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## **Record of everyday life of Britons will be trove for future historians**

Forty years ago, British TV brought the world a series called Seven Up!, interviewing a diverse group of children about their everyday lives, and visiting them again every seven years.

Now, British social scientists are following the lead of the wildly popular TV series. Five universities will spend the next five years tracking 400 volunteers - from babies to the elderly, and from all social classes - to paint a broad portrait of British life in the early 21st century.

It's meant as a tool for policy makers, they say. But it will also be rich material for historians of the future, skipping the usual prime ministers and royalty to record the lives and loves of bus drivers and homeless people.

Especially their loves. The project called Timescapes will focus on the relationships among people - parents and children, romances, friendships and the problems of growing old.

In academic terms it's called a "longitudinal" study, meaning one that follows events as they happen, for a long period, rather than asking people to remember events later on.

It will use interviews by researchers, but also such less traditional research tools as asking volunteers themselves to keep video and audio diaries.

"We've gone away from the Simpsons model of family life," said Bren Neale of the **University of Leeds**. "There are more single-parent families, grandparents are increasingly relied upon to help out, and people have really diverse views about what constitutes a family."

Historians love material like this, partly because it's rare. For example, they were thrilled in the 1970s to find Inquisition records about a village of southern France in the 14th century. The bishop in Montaillou was looking for heretics, but he left posterity his painstaking notes on the daily life of peasants and door-to-door wine merchants - something absent from the usual kings-and-battles accounts of medieval times.

"There's always an interest in regular people," says Guy Grenier, who teaches psychology at the University of Western Ontario and counsels patients on relationships.

"When Alfred Kinsey did his sex research, thousands of interviews, the question he was routinely asked more than any other, was 'Am I normal?' That's what people wanted to know, whether we're talking about sex, or income, or family disputes, number of children - people want to know where they are.

Jean Leuch  
WBs VC DVC ~~MHA~~ MHA  
Bren Neale Rob Picton

**PTO**

"Yet we don't have good sources of information that let us know what's going on." The best we have is our circle of friends - and friends may edit the truth on sensitive points.

"Whenever we get a snapshot into real life, that's profoundly satisfying and fascinating to us, because it answers the question that Kinsey was asked: Am I normal? How much worse, (or) how much better am I doing than the guy next door?"

That's why Ken Burns's history series on the Civil War and the Second World War drew such a large audience, he says: They told about ordinary soldiers and their families, not just generals.

"The reasons these (longitudinal) studies are worthy of note is because they're so incredibly difficult to do," he said. They're expensive and scientifically risky, because they can fall apart if too many volunteers drop out.

But when they work, "the data they provide are far more powerful than the more common research methods."

Besides Leeds, the project involves Cardiff University, Edinburgh University, the Open University and London South Bank University. They have a budget of about \$9 million.