

Timescapes Project 7

The Oldest Generation: Events, relationships and identities in later life

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INTRODUCTION

Intergenerational relationships, rights and responsibilities are changing. At the beginning of the 21st century, older people find themselves adjusting to new expectations and circumstances. How relationships are maintained through new forms of communication and living arrangements, is transforming the ways in which families and the care services engage with the challenges of later life.

The Oldest Generation project is concerned with the dynamic nature of older people's relationships and identities and how these unfold over the course of long lives and current everyday exchanges and activities. Our aim has been to explore how and why certain family relationships endure or change, how these processes affect the lives of the oldest generation, and how events and life transitions mark the passage of time and changes in relationships and identities.

METHODOLOGY

We have recruited a diverse sample of 12 volunteer families through the UK-wide Open University network and have followed them over an 18 month period. In each family one person over the age of 75 years gave a life history interview

in 2007 and was interviewed again in 2009. In addition someone in the family has been keeping a diary and taking photographs marking events and visits, and illustrating relationships and everyday activities.

FINDINGS

- As people move into later life they continue to draw on their particular social resources as they respond to change in themselves and their surroundings, showing ingenuity in the ways they incorporate new ideas and opportunities into their continuing lives.
- Bringing together the life lived, as described in life history interviews, and the life being lived, evident in diary entries, enables the identification of links between broad socio-historical contexts and day-by-day accounts of domestic routines and social activities.
- Where older people are in contact with family members there is a commitment to family-based supportive relationships in which all the generations play a part, sustaining relationships and a shared sense of identity.
- Late in life people actively seek to maintain a balance in their everyday lives: for example, in the support they may receive from family, friends and neighbours; and between familiar but increasingly risky activities and safer alternatives.

ACADEMIC AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This project is of direct relevance for gerontologists and policy makers interested in the daily lives and changing circumstances of older people, their families and friends. It complements the New Dynamics of Ageing programme, emphasising the importance of attending to past experience and the contexts in which people have lived out their lives. The findings cast light on the effectiveness of current health and social care policies and practices and the support that

families and carers are able to offer older people. It informs policies relating to the structures of family life and inter-generational relations, in particular: housing, employment, health, income, citizenship and learning in later life.

For further information, please visit our website:
<http://www.open.ac.uk/hsc/research/research-projects/the-oldest-generation/>

