vulnerable by sharing how they did it. That was in itself a really major political project.

I think at the time I was a bit like, ‘boring!’ ... *(laughter).* Oh god, more of this ... and then I became an academic myself and thought wow, that was really amazing. That was what Caroline did and that was really teacherly as well for the rest of us. She taught us all about that and how that was important. She kept us on the straight and narrow in a real kind of way and I think that was probably one of the reasons that the project was so influential in the end, was because it showed us its innards. It was inside out, it let you see how knowledge was constructed and claimed but in a very particular way and I guess I was probably, not a thorn in the side, but the sand in the oyster. I was always kicking back and pushing back because I felt that it was quite a strongly reductive version and that didn't sit with me terribly well, on feminist theory. It was a bit black and white. It was very black and white but it made sense from the subject position, particularly for Caroline. It was black and white. She would say it is like that but I was in a different subject position as a younger person and for me, it couldn't be like that.

I had to do that work to make some more spaces really and Janet, her thing was the organisation. She was this kind of quiet but really thorough approach to administering a project which meant that the project could be mobile. It could survive outside of institutions. People could change institutions and it wouldn't matter because the project was this thing that had its own life and it was made up of these really mundane practices around minuting things, having meetings, making lovely meals, cooking together, talking, minuting those talks, planning writing, planning the next conference.

People had different, really different roles and I think's probably what made it really work. That we had these different kinds of things that we did really well. Sue Sharpe was just the best interviewer in the history of feminist research, could hold a silence longer than anybody could. I think my role was probably turning it into practice, the activism, but also a bit of what's the agenda now or what's the agenda going to be. What's interesting, how to make this interesting, because Caroline could make things really boring so it was finding a way of turning that around.

There's probably a better way of thinking about it, to be honest. Thinking about it as roles and nothing else.

**I: What was Sue Scott's role?**

R: She was very much about starting it. Her role more than anything else is somebody who's a player within sociology. She still is because in some ways the rest of the team were slightly semi-detached. Whether it was Sue Sharpe as a freelancer, Janet living in her house in Tufnell Park, or Caroline as being slightly furious, but Sue Scott was the incredibly socially skilled, politically astute person who understand the academy, understood sociology, understood influence, understood the politics in the field, so she played a very important role particularly at the beginning of the project.

**I: Could you just say a little bit more about what you mean when you say you found it all a bit reductive and a bit black and white and I suppose I was thinking about our conversation we were having this morning about how Judith Butler's Gender Trouble which was published in 1990, and the wider ideas and politics around that, how that fitted in or didn't?**

R: It was a really big deal for me at the time and I think probably I found, in trying to resolve it for myself I found my own voice as someone who could be an independent academic as well as a collaborator. The world's a complicated place. Data, in my experience, is always more complicated than the analysis that we put on it and I struggle often with any analysis because it's often that the material is so much richer and I think one of the interesting things about engaging in archiving processes and going back to material, is that it will speak again and again and again. It's never worn out. You put it into a new context and it's got something new to say and that's really exciting.

I felt that the story being told in the pamphlets had a very particular generational position which was fine because the majority of the researchers on the project had shared a generational position and had been through a particular experience that has fit into a narrative that they had, a theoretical narrative, and one that was really bloody convincing and politically really, really important.

**I: What was that narrative?**

R: The durability of the patriarchy. It's ability to adapt and encompass newness and yet reproduce itself and close down resistance. Resistance is futile *(laughter)* but it's very interesting that Foucault was a really important figure at this time and a set of ideas at that point to thinking about power as fluid. It was a big challenge to feminist theory that had thought about power as being male power ... for radical feminists, that might mean real male power rooted in male bodies that have certain shapes and abilities - but then this is lived through political systems and culture and a whole range of things. We are challenged to think of power as working through the metaphor of *capillaries,* it's just everywhere. You stop it here and it flows there and it's much more fluid and difficult to categorise. The moment you start classifying it, what you have to understand is you are complicit in doing power. The classification itself is a power play.

That was the period in which we were doing this work and I think we were arguing from both sides of the fence actually as an inter-generational research team. We were trying to have that argument in both ways and I think you can see it in some of the writing and the chapters that have been written from slightly different places.

I think that's probably the case and both can be true. That you can look at things in one way and you can see all of the continuity and then again, you can look in another way and you can see all sorts of possibility. It was just the repetition of the continuity again and again, that I found from my generational position as oppressive. I wanted to be able to disrupt that a bit.

**I: So, you felt there was more variation between women or more examples of women using their power or experiencing -**

R: I think I was more interested in the detail and I still am. I go to the stories and I'm really interested in the detail, how individual people live lives, make stories and I am interested in how they're similar to each other but really it's the uniqueness or the ways in which common positions can give rise to such extraordinarily different gambits and strategies, that I find amazing in the material. If you were like, these are the working class women, the diversity in that is just so incredible and to think about why. Why might it be that you've got these sub-cultures or some families that might give rise to somebody who does it so totally differently and feels able to do that, then what happens to that person.

So, that more biographical located specificity of the materials is probably more ‘me’ and I think in the work I've done subsequently, that's probably how I have really thought about or wanted to tell stories through sociology rather than this is how the power works in this kind of way and really there's no escaping it.

I mean, that might be true in some ways and maybe all of the most creative attempts to make something different you can always explain within a bigger theory but that was not my way of doing it. I don’t think it was Sue’s either.

**I: Sue Sharpe?**

R: Yes. She didn't really seek to be too involved with the writing. She wanted to do the interviews and I think that's partly because if she had written it, it would have looked very different and her books did look very different. But it's interesting being part of a group, isn't it, to find those things out. You only find out who you are but finding out who you're not.

**I: When the project finished and you got a job at NCB, lots of people have referred to the fact that that was one of the ways in which the WRAP influenced policy and practice, through you and your role there so I suppose I was interested in what you were doing and if you felt you were able to take what you'd learnt from WRAP and put it into -**

R: Yes, because it's interesting ... if you think about how did the WRAP analysis relate to the study of sexuality and feminist theory that is one thing, but in terms of translating it into sex education, there was just a really simple clear message from it that ‘power matters’. Young people already are completely able to talk about sex, they just need to have an opportunity to do that and are there any spaces in which that's possible? It was like we don't need to know what sexual health is in order to impose it on people, we need to create spaces so that these kinds of conversations can happen and we've done that in this research. Look, you could do that in your counselling role, you could do that a school nurse, you could do that as a teacher. It was like, this possible! And it's a massive neglect of responsibility to be ignore young people's sexual cultures when this evidence is there.

It was a really easy thing to disseminate and everybody wanted to know about it. I really can't tell you but we probably did 500 gigs of school nurses conferences, psychosexual counsellors conferences, invited all over the place and I was able to combine that with my sex education forum job. It's a bit of juggling and -

**I: What was so exciting about what you could say with WRAP?**

R: It was young people's voices. Because I suppose it's the thing, there wasn't very much previously that showed young people talking really eloquently about sexuality. Not just about the idea of it, about their own sexual experience. The big problem with sex education was they're not supposed to be doing it, it's illegal, so the big problem is how do we tell them what sex should be whilst pretending we don't know they're doing it. It's like the tombstones, big euphemism ... how do we deal with that, we don't know ... don't tell us because we don't want to know and we therefore don't have to tell you - and it was just nonsense.

The WRAP was fantastic evidence. They're doing it, loads of it. Loads of it is really super-unsafe in terms of all sorts of ways but they're completely up for a proper grown-up conversations, which in a way is what we modelled in WRAP. If we actually asked somebody seriously, this is what they might say and then therefore, you as public servants in all different kinds of way from teachers to counsellors are neglecting your job by not allowing these conversations to happen.

That's what you've got to do. That's what sex education is, making it possible to have these conversations, but that isn't what it was like then. In 1986 the Education Act made school governors responsible for deciding what would be in sex education. It was in 1987, they decided that school governors had to create a moral framework within which sex education was taught, so actually the top down policy discourse was all so out of kilter with our approach. But we also had this new possibility around children's rights coming through, so children's voices. We just went on that hook, line and sinker ... that it's all about children's rights, hearing what's happening, they're doing it anyway and they need just safe places to talk about it and to get access to services when they need it. You had one very conservative top down thing and then a sort of more bottom up ... that was the 90s really. All of the lobbying took that kind of form and the Sex Education Forum was very much that so partly that top down, hard work, getting all the organisations to agree that children do have the right to talk about sex, that sexuality is not evil. Some really basic place markers around human sexuality is part of human nature.

That really basic political work and then in a much more pragmatic way, giving people resources, networks, helping them open up spaces to do the work and that the work should be following young people, asking them what they would like to talk about. Give them prompts. That's where sex education is now, I think, isn't it?

**I: I remember when I first read *Male in the Head* when I'd just started doing a PhD and I just stopped being a ... well, no I was still a practitioner so coming from a practice background, and one of the things that I found really amazing to hear, articulated in that way, was the idea that there's no point in just giving young people information because you can't just tell a woman about condoms and that she needs to use one when she's in this unequal - if she doesn't have the agency or the sense of empowerment to tell someone to use one. I remember finding that really powerful because I think at that time there was still a sense of, we just need to give young people information and that knowledge equals power, and for me it felt WRAP was trying to say something else about power. I suppose I was wondering if you were able to do something with that or whether there was more basic stuff that was needed to be doing about getting people on board.**

R: I suppose it's the critical, feminist conversation tends to happen between the feminist and the person so one of the things about sex education ... we did, we did a lot about arguing that power is really important and that was always slightly double-edged sword because there's always been a kind of potential coalition between the feminists and the conservatists about sex is really a nasty, brutish and short. We need to protect girls from young men, so there was really a tightrope to walk on. But there was also a new generation of people ... I suppose this is also about the generational politics. There was new generation of people who wanted to do sex education work and they would be people like me who'd come in through AIDS activism, who were part of those networks, who worked for local authorities, and they wanted to do it with a critical edge. They had the sexual politics around power is I suppose all those things about the masochism, the ordinary sex being sex that hasn't been properly deconstructed, that we need to deconstruct what sex is and who's it for and what pleasure is, and all the stuff about masturbation being the bottom line.

Those are the people who worked in sex education so in FPA [Family Planning Association], and in Brook in some ways. Those were the people who were in the field, they knew that stuff and they wanted to do it in that kind of way. I don't know. You spend seven years of your life doing one thing, you spend the next seven years of your life doing the next thing, so I spent the next seven years of my life trying to make sex education something that was easier to happen. WRAP was definitely the way in and in fact, I remember as part of my job interview, I sent one of the purple pamphlets as like an appendix to my application.

**I: To the sex education forum?**

R: Yes, it was like this is all I want to do. This is my agenda and I felt that they knew that. That's what they signed up to and it was to do it in that kind of way.

**I: You felt it was possible to do that.** **It is often the sense now maybe that putting research into practice is difficult and it's hard and difficult to do something so I wonder if having got that job or got that opportunity, whether you felt like you could -**

R: Yes, but it's like yes and no. One of the things that happened during the 90s was that whole evidence-based practice and there was never enough research to really show ... it was like research was both seen as more important but actually it was denigrated so a good study like WRAP, which was a large critical study, in that framework we'd have been saying it's qualitative and it's not an RCT. In terms of the agenda that came in, it would have been seen as flimsy evidence to do something.

But at that moment, it was a powerful body of really convincing argumentation. I suppose it's like how do you influence people? I think at that moment, it was really influential. Whether it could be influential in the same way now, I don't know but I wonder if one of the reasons why it was influential, I think this actually, is the quality of the interviews we got. The reason it was influential was probably a lot less to do with us, which is hard to say isn't it, because you want to be the heroes of the story, but I think it's to do with the way those original women took up the invitation to be interviewed.

Reading the interviews again, with the reanimation work, it's the material that really speaks. The way that those original young women said, ‘I'll be bloody interviewed and I'll tell you how it looks like from when I stand in the world.’ I think those testimonies are really, really powerful and that the way we did the WRAP project, it had an analysis of power, it had an analysis of methodology but there was loads and loads of data in it. There was just lots and lots of young people talking and I think the thing that took people aback was how interesting it is, what they said. Often funny but it shows that there is a sexual culture there and that young people have a sexual culture and there's lots to say. It's like if that's the case, then surely, it's legitimate conversation.

I don't know, I left working in sex education convinced that it was just nuts. I'd had enough because it's a weird seduction that somehow at one level you feel like you're supposed to be some kind of hero who will change the world, make it more liberal, and the field is contested by all these campaign groups, and there is always the next controversy, it's draining. Maybe the real action isn't at the level of policy. I think there were little moments when it has been but I think you can just ... it will never stop. It never stops that kind of constant controversy.

**I: I think a lot of us have a lot of investments in sex education as this transformative vehicle for change, in a way we're not perhaps so invested in other areas of education as being quite ... we're more modest about the transformation of other areas of education but those who are invested in sex education, I think a lot of us are really -**

R: Yes, I think we overdetermined ... when WRAP started, sex had been ignored. It was really important for a small part of the population who suddenly thought who was getting ... this is where it's really important, this is where the action is in our lives, and I think when we went and talked to young women we captured that happening with them as well. But I think in the 30 years since, in a sense, it kind of grew and grew and grew until it came quite empty. It's really interesting that it feels like in many ways there's not ... the official conversation about sex, is it's one that it's very difficult to speak into and I felt what was exciting about some of the reanimating work that we've done, is that we've been able to reinvigorate those conversations so people think they can say something again, it’s not just an empty discourse.

It's very interesting, going back to Caroline, how do we make knowledge? At what point does knowledge have a real salience and have a real kind of edge to it and what point it loses that edge as well and just becomes stuff to hit people over the head with.

**I: The last thing I wanted to ask you about is why did you decide you wanted to go back to WRAP. Because it's been a long time coming, this project, hasn't it? You've been wanting to go back to it for a long time and I wondered what that was ... you in the team, you've been the driving force there.**

R: (Inaudible 01:24:59).

**I: I wondered what that's about for you?**

R: I think I was interested in doing a revisiting study because I'm really interested in thinking about how you understand social change empirically. I'm really interested in the difference between sociology and history, how they work as disciplines that try to make authoritative claims about time. That's one big reason I was quite keen on doing an archived-based piece of work.

I think there was a bit of me that really didn't want to return to the WRAP because it's so autobiographical and I felt that that could be really hard and, in some ways, it has been really hard and draining, in a way that's personal but -

**I: What do you mean by it was really autobiographical?**

R: It's made me who I am, so going back to it, I have these well-worn stories about what happened and why what happened and I never anticipated going back and opening up any of those. No reason to. In fact, walking away from them was a nice experience. ‘Oh well, that's an experience’. Working with that group of people in different ways over many years ... it wasn't a straightforward thing for me to want to go back to the WRAP and I got cold feet several times along the process thinking I'm not sure that's a good idea, but actually, the desire to return, ... there's two bits to it. There's one bit which is, it's like a magical solution in some way. I get to go back, return in time to those two very fast years that we were in Manchester before moving down to London when I was working with Sue. I get to go back and make a bit more time to do a bit more of that. Looking again at that work and asking those questions about how is this about Manchester in the 1980s which was felt to be a research question that got lost. Not for any bad reason but because other things took over and there wasn't time to look at that.

The other side is just that I think this material should be in an archive. That's partly through an experience of making archives on subsequent projects, so I'd certainly learnt all my lessons from the WRAP and from doing the Inventing Adulthoods, put a lot of those lessons into practice. Making sure the place was really central, being able to think about individuals as well as categories. Making an archive as you go along and it being there for other people. I felt that I'd learnt the lessons and it would be really amazing if those lessons could go back into the WRAP project and we could preserve the archive for the future and other things that might happen to it. Already, from our reanimating projects that we've done so far, I feel really hopeful about that in that I think the material has got power in its own right.

It's a project that has a kind of methodology and there's been many other younger academics who've been interested in it so it feels okay. In reality, I probably should have answered ‘I don't know’ to every single question you've asked me because actually *I don't know* and that's quite nice. I don't really need to know, but I know that they were amazing interviews and the idea that they could be nurtured and cared for and keep making things happen, or people can engage creatively with them into the future, is really exciting. There's an aspect of that in feminism and the tradition, which is about care - not for ourselves as feminist academics, but care for the material. I've learnt a lot about this in recent years, understanding more about archiving. I still work in a university. I may not work in a university that much longer so I can use the resources of the university to make this archive safe and that feels like a really good thing to do.

I mean, we all come to the end our lives. It's a way of also escaping time, cheating time and I'd like to think it's not just all in an attic in Janet's house which puts a huge responsibility on Janet as well so it's kind of about that relationship partly too.

**I: Has it felt in any way for you a burden to have ... because you also had some of the data, or to know that it's in Janet's house, as Janet gets older, has that felt like something you've carried around with you?**

R: Yes, it's part of my relationship with her and my duties towards her, I guess, and the older generations. Always with a bit of an edge so, yes, I mean I don't know. Maybe I'm kidding myself but it feels like it's sensitive as a thing to negotiate but I think it's probably a good thing to have negotiated for everybody concerned. We'll see.

**I: I think I'm done on asking questions. I suppose I wondered if there was anything else? I suppose if you think of someone coming across the archive in 30 or 40 years, is there anything that you would like them to know before they dive in and start reading the material?**

R: It's funny because we did this project recently with young people, creating an archive about everyday childhood, and they sent postcards to a future user. Things like ‘be kind’, ‘don't judge me’. So I suppose, things that maybe everybody would want to say that to the future audience. I guess also I really hope that the material stands up to the test of time, that it was worth the labour of doing this. I think we've had an interesting time archiving it and learnt a lot from that process but I really do hope that the material is rich enough to really justify the resource and the energy that's gone into making this happen.

My fantasy is that they'll weave their way into what we know in the way that the Mass Observation Archive has weaved its way into how we know about the world. Maybe these stories will as well? I really hope that the young women who's stories they are, if they knew about it, would be happy ... well, they're not young women any longer. I hope that they also want them to be playing role.

**I: How do you feel about this very autobiographical project being a publicly available one or the bits of you that are in those interviews being publicly available?**

R: I think I'm very completely defended against really knowing and understanding it. At one level, I don't care, so what, it doesn't matter. I think we always have to know stuff through people, don't we, so I hope that the bits of me that are in there have been sufficiently observant and eloquent enough to capture the thing that's interesting. That's my hope, so that I've managed ... because I encounter myself as a stranger within the archive and sometimes, when I read something I think ‘I can really feel that’ or ‘I can imagine that’. That’s when I think that I have done my job, if that's the case, because that's the job, isn't it? You're a researcher so your job is to provide bridges into other places and people. So doing that over time is really something that feels like a really good thing. We'll see *(laughter).*