



## **The Oldest Generation**

*The Oldest Generation project*

### **Commentary**

The issues faced by older people in society are having an increasing claim on the attention of politicians and government policymakers. But when many older people feel that the government fails to address their concerns, the need for social policy research that attempts to understand the lifestyles and behaviour of older people is vital. The Oldest Generation is an Open University project that has been looking into older people's relationships and identities.

It's part of a larger study called 'Timescapes' that's taking place at several institutions across the UK. Timescapes has been exploring how personal and family relationships develop and change over time. And it's the first in-depth qualitative longitudinal study -- that's one in which the same group are studied over a period of time -- to have been carried out in the UK.

### **Joanna Bornatt**

My name's Joanna (Bornatt) and I'm Professor of Oral History in the faculty of Health and Social Care. And I'm what's called the 'Principal Investigator' on this project which is a sort of two and a half year project, one of seven in the Timescapes programme. And, er, we're all of us involved in interviewing people, talking to people, and in our case, getting people to keep diaries as well.

### **Bill Bideaway**

My name's Bill (Bideaway) and I'm working with Joanna on this project. I'm a researcher in the faculty with the Open University, and a gerontologist. I've spent 30 plus years, er, researching how people grow older. And so when the possibility of working on this project came up, I thought this is great cos it's an opportunity to look at change over time which was, you know, day by day by day. So that's why I was interested and keen to join it.

The bigger answer is that, um, longitudinal research with older people, there is some, it tends to be, er, undertaken by psychologists, we felt that there was a need for a more sociological perspective which looked at how older people coped with change over time, change of all kinds.

### **Joanna Bornatt**

Yeah, I think it's true to say that quite often older people are focused on other people's research but not in their own right. Often they'll be the subject in the secondary sense, people being asked about their grandparents or asked about caring responsibilities and we really wanted to hear much more about what people do in their every day lives over the age of 75, and also what they had to say about those lives that they've lived.

### **Karen Frances**

My name is Karen Frances and I am the Project Secretary for the Oldest Generation project. The Oldest Generation is about people over the age of 75, how they live, where they live, what happens in their daily lives. We've actually selected 12 families, um, all very very different.

Each family has a senior over the age of 75 and a member of that family, younger member of the family, collects almost daily information about the senior. We've asked the recorder, as we called them, to write a diary, as much detail as they care to provide us with over an 18 month period.

The seniors in each of the family have been interviewed twice over the 18 months and the interviews of the seniors tended to be more, more or less their life story from when they were very very young.

### **Bill Bideaway**

In terms of recruiting the sample, we put out a call through the Open University networks, through the regional offices primarily, asking for people to volunteer their families to join this project. And we set ourselves certain criteria whereby we wanted to make sure we ended up with a diverse sample. So we wanted to make sure we had at least one person from at least four regions and at least five, (ran in) at least five women.

We were particularly concerned about the age range. We wanted to have at least five over 85 and at least one over 95. So we set those criteria and having got something like 40 volunteered families, we then shuffled things round and found 12 who met all our criteria.

### **Albert**

That's my diary. That's a diary I've got to fill in. As you can see it's called 'The Timescape Programme' - the Oldest Generation diary.

### **Karen Frances**

Albert was the very last of the families to be recruited, um, and he is actually unique to the project. All the other families each have a senior member of the family who's interviewed, and a recorder in the family who writes the diary each month and stays in touch with us. Albert is the only one who actually is the senior, so he's interviewed twice and he writes his own diary. His choice and it actually has worked pretty well.

### **Bill Bideaway**

Well the thing about Albert was, er, when he volunteered to participate in the project and we met him, he was happy to be interviewed, but when we got on to the question of the diary, he said: Well I'll keep the diary. And we thought, you know, do we want this? He would be the exception. But we thought well, he clearly wants to keep the diary, so we said yes, you keep the diary and, um, that'll be fine by us.

I think the other thing I'd add is that, um, we do see the families as participating in the research and you know, families are structured in different sorts of ways, and we wanted to some extent, to allow the families to dictate the ways in which they participated.

### **Albert**

You want me to read Tuesday's, yesterdays? What happened yesterday? I got up early this morning to see my sister off. She's leaving at 8 a.m. for the airport to go back to Jamaica. I got next door for 7 a.m. and helped to take some of the luggage to the cars.

I took some photographs and waved goodbye. The grandchildren were still asleep. I was going to take them for a walk with me at 9 a.m, but they were still asleep so I left them and went on my own.

It's surprising that the amount of thing that you can find to put in your diary that you'd never actually think about in a different circumstance. You sort of realise that you do a lot more in a day that you thought you'd done, you know. So, um, yes, it's just sort of making you ... your brain ticks over.

### **Bill Bideaway**

So thinking about Albert, he clearly has an active relationship with his two sisters, one of whom has been to visit him.

### **Albert**

Yeah, I think we all have become part of the, the whole project. Become a family thing now. Especially my immediate family. We're all ... we've all become a part of it, and they, they all look forward taking part in, in it whenever I'm doing anything. I think they also see me in a different light, as someone who's not as daft as they originally thought.

**Joanna Bornatt**

One thing that's come out of the, um, the research, for him, is he said it's, um, his ... this has renewed is relationships with his sisters and particularly one of them in the States who he now feels much closer to, having told his life story and thought about his life. So much so, I think that he's I think on the phone to her almost every week, where previously I don't think he was.

**Albert**

And so it's interesting that carrying out that life review has had some changes and doing the research I think, has changed these families.

Ooh, it took me way back in my past. It made me remember things that I'd forgotten for years. And strangely enough, I was quite surprised that I could remember things that happened at quite a young age of my life, you know, maybe from the age of 6 or 7. And so that, you know, sort of, sort of brought back a lot of old and good memories to me which I, you know, sort of begun to cherish really and to sort of keep in my mind because they were, they were good days then to me.

Even though, you know, they weren't all easy times, you, you know, sometimes very hard and difficult and ... and everything like that. But, er, I just treasure them as good memories.

**Joanna Bornatt**

One of the key themes in Timescapes is time, temporality, and what the interviews and the diaries, and also the photographs offer are different slices of time, so the interviews are a retrospective view, the first round of interviews, is a retrospective sense of the life lived, coming up to date.

And the diaries are quite different, because they're more immediate, they're more about every day life and managing every day life. And then the photographs are kind of one offs, aren't they, just instant pictures of, of a group of people. And so the interplay of those different temporalities is very interesting to us.

**Commentary** Joanna made audio recording of the interview she conducted so that they could be transcribed for the project archive. One of the participants in the study who Joanna talked to is an older woman from a large family in North London. The project team call her Masie. That's not her real name, but throughout the study the team are very careful to ensure that people's identities were protected.

**Masie**

In the course of walking, I saw a man who I know has been recently widowed and I knew his wife, and he has looked so miserable, so I just said to him: You know, how are you today? You know, you could see he could barely answer. And I just said to him: Do you play Scrabble? And he said yes. So I said, well, any time you want a game, er, I'll, you know, I'll ... and I think I frightened him. (LAUGHS) And this is ... it's really quite amusing at the time.

I'm really ... I mean I'm not looking for a partner at all, I just thought I would ease him. It's an overture to try and get somebody to feel a little better, that's all you could say.

**Joanna Bornatt**

Well it sort of gives me a nice picture of you here in a way that ... of the kind of life you have and the sort of ...

**Masie**

And you know, we ... we ... we ... we need to help one another. What's the famous saying, no man is a lion, it's true.

**Joanna Bornatt**

As I clicked with Masie, I like it very much because, um, I liked her manner and I liked the very fact she was very direct and very much engaged in her local community and had a kind of sense of responsibility towards it. She's lived there for a long time in the same house.

The story kind of encapsulated all those things as aspects of her, that she'd remade her own life after she'd been widowed. She'd had a very happy relationship with her husband who died not long after he'd retired, and she'd had to sort of start again making her own sort of social life, independently, and, and she'd done it successfully and she'd kind of got drawn back more into the synagogue. And so she saw someone who was going through what she'd gone through I think and just took on this very neighbourly responsible, friendly role.

And she told the story about herself. Um, I like the fact that she told it about herself because she'd chosen to illuminate what sort of person she was.

### **Commentary**

For Bill too, the small day to day details of a life can reveal a surprising amount.

### **Bill Bideaway**

I came to this project knowing that, um, one of the appeals of doing it for 18 months was we'd get a full year, and having a full year we could say something about the, er, the significance of the seasons.

### **Diary Excerpt**

What a day. It rained, it snowed, it's windy and cold. I wish I didn't have to go out. But I had to. I had no choice. It was mine and Avi's turn to clean the church today. So we left at 10 a.m. to make a start. It was so cold and snowing. Then we got to the church and my key wouldn't open the door.

### **Bill Bideaway**

It's coming to commitment, isn't it. Er, they're down to clean the church, you know, and that's sort of non-negotiable. I mean some people in his situation had decided not to bother, but he felt he had to. This is part of a routine, and frustrations upon frustrations, he couldn't get in. So having got there, you know, they couldn't actually do their ... what they were supposed to do.

### **Bill Bideaway**

There's other examples. For example: We were threatened with bad weather for Friday and Saturday, so did some precautionary shopping today. It was very cold. I went for the blood test missed yesterday. In the afternoon it started to sleet which later turned to snow.

### **Bill Bideaway**

Reading out diary excerpt        We soon had a white covering over the garden, though not really thick. We stayed firmly indoors. And then the following day, day he wrote: We woke to find a fierce wind blowing. We went as soon as possible to the market as worse weather is expected. We then thankfully returned home to put up the proverbial shutters. In other words, there's a siege going on here. The two of them are going to, er, sit it out and when the weather returns to something more pleasant, they will be back out into the market shopping again.

### **Bill Bideaway**

So in other words, this is evidence of how they're looking after their wellbeing in the context of the weather forecast. So people, you know, are prepared to go out, and they are committed to supporting the community and the family in this, but at the same time, you know, they recognise the importance of a minimising risk.

### **Commentary**

But how can this sort of research feed into policy making? One of the partners that the project team have been working with is the Institute for Public Policy Research.

### **Joanna Bornatt**

Well talking to IPPR and Ruth Sheldon who did some work on our data, I think what she finds is that what we have here are real life stories which fill out some of the larger statistical big quantitative surveys of carers and co-relationships, or older people living at home. You can

actually see the sort of dynamics of day to day living and how various policies affect, or what policies might do to enhance or change relationships or down to quite basic things around finance and various kinds of support.

And I think it's because the data speaks very directly from people's own experience, but on top of that, I think there are some generalities we can draw ...

**Joanna Bornatt**

Yeah ..... even from such a small sample.

**Bill Bideaway**

I think it's interesting what Joanna's just said because the implication (INAUDIBLE) policy, it does seem to me to emerge out of what might be called 'individual case studies'. Over the last 20 years or so it's been very interesting to see what's happened in regard to care.

Policies are being brought into play to support the carer. Carers get assessed as well as the person they're caring for gets assessed. And we, we have in our sample quite a number of carers, both of the oldest and of the younger generation, and so we're able to see informal care, family based care in a rather broader context. And you do have some people over 75 who are flung in aeroplanes in order to accompany their sick spouse in a city hospital.

But at the other extreme we've got two or three people who are in wheelchairs when they go out, and we get in the diaries very graphic accounts of hitting the local shopping mall, you know, and the, the fact that they're still using rather old fashioned lift systems.

**Joanna Bornatt**

But I think what interests us is how the families themselves, of what evidence we have of the family themselves, understanding what's going on in their ... often in ... usually in their parents' lives. So it's a kind of support that family members give each other. And for example, one couple where, who are both well into their 80s, she had a bad fall and injured herself in the shower.

And immediately it seems, the two daughters, who both live at least 200 miles away, seem to have been on the scene.

**Bill Bideaway**

But the interesting thing about that family is that she has an alarm system round her neck, and they press alarm, which then mobilised a neighbour who came round to help, and as a result of that, you know, she received the kind of care and support she needed. So in other words, the system worked then, but nevertheless, it depended upon the alarm working and the neighbour being willing and the daughter being willing, and um, the older couple being able to sort of cope with all this, you know.

And ... And there's other instances where I think one could similarly make a direct link between an individual family story and, you know, a policy of the central government.

**Commentary**

So research like the Oldest Generation can feed into policy making debates on a national level. But what about the people at the front end? The people who took part in the study, both participants and researchers? What did they get out of it?

**Karen Frances**

The whole experience of the project has been fantastic. Er, it has made me think; has made me become more aware. Has actually ... I've actually learned some things which I probably didn't know before.

**Albert**

I get a lot of fun out of it really. I don't want it to end. (LAUGHS) I want it to go on for as long as it's possible. Maybe for myself, for what I get out of it, and for how I'm helping, you know.