



TIMESCAPES FINAL REPORT PROJECT 1: *Your Space! Siblings and friends: the changing nature of children's lateral relationship*

Researchers: Rosalind Edwards, University of Southampton
Susie Weller, London South Bank University

The *Your Space!* project (Timescapes Project 1) looks at the meanings, experiences and flows of prescribed (sibling) and chosen (friendship) relationships for children and young people, and explores how these relate to their sense of self as their individual and family biographies unfold. The study also examines how young people see themselves and their place in society as they grow older.

The project has been tracking the lives of around 50 children who were born between 1989 and 1996 as they move from mid-childhood into young adulthood. It provides a rich dataset, illuminating change and continuity over time in relation to a wide range of contemporary issues.

The project has its own website: www.lsbu.ac.uk/ahs/research/yourspace/index.html. This contains pages with:

- A description of what the *Your Space!* project is about;
- Examples of findings from the project;
- Descriptions of events and activities carried out as part of the project;
- Links to newsletters, books and reports arising from the project; and
- A YouTube video about bedroom space and siblings using visual and transcript material from the project.

Aims and Objectives

Within the broad overall aim of documenting children and young people's prescribed and chosen relationships over time, the *Your Space!* project addresses a number of research questions:

- What are the dynamics of children and young people's ontological connection to or separation from siblings and friends? What do these relationships mean for age, gender and other status hierarchies and boundaries?
- How are these prescribed and chosen relationships balanced over time and accommodated with a sense of separate self for children and young people from different social groups?
- What particular ethical considerations arise in the design and conduct of qualitative longitudinal research with children and young people living in different circumstances? What are the specific issues surrounding communication with the participants, informed consent, appropriate methods of data collection, and researcher involvement over time?

Sample

The *Your Space!* project draws on samples of children from three previous projects conducted under the ESRC's Families & Social Capital Research Group programme: two concerned with sibling relationships and another with locality and school. As part of these projects the children, then aged between 6 and 13 years, were interviewed in 2003/5 – and this came to form Wave 1 of



the *Your Space!* project. A further two waves of interviews were carried out: 2007 when participants were age 10-17 (Wave 2) and 2009 age 12-19 (Wave 3).

The project sample comes from a range of family, ethnic and class backgrounds, as well as a range of geographical locations in England, Scotland and Wales, including remote villages, coastal resorts, new towns, inner-city estates and suburbs – see Table 1 below for some indication of their diversity. We recruited 52 participants from Wave 1 for Wave 2, and of these 45 also took part in Wave 3 (five said they were too busy, one did not respond and the other was killed in a car accident).

Table 1 - Characteristics of participants during Wave 3 (% n=45)

GENDER		ETHNICITY		SOCIO-ECONOMIC		GEOGRAPHY	
Female	67	Asian/British Asian	18	Working-class	47	Urban	51
Male	33	Black/Black British	7	Middle-class	42	Suburban	27
		White/White British	60	Socially mobile	11	Rural	22
		Mixed	15				

We used a range of tools to foster long term engagement in our research, including annual newsletters, birthday and new year cards, and postal, email and internet-based interim activities such as writing ‘cultural commentaries’ explaining one of their particular interests or leisure activities. We also set up a Panel of Advisors formed of interested participants in the project who we consulted to ask about updating our website, project materials and so on. The participant Panel of Advisors operated alongside the project’s Advisory Group, with members drawn from academia and the third sector.

Data Generated and Archived

The data generated for the *Your Space!* project was mainly in-depth interviews with individual young people or small sibling groups, depending on their preferences, carried out in their homes. The interview schedule used during each Wave shifted slightly along with developments in the focus of the research and the changing circumstances of the young people, but common themes included: significant life events, change and continuity in family relationships and friendships, routines and responsibilities, and hopes and fears for the future – all within the context of everyday life at home, at school, college and/or work, and in the local community.

A major output from the *Your Space!* qualitative longitudinal project – and key achievement of the study – is the quality and range of material that has been deposited in the Timescapes Archive, ready for use by other researchers. Materials archived for project include:

- Digital transcripts of interviews, as well as audio data about the young people’s family, friends, home, neighbourhood and school
- Visual material such as network maps of relationships, timelines of significant events, and photographs of important places in the home.
- ‘Cultural commentaries’ explaining popular interests and leisure activities, and brief essays on ‘when I’m 25’.
- Notes on interviewees’ social characteristics and circumstances, and fieldnotes about the interview process.
- Research process materials including interview schedules, information leaflets and consent forms, and project newsletters.



Findings

As well as the archived outputs from the Your Space! qualitative longitudinal project, findings from the *Your Space!* project are both substantive but concern the process of conducting qualitative longitudinal research. Emergent substantive findings from ongoing analysis include:

- **Trajectories to adulthood and the economic recession:**

We asked participants in our study about their experience of becoming an adult during a time of recession. Tracing young people's aspirations and pathways over a period of major economic change: from sustained growth (Wave 1), the credit crunch (Wave 2) and economic recession (Wave 3), our research shows that young people enter into a crisis such as economic recession with prior resources of various kinds and uses, and the crisis accentuates whatever it is they bring to it. These resources include cultural and parental expectations, the material resources available within and to families, wider social networks, the availability of economic and welfare opportunities for employment, education and training, housing and so on. This means that young people from less advantaged backgrounds are likely to fare worse during these times. The nature of the family, cultural, material and welfare resources available to young people shapes the impact of economic disruption on their lives.

- **Shaping gender identities and sexuality over time:**

We have drawn on our participants' accounts of their everyday lives to explore the significance of sibling relationships in shaping gendered identities over time. Children and young people's sense of what it is to be male or female is an integral part of their relationships with their brothers and sisters. We found that brothers and sisters make judgments about each other's gendered behaviour, which shape their relationship, but which can change over time. Their feelings and ideas about gender and sexuality can be confirmed, challenged and negotiated as part of their everyday interactions as they grow from childhood into young adulthood.

- **Dynamics of siblings, care and support over time:**

We asked our participants to discuss the giving and receiving of help and support amongst their sisters and brothers. Siblings often provide an important range of resources, support and care for one another. For example, older siblings can be helpful to younger ones in coping with the move to a new school, providing advice about homework, and/or tackling bullying at school or in the neighbourhood. This can be the case even if they rarely get on when they are at home. The sort of care provided, and how it is perceived, can change over time, and vary according to the places in which it occurs. Indeed, relationships with brothers and sisters are dynamic, with change and continuity over time. Bad relationships can shift into close, caring ones as siblings grow older, especially around shared music interests and other activities. Once close connections and support can loosen as siblings develop other intimate relationships. It is difficult to pin down a particular point in time as characteristic of the type or quality of relationship between siblings.

- **Generation as a discursive construction:**

Generation can be understood and enacted as a discursive construction between sisters and brothers, rather than a fixed family-based or cohort-based position. Older siblings can be regarded as parent-like and belonging to a different generation, while older relatives such as aunts can be considered the same generation as a sibling. The elements or signifiers of discursive



generational similarity and difference include age status and associated authority, cultural experiences, and so on.

- **Hopes for parents' futures:**

In contrast to the stereotypical portrayal of young people as ungrateful and selfish, many want the best for their parents. As they grow older, children and young people shift away from seeing a good future for their parents as bound up with a bigger and better house, car and income, towards wanting them to be happy and healthy. They became more aware of their parents' dreams and hope that they will be able to realise them in the future. Many see themselves as helping to realise these dreams. They can feel a strong sense of responsibility to their parents and hope to repay them in the future by making life easier for them, helping their parents out financially and looking after them.

- **Qualitative longitudinal research and archive both as source and potential resolution of ethical dilemmas – the case of a death:**

A qualitative longitudinal research study (QLR) that is archived for future use can raise particular sorts of ethical dilemmas that are different from other kinds of research practice, but may offer a resource in dealing with them. QLR involves creates a long term relationship between researchers and participants and their families, with a particular sense of commitment and responsibility. In the *Your Space!* study, the death of a young participant raised questions about the moral 'ownership' of the data: archive, researchers or parents/family? The archive, however, offered an opportunity for bereaved family members to have their memories of the young person recorded and placed alongside the research data about the participant.

Early/Anticipated Impacts

Enhancing and extending academic knowledge:

The *Your Space!* project has made contributions to substantive, theoretical and methodological debates, drawing on the emergent findings outlined above, and disseminated through publications and presentations. In particular, these relate to:

- life course research, especially that focusing on trajectories into adulthood;
- understandings of the processes shaping gender identity and sexuality;
- understandings and signifiers of generation;
- ethics of care, both as part of sibling and family practices, and as ethical research practice.

Informing and supporting professional practice:

- We were invited to contribute to a US edited handbook on siblings. Mental health practitioners are a key audience for the handbook. This shows the relevance of qualitative longitudinal research, with an impact that informs and guides practice. Specifically, we produced a series of case studies and a set of 'siblings and gender awareness' guidelines for practitioners to consider when working with families.¹

¹ Reference: Edwards, R. and Weller, S. (2011) 'A sideways look at gender and sibling relationships', in J. Caspi (ed.) *Sibling Development: Implications for Mental Health Practitioners*, New York: Springer Publishing.



- Over the course of the project, we have talked about our project and disseminated findings to professionals and practitioners to support their practice. Examples include: a key address to playworkers and local authority officers at the London Play conference, to draw attention to the way that play is relevant to young people's lives, not just young children's; and a talk to professionals working in the families field at a Family and Parenting Institute expert seminar to draw attention to the importance of sibling relationships in communities.

Engaging and enhancing public knowledge:

We have undertaken a number of activities that demonstrate public interest in the topic of young people's sibling relationships, successfully draw academic research to the attention of both children and adults, and show the potential for the social impact of qualitative longitudinal research:

- As part of the ESRC's Festival of Social Science in March 2008, we teamed up with Timescapes project 7 to invite members of the public to complete an online or hard copy postcard telling us about their relationships with their siblings. As well as collecting substantive data, the activity aimed to show the public the sort of research funded by the ESRC and the topics that academic family researchers may investigate. During the week-long exercise, public response far exceeded expectation: we received just under 800 postcards – a major achievement. As well as achieving the impact of public interest, further impact is possible through analysis of the postcards, which have been archived for reuse.
- In April 2009 we worked with the Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood in London on a 'Family Albums' weekend event, designed to explore the place of sisters, brothers and other family members in children's lives. Around 1500 visitors to the Museum visited our poster exhibition of findings from our Sisters and Brothers postcard activity (see above), with 130 or so taking part in workshop activities drawing on our research that were run by community artists and storytellers. This achieved the impact of public interest from children as well as adults.
- In October 2010 we posted the 'Learning About Young People's Lives: what do teenagers' bedrooms tell us about their identities and relationships?' video on You Tube, which combined visual and transcript material from the *Your Space!* project: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=El0ph9yVl3I>. To date, it has had over 750 views.
- As part of the ESRC's Festival of Social Science in 2011, we contributed to the wider Timescapes day event: Family Lives Over Time, sharing the audience of around 200.

Future Plans

There are two key elements of future plans for the Your Space! project.

1. Gaining funding to collect another round of data

We are awaiting the outcome of a bid to the ESRC, in collaboration with the *Inventing Adulthood* project team (linked to Timescapes through the 'Making the Long View' strand: 'Good times and



hard times: tracing trajectories into adulthood through a linked qualitative longitudinal and mixed methods comparison'. This involves a substantive comparison of two samples of young people and their trajectories into adulthood, each across time and comparatively at different points in time. If funded, the generation and archiving of a new wave of data for each the two pre-existing project data sets involved (*Your Space!* and *Inventing Adulthoods*) will add longitudinal value to potential reuse of the already archived data.

2. Exploiting the analytical potential of the current data set

The *Your Space!* data is archived and available. Along with other users, we have plans exploit its rich potential. As well as building on the analysis of areas that we have already undertaken (see emergent findings), we are also interested in looking at space and sense of individualized and collective identity in relationships with siblings and friends, in particular focusing young people's bedrooms and 'annexed' places.