



TIMESCAPES FINAL REPORT PROJECT 7:

The Oldest Generation

Researchers: Joanna Bornat, Open University
Bill Bytheway, Open University

The Oldest Generation (TOG) is the only project within the Timescapes Programme to focus on the experiences and perspectives of people over the age of 75. The resulting data opens a focus on past, present and future viewed in terms of historical, generational and biographical time. As part of Timescapes, The Oldest Generation project has been concerned with life processes within, and associated with, families and the consequences of these for the oldest generation. The TOG research team, Joanna Bornat and Bill Bytheway, have a particular interest in how continuities and changes in inter-generational relationships and identities are experienced and commemorated, and how families manage and account for time in the context of such change and ageing processes. The information gathered would provide a new perspective on care and support between the generations.

Aims and Objectives

To explore these aspects of daily and past lives, three types of data were obtained: interviews, diaries and photographs, each generating specific temporalities and evidence of relationships and practices over time. In what follows we outline the rationale for TOG, describing our aims and objectives, methods, findings and some early and anticipated impacts.

With such ideas in mind, we identified three indicative research questions:

- How are the living arrangements, household practices, needs and resources of the oldest generation affected by (and how do they affect) their intergenerational relationships and identities and what is the dynamic nature of these processes?
- How do families maintain contact within and between the different generations, and how significant are annual routines of family celebration and commemoration, and events associated with key life transitions (births, marriages, deaths)?
- What is the value of linking data from a range of differently derived time-based projects and datasets (Mass Observation, Timescapes) in addressing these themes?

These questions were devised in such a way as to guide our investigation into the lives of older people and the family relationships which they engage in. Gerontological research tends to focus on the problematics of ageing and on the challenges of loss and risk in late life. Our interest lay in exploring ways in which older people and their families managed and created change, by taking in more than one perspective and with evidence which would generate as rounded a picture as possible. In keeping with the Timescapes focus on temporality, we wanted to find out how families manage and account for time and change in the context of age and ageing. In these ways, we would engage with ageing and temporality through a focus on past and present lives. The serendipitous source and nature of the information we gathered, through both symbolic as



well as literal references, would indicate how and why certain family relationships are sustained or change, and with what possible outcomes in terms of patterns of care and support for the oldest generation.

Methods

In planning the project we drew on our own interests and expertise in life history interviews (Bornat, 2008) and diary data (Bytheway, 2011). We were familiar with different approaches and procedures with respect to both forms, and combining the two promised complementarity together with the possibility of revealing contrasts. We anticipated that the project would be an interesting contribution to current debates about how time can be incorporated, conceptually and methodologically into family research.

The Timescapes blueprint states that the TOG project 'will be based on 12 diverse families recruited through the UK-wide Open University network', each family including at least one person aged 75 or more (the 'senior'). The TOG research questions called for data which would encompass as wide a range of temporalities as possible and with opportunities for direct elicitation from family members. Life history interviews would provide opportunities for the seniors to reflect on and recall their lives over time. Interviews of this type would also provide a narrative of a family in which, it could be presumed, individual members would play a part and be shown in changing relationships. By inviting people to talk about their past lives, we were also expecting to hear accounts which contextualised current situations and presentations of family life within a life trajectory as well as in terms of the changing times, events and epochs lived through.

We anticipated that diaries would provide us with data indicating aspects of daily living and the types of choice and decision-making which feature on a day to day basis. Diaries show time in closer focus than in interviews, they also often note seasonal change and regular events and celebrations, thus providing yet more temporal dimensions. As a Timescapes project, there was the additional temporality provided by longitudinality. Here both interviews and diaries scored. By repeating the interviews after an eighteen month period our intention was to invite reflection and comment on change in families and wider society. A return visit to undertake a follow-up interview would also encourage additions to the original life history as well as enable us, as researchers to explore in greater depth particular aspects of lives or to introduce issues which had not been developed in the first interview. The diaries would provide a more detailed and itemised account of time and family life between the two interviews. How complementary the two forms of data were to be with what differences and challenges to data interpretation and to our use of each as a method we were to go on to discover.

Photographs were solicited to illustrate, inform and amplify the interviews and diaries. The research literature relating to photographs tends to focus on the family's image of itself and how this is displayed. Our use was more incidental, with participants being allowed some freedom in when and how often they used the cameras they were given. The result was that the numbers of photographs taken varied greatly.



The dynamics of multiple temporalities available from interview, diary and photograph can be readily elicited since all three formats are well known means of communication and documentation. Through the broadcast media interviewing is an activity which many people have experienced or observed. Similarly, diary keeping in some form or other is a familiar practice, and most people have family photographs. For these reasons we did not anticipate resistance when we began recruiting our sample. In contrast, we expected ready understanding of what would be involved, and some enthusiasm from some who saw participation as an opportunity to boost their knowledge of their own families.

Sample

A sample of twelve families would enable us to ensure that we had sufficient to cover a range of later life circumstances while at the same time allowing us the opportunity to collect and analyse ample qualitative data detailing the lives of older people over an extended period of time. Our aim was diversity and a good cross section of the oldest generation and, with that in mind, we set a number of targets shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Targets

The 12 seniors

- ✓ no more than three in any one OU region,
- ✓ at least one who is living in a residential care home, and at least one who is living in sheltered or some kind of special housing,
- ✓ at least four who live alone, at least four who live with husband/wife, and at least one who lives with other members of the family or a friend,
- ✓ at least one who has never married,
- ✓ at least one who has no children,
- ✓ at least four men,
- ✓ at least six who are aged 85 or more and at least two who are aged 95 or more,
- ✓ at least one who is registered disabled,
- ✓ at least one who was not born in the UK.

The 12 families

- ✓ at least two where it (or a section of it) is of a black, Asian or minority ethnic group,
- ✓ at least one where a section of it currently lives abroad,
- ✓ at least four where it (or a section of it) is from a 'traditional working class background'.

We were looking for twelve families in which there was someone over 75, whom we called the 'senior', linked to another person, a 'recorder'. The seniors would be interviewed twice and the recorders would keep a diary of their daily lives and events and were also given the camera. The invitation which went out through Open University's networks made it clear that the senior would be interviewed twice and that they would be asked about 'their life, and the family's history and heritage'.

This recruitment strategy resulted in 27 people volunteering their families. All were OU employees, either full or part time. From these we selected eleven families who agreed to take part. The senior of one of these families was interviewed but, unfortunately, the designated



recorder decided to withdraw from the project before starting her diary. This family was immediately replaced by another.

Finding a participant from a black or minority ethnic background needed more time but eventually we were successful. Between July and December 2007 our recorders were inducted, beginning eighteen months of diary keeping and photography, and the first round of interviews with the seniors was completed.

The sample came from as far north as the Scottish islands, from South Wales, London, East Anglia and various parts of northern and midlands England. Seniors ranged in age from 75 to 98 at first interview and in the main the recorders were sons or daughters, the exceptions being a niece, a partner and one man who chose to be both senior and recorder (see Table 2).

Though we felt we had arrived at a good geographical distribution we were more concerned that we had had no enquiries from anyone employed in the Open University's manual grades, perhaps because we had relied on online networks for publicity. Attempts were made through posters to rectify this imbalance, but ultimately no recruits came forward.

Nevertheless, several of the seniors described working lives which featured manual work and some of the families had what might be termed 'working class histories'.

Table 2: The TOG families

	<i>Senior's age (2007)</i>	<i>Relationship (senior to recorder)</i>	<i>Location Senior</i>	<i>Location Recorder</i>	<i>Date diaries started, 2007</i>	<i>First interview, 2007</i>
F1	86	Wife	North Yorkshire	North Yorkshire (same address)	Aug	Sept
F2	98	Aunt	Scottish City	Same Scottish City	Aug	Sept
F3	87	(1) Husband's grandmother (2) Daughter	Yorkshire City	(1) N E England (2) Yorkshire City (same address)	July	Sept
F4	78	Father	Scottish City	Rural Scotland	Sept	Aug
F5	82	Mother	London	Scottish City	Sept	Oct
F6	79	Mother	West Midlands	London	July	Oct
F7	78	Self (male)	South Midlands city	n/a	Dec	Dec
F8	75	Mother	Scottish Island	Same Island	Sept	Aug
F9	81	Father	Northern English City	Same city	Aug	Oct
F10	89	Father	South Wales village	Same village	Sept	Sept
F11	82	Father	East Anglia	East Midlands	Oct	Oct
F12	85	Mother	West Yorkshire village	Another West Yorkshire village	July	Sept
F13	89	Mother	Southern County	Southern County	Withdrawn	July



Data Generated

All the first round interviews followed a life history format, with questions about origins, including grandparents, first homes, jobs etc, following through main life events, allowing interviewees to concentrate on particular events, aspects or phases as they chose.

The interview included some common questions which all the Timescapes projects were asked to include, irrespective of age. These encouraged a more reflective turn in thinking over life events. For example, there was a question on futures which contrasted with the retrospective focus of the interview schedule. The second interview, eighteen months later, followed a schedule which encouraged participants to look back over the intervening period but also drew on key life events, inviting further reflection.

Two of the seniors died before the second interview and we decided that rather than replace them with other matched people we would interview other family members in their place, asking them about the space that the deceased person still held in the family and about changes following from the death. The result was that a son and two daughters agreed to be interviewed in the place of their mother and father respectively.

The twelve Recorders were supplied with monthly diaries to be returned to the project office each month. Each diary included 60 A5-size pages, formatted in a way that required daily entries to be dated but allowing entries to overflow on to a second page when necessary. In total, we received 162 monthly diaries, of which 116 were handwritten. Most Recorders wrote entries every day with only occasional days missed. Two provided fewer but lengthier entries.

In guiding Recorders, we emphasised that we were hoping for something resembling an 'ordinary' diary in which they described contact with the Senior and the things that were happening that day in their Senior's life. We elaborated this by indicating that we were particularly interested in everyday life, in one-day events such as visits or celebrations, in life transitions such as moving house or going into hospital, and in more general comments about the Senior's relations with the family and others. Most of the Recorders produced diaries which covered all these areas. All the interviews and diaries have been transcribed, checked and anonymised for deposit in the Timescapes Archive.

Each recorder was given a small digital camera and asked to take photographs to illustrate the lives of their seniors. As adjuncts to diary entries, they confirm dates, reveal something of the setting of events, such as visits, help the recorder to remember events and convey images of relationships. It was hoped that through the photographs we would have useful supplementary information, such as the layout of dining tables or gardens. Recorders were asked to ensure that they had the permission of each person photographed.

Each recorder and each senior was offered small reimbursements for taking part. This was part of a strategy to ensure continued participation and also to encourage volunteers to come forward.



Looking back we have some reservations as to the diversity of our sample. As indicated above, we were concerned about the social class and ethnic distribution of the sample though on reflection we feel that there is sufficient diversity within families, with several members of the oldest generation coming from more working class backgrounds than their seemingly affluent sons and daughters and five belonging to trans-national families. By recruiting through the younger generation we had only one senior who had not been a parent, and this particular person was the only senior aged more than 90 and living in a care setting. We would have preferred to have included at least one other senior receiving full-time care. A budget-driven decision to issue the invitation in English may have deterred minority ethnic families from volunteering their older members, the result is that we included only English first language speakers.

Findings

To present a summary of our findings we go back to the three research questions which informed our investigation.

1) How are the living arrangements, household practices, needs and resources of the oldest generation affected by (and how do they affect) their intergenerational relationships and identities and what is the dynamic nature of these processes?

The interview and diary data provide insights into the complexity of relationships within families where there are multiple generations. We found that power and attachment persisted as significant, sometimes conflicting, forces determining how change was managed or created and how risk was identified and attempts made to minimise it. While family roles were maintained there was also evidence of flexibility, as situations were managed, support was organised and perspectives shifted (Bornat & Bytheway, 2010a) The interview data includes evidence of the way in which family relationships are narrated retrospectively and how decisions are taken in relation to life events, a biographical account. The diaries in a complementary way provide evidence of the conduct and negotiation of decision taking, the to and fro of the processes of estimating what to do 'for the best' (Bornat & Bytheway, 2010a). The two different sources introduce a multiplicity of temporalities, longitudinally within the project and while focused on the present, concern past experiences, current concerns and future prospects (Bornat, forthcoming).

While data from the life history interviews provided evidence of the significance of biographical, historical and generational time in family relationships, the diary data added more embodied and physical dimensions, with observations about responses to changes in the weather for example. These suggest how, for older people, maintenance of health and care of the body play a significant role in decision-making and where the planning of the day to day is viewed as having longer term consequences (Bytheway & Bornat, 2009).



During the period of the research, the effects of the economic downturn were beginning to be evident and from the data we were able to see how this has led older family members to focus on other people's futures, rather than their own. Some drew on experiences of poverty and unemployment in their own narratives, leading them to fear for younger family members rather than for themselves (Bornat & Bytheway, 2010b).

2) How do families maintain contact within and between the different generations, and how significant are annual routines of family celebration and commemoration, and events associated with key life transitions (births, marriages, deaths)?

During the eighteen month period of data collection we were witness to a variety of family events and significant life transitions relating to all generations, these included many birthdays (including a hundredth birthday), births of grandchildren and great grandchildren, grandparents becoming surrogate parents, trans-national visits, extended hospitalisations, Christmases, A-level exams and driving test passes, and two deaths. All, in their different ways, produced and reproduced family relationships in ways that confirmed solidarity, while at times showing evidence of approaches to the negotiation of relationships which challenged accounts of family cohesion.

While families were ready to draw on annual routines and special occasions, renewing contact, exchanging presents and generally celebrating their ties, these events could also cause or reveal strains or variations in treatment. Differences in the involvement of two grandmothers in one family became evident at one Christmas celebration, for example (Bytheway & Bornat, forthcoming) and in another, the support given over a long lifetime to a disabled brother was being maintained through the surrogacy of adult fostering, rather than through inter-generational ties (Bornat & Bytheway, 2010a).

The annual cycle features not only celebrations but also the seasons and changing weather. Some of the diaries and photographs provided graphic evidence of the risks that some older people faced during the winter of 2007-08. More generally there is a seasonal pattern to family life as younger households adjust to the temporal demands of schools and universities and the oldest generation watches with a mixture of pride, concern and disconnection.

3) What is the value of linking data from a range of differently derived time-based projects and datasets (Mass Observation, Timescapes) in addressing these themes?

Despite TOG being based on a small sample of families, we anticipate that our project, like other Timescapes projects, will be valued highly as future secondary analyses link it with other projects, both qualitative and quantitative. Through 'visiting' three other teams we have already learnt to appreciate the value of comparing methods and datasets. Also, through our active collaboration with other researchers at the Open University and elsewhere, we have found ways of linking our data and findings with those of other researchers.

For example, we have participated in various seminars and workshops with staff and researchers linked with the Mass-Observation Archive whose current project, started in 1981, has, three



times a year, invited a panel of several hundred volunteers to write on various selected topics. Occasionally this has included a request that they keep a diary for a week or two. This has generated a unique body of qualitative longitudinal research. Its strength is its continuity over thirty years; one well-known weakness is that the panel, although diverse, is not representative statistically of a wider population. There is a second weakness in that there is no extended recording of daily experiences and activities: the panel is contacted only three times a year. It is in this respect that TOG is recognised as complementing the MOA: it has sustained close contact with the participants over an extended period of time.

Early and Anticipated Impacts

We achieved an early impact when, having been approached by a researcher at the thinktank, IPPR, we agreed to her carrying out secondary analysis on our data in relation to an investigation into mental health wellbeing amongst older people and their families. The results were written up and published on the IPPR website (Sheldon, 2009).

Since then, we have at all times taken advantage of invitations to contribute to seminars, policy events etc especially where these are outside academe. Formats have varied and have included participating in four Festivals of Social Science (2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011). On the first two occasions this took the form of the 'Siblings' project, in collaboration with London South Bank colleagues and resulted in over 800 responses and a link with BBC Memoryshare. The Siblings exhibition boards were also included in the Open University's 40th Anniversary Open Day when visitors were asked to take part in a 'family tree' activity.

Bill Bytheway was recorded presenting diaries as research data for an Open University iTunes programme (released 29.10.09).

Colleagues' interest in TOG data has taken the form of planned comparisons with existing datasets with plans for re-use awaiting final data deposit.

Bytheway's recently published book (2011) draws extensively on the TOG research in his exploration of age and we continue to publish whenever possible. However, as both of us are now retired (since 2009) none of our publications can be counted in the forthcoming REF and this is scarcely an encouragement to continue.

Notes

Bornat, J (forthcoming) 'Researching the future with older people: experiences with The Oldest Generation'. Paper presented at 'Imagining Futures', Representation of Older People in Research series, seminar 13, Centre for Ageing and Biographical Studies and Centre for Ageing, 11 February 2010.



Bornat, J & Bytheway, B (2010a) 'Perceptions and presentations of living with everyday risk in later life', *British Journal of Social Work*, 40: 1118-1134.

Bornat, J & Bytheway, B (2010b), 'Late life reflections on the downturn: perspectives from 'The Oldest Generation'', *C21st Society*, 5, 2, 183-192.

Bytheway, B & Bornat, J (2009) '“I shall not venture out today”': accounts of how the weather figures in the everyday life of older people'. Paper presented at BSA Medical Sociology Wales Study Group Research Seminar, University of Swansea, 24 June.

Bytheway, B & Bornat, J (forthcoming) 'The oldest generation as displayed in family photographs', in V. Ylänne (ed), Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Sheldon, R (2009) 'Breaking a “strange silence”', *Public Policy Research*, June-August