

MOMENTS IN TIME

THE TIMESCAPES PROJECT, BASED AT LEEDS, AIMS TO PAINT
A COMPLETE PICTURE OF FAMILY LIFE IN THE UK RIGHT NOW
CERI THOMAS FINDS OUT HOW

The state of society is always a hot topic with politicians, policy makers and newspaper editors quick to seize on research that lays out the bare facts of social change. Are they in danger of missing the more detailed picture? Professor Bren Neale of the School of Sociology and Social Policy at Leeds is convinced that they are. To go with the whats, she argues, they also need the hows and whys.

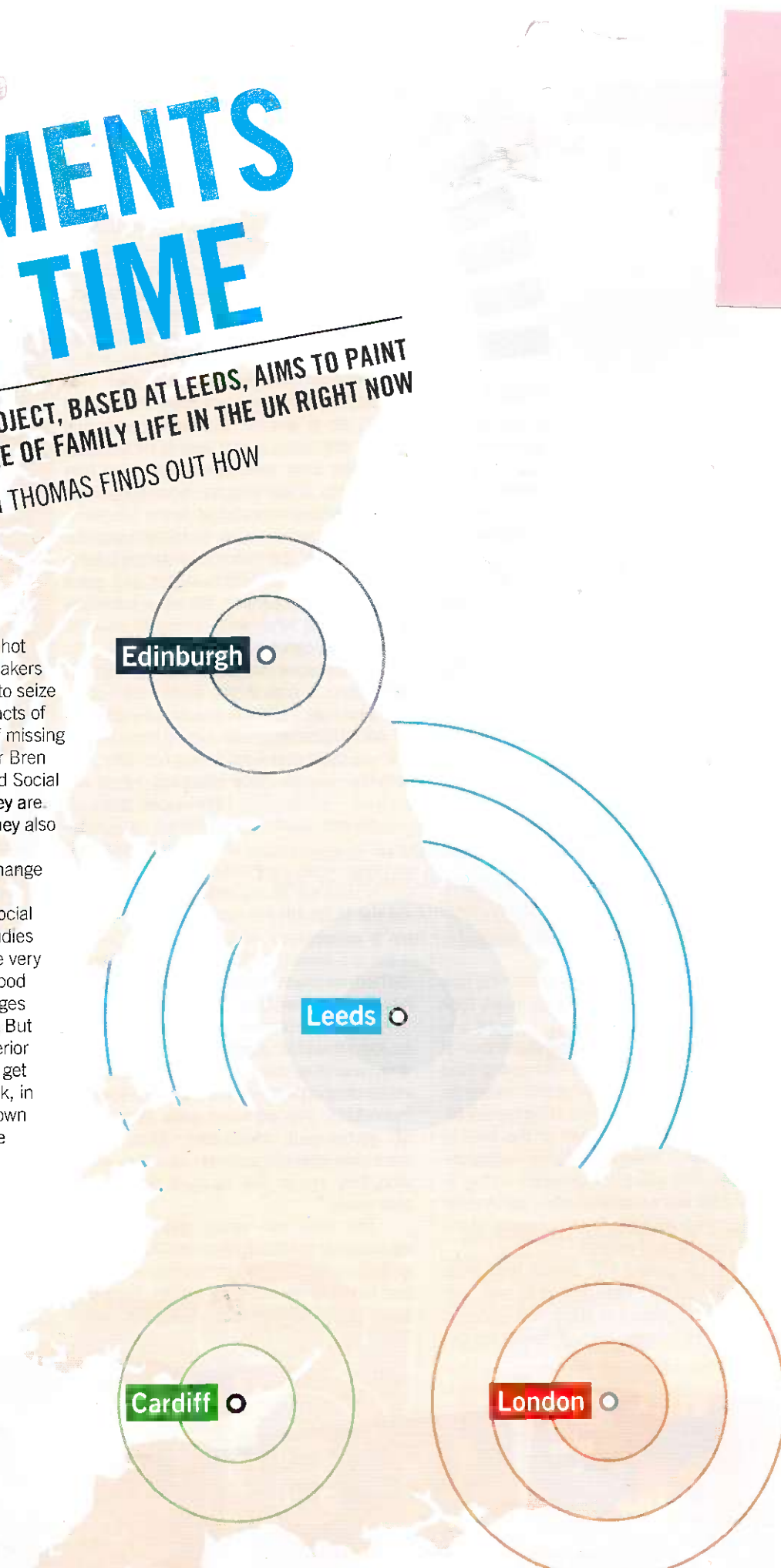
"We won't understand social change unless we can get to grips with how individuals create and experience social change," she says. "Large-scale studies that involve thousands of people are very important and they give us a very good picture of trends and of social changes that are going on at a national level. But we also need to understand the interior logic of people's lives, and we can't get at that unless we allow people to talk, in depth, about the unfolding of their own lives, and how and why changes are occurring for them." >>

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>> Professor Neale is director of Timescapes, a national study led by the University of Leeds and involving researchers from four other UK universities (Open University, Cardiff, London South Bank and Edinburgh). Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, this is an ambitious study that spans several generations of participants in the hope of unpicking exactly that 'interior logic' of individual lives that Professor Neale speaks about.

Timescapes is made up of seven individual projects dealing with different age groups and different stages of life experience. The 'siblings and friends' project looks at these relationships in the lives of children, while 'young lives and times' tracks a group of young people as they progress through their teenage years.

The 'dynamics of motherhood' project aims to discover what it means to be a mother in the 21st century, while the 'men as fathers' project balances that out by examining how first time fathers make and maintain their commitments to parenting. The 'work and family lives' project, meanwhile, looks at the modern experience of combining paid work with parenting and what this means for parents and their primary school age children. The two final projects look at the lives of older people. 'Intergenerational exchange' examines the place of grandparenting in modern society while 'the oldest generation' has gathered life histories from some of the oldest members of society.

All in all, around 400 people from areas all over the country have agreed to take part, giving in depth interviews about their personal lives and their journeys through the life course.

"That's the key thing about Timescapes," says Professor Neale. "It is dynamic research that works through time. We have a lovely, rather grandiose notion that we walk alongside people as their lives unfold. Of course we can't really do that, but we do dip in and out of people's lives. And what's interesting is that people reflect back on where they have been, and how they have got to where they are now. And where they think they may end up in the future.

"What we're doing is recognising the importance of the dynamic of people's lives. You can go in and do research and get a snapshot of someone's life at a particular moment, but what we're trying to do is to turn the snapshot into a movie."

Timescapes began gathering data in 2007 and is now in the fourth year of its five-year run. Typically, one of the problems of sociological research lies in maintaining sample sizes over such a length of time, but very few people have dropped out of the

Timescapes study.

"It's a side-effect of what we do, but generally, we validate people's life experiences through this process," says Professor Neale.

"When we invite them to take part again, when we follow them up, they're usually very happy to do so. We're very attentive to the ethics of doing the research – we only use the information for bona fide research purposes and we don't identify individuals. We work out with them ways of anonymising their data. They chose their own pseudonyms so that they know who they are in the account but nobody else would."

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CASE STUDY

Siblings and Friends

Relationships with brothers and sisters can change over time – from good to bad, or from bad to good. When Timescapes researchers first interviewed Cora she was 13 years old, and did not get on at all with her 16-year-old brother. She persistently raised her brother's shortcomings. "I've sort of grown up more faster than he has," she said. "He's always been with himself, a loner... He doesn't do anything basically... Sad act."

Cora thought that all her friends who had brothers were getting on far better with them than she did with hers.

Four years on, their relationship had changed. Cora now felt that her friends who had brothers did not get on as well as she and Gordon did. She felt they now shared tastes in music and television and had a similar sense of humour. They also regularly socialised together:

"[We started getting on] probably when I was 15 or 16," she said. "There's nothing really I don't like about having a brother, it's fine."

In Cora's eyes, Gordon's behaviour had become more appropriate for an older brother of hers – giving her lifts in his car, being far more outgoing. His new version of being an older brother meant that he was not only a sibling to her. "I kind of class him as a friend as well," she said.

to have a concrete effect on the way social policy in this country develops. "There's little point in doing research unless we can use it to make a difference in the real world," she says.

"One of the things about Timescapes," she continues, "is that because we're running through the life course, because we're interviewing mothers, fathers, children and older people, we're touching on many different areas of policy. Each of those projects will be working with a different policy partner of one sort or another.

"For example, my colleagues down in Cardiff working on the fatherhood project



CASE STUDY

Fatherhood

Soon after the birth of their child, many of the participants in the fatherhood study looked forward to a time when their child would be more interactive and less physically dependent on the mother, enabling them to have greater involvement.

When re-interviewed years later, all participants were more involved but some also described difficulties associated with this. One, 43-year-old father of two, Rick, talked about wanting his children to "become more and more mature as people so you can relate to them in a more adult-to-adult level and lose the kind of parenthood thing a bit."

He was aware that the "bringing up kids phase" of his life would end one day when his children were old enough to go their own way but didn't see that as something to fear. "Some people have this thing of being quite devastated when their children leave home and that they've lost their life purpose. I don't think so, I think I'll be quite looking forward to it (amusement) to doing something else."

have learned a great deal about how fathers feel when dealing with hospital visits and feeling involved in the birth of their child. They have produced a policy briefing for the National Childbirth Trust which suggests that fathers may well benefit from antenatal groups targeted at them. The report has been well-received and is influencing NCT policies."

Even though Timescapes' funding ceases after its fifth year, Professor Neale hopes that many of the individual projects will secure cash to continue on their own. A great admirer of Michael Apted's seminal series of 7 Up documentaries (which started in the 1960s and continued, at seven year intervals, to revisit its participants lives until 2004), she'd like to continue to follow the Timescapes participants.

>> "Ideally, it would be lovely to be talking to the same subjects across their entire lives. Maybe we can't do that across all 400 people, but it may well be that some of the projects do get carried on in that way. We do already have new generations coming along," she says. "For example, the motherhood project started off by recruiting first-time mothers and went on to interview the grandmothers in the family too. The babies in this project are now approaching school age and they are beginning to take part too."

Even if the projects don't continue, Timescapes will live on, in the form of the Timescapes Archive, housed at Leeds and accessible online by researchers. All of the raw interview material, oral narratives, photographs and other visual documents from the study, together with material from affiliated studies, will be included in it. Professor Neale thinks that making their data available to other researchers could be one of the most important legacies of Timescapes.

"It's quite expensive to go out and talk to people and gather their accounts over time," she explains. "So we're encouraging a climate where we share our data and it can be reused by other researchers."

"It's a rich resource that can be exploited by many different researchers," she continues. "If, for example, you are interested in fatherhood, you can search for accounts from children talking about their relationships with their father and how they feel about becoming parents in the future. And from fathers themselves there are accounts about the experience of the transition to fatherhood and what it is like to parent young children and maintain that role. And then there are experiences of people fathering and being fathered in later life."

"It's building up as a historical resource too which is really important," she says. In fifty years' time, people will be able to ask 'What was going on in 2008, 2009? Where have we got to now?' And they will be able to go to the Timescapes archive to find our data."

BBC Memoryshare

As well as gathering their own data, Timescapes is also partnering with the BBC's Memoryshare scheme to gather accounts and memories from members of the general public about their lives.

"They invite people to send in all manner of aspects of their lives through the BBC website," explains Professor Bren Neale. "For example, if the BBC has a programme about rationing after the second world war, they'll often say afterwards, 'Write in! If you've memories of rationing, write in to BBC Memoryshare.'"

"It's important because it means that we're not just limited to our 400 or so accounts which are proper social scientifically generated research data. We also have these popular accounts too."

Visit the Memoryshare website at www.bbc.co.uk/dna/memoryshare



Going public

Engaging the general public with Timescapes is something which everyone involved in the project is very keen to do. In March 2010, Timescapes in conjunction with the BBC Memoryshare project, organised the *Family Lives And Turning Points* exhibition at the Blackall Studios, Shoreditch, London, to do just that.

"We encouraged people to write in and share their memories about turning points in their lives and we ran a photography competition too in the run up to the exhibition," said exhibition organiser Sarah Finney. "The collection of photographs and accounts were showcased and we also had bespoke and interactive elements to the exhibition, including a postcard shrine, a chandelier of photographs and a narrative wall, for which we recorded special interviews with some of the people who sent in their memories. We had a fantastic response from the public."

A version of the exhibition also took place in Parkinson Court at the University of Leeds earlier this year.

