

Timescapes project aims to capture our memories

A Leeds University project is recording stories and memories of vast swaths of the population for posterity

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- **Lucy Tobin**
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to remember at the beach

A day

When Sheila gave birth at 17, she became another number in the teenage pregnancy statistics. Bringing up her family on an estate, she became a grandmother at 38, and her family's cycle of young parenthood looked set to continue. But Sheila views late-teenage pregnancy as a positive thing for people who live in deprived circumstances, since it means children can grow up with their grandparents around.

Her experience gives flesh to the black-and-white bones of statistics. Her life is one of thousands being tracked for a fascinating research project started by Leeds University. Called Timescapes, it is recording stories and memories of vast swaths of the population, aiming to log "the whole sweep of human relationships from the cradle to the grave". Using the latest technology and old-fashioned face-to-face interviews, Timescapes is trying to capture the essence of family relationships, careers and life in the 21st century. It includes memories of relationships and personal life from 1900 to the present.

Making movies

"While a lot of social research involves surveying thousands of people to provide a snapshot of a population, Timescapes is more like creating a movie of our time," says the project's director, Bren Neale, a professor at Leeds University's school of sociology and social policy. "Society is so complex and change so rapid that to understand it we need to track people through time so we can see how their lives unfold. As social scientists, sometimes we become so interested in the big picture that the people get lost. With this project, we're putting their narratives at the heart of things."

So Timescapes is tracking the everyday thoughts, decisions and relationships of 400 very different Britons, through diaries, interviews, videos and photos. In addition, a link-up with a BBC website, Memoryshare, is encouraging as many Britons as possible to add their own memories to the archive. It's all part of the project's aim of creating one of the largest and most diverse resources of qualitative longitudinal research – tracking subjects through a sustained period of time – ever carried out. The project started in 2007 and is to run for at least five years, or longer if £4.5m funding from the government's Economic and Social Research Council allows. This week, for the first time, the general will be able to view the project when Timescapes launches its giant, multimedia "time-capsule" online.

The logistics are mind-boggling. The research is led by Leeds University, but involves sociologists, gerontologists, psychologists and oral historians from London South Bank, Cardiff, Edinburgh and the Open University. Each university is in charge of one of the seven "micro-projects", which focus on children and teenagers, people going through mid-life experiences like parenthood and careers, or older lives.

Participants were tracked down through schools and youth clubs, maternity hospitals and GPs, local newspapers, care homes and community centres. The Leeds team says most people who heard about the project were intrigued and keen to be involved. "Most of the participants, especially the younger people, were very keen to get on board and see their lives 'published'," says Neale. "If someone wants a particular fact or feeling to remain anonymous, that's fine, but on the whole people have been happy to talk openly."

However, the recording process is not always easy. Neale says that in some interviews researchers had to be careful to avoid a "culture clash" when "middle-

class academics go to sometimes very disadvantaged communities".

Lost footage

There have also been practical problems. For the research into teenagers, for example, the Timescapes academics lent participants video cameras for a weekend of Big Brother-style "diary room" recordings. The aim was to capture modern voices and looks for posterity, as well as documenting the events that make up the participants' lives. One teenager, however, has not returned the camera. "He said it had been stolen, but we're pretty sure it was sold," says Neale. "But we were more upset about the lost footage than the camera – and we couldn't make too much of a deal about it, because we're keen to keep the teenager involved in the study."

The researchers say that experience was unusual. One young participant produced 50 "vodcasts" over one weekend, capturing a walk with her family and her dog, footage of a family meal, and her friends in school putting on makeup. "For the first time we have the technology to capture real lives and real change in the making, to walk alongside people's lives – so that's what we're doing," says Neale. She and her team believe the future uses for the collected data are unlimited, potentially including health and social care policy-making. "Because the research is running over several years, it will help governments to gauge whether things like teenage pregnancy initiatives or elder care-home provision are actually effective."

Early trends the team has spotted so far include the ill health of grandparents in disadvantaged communities in the UK. "Some are in their 40s and 50s, and often providing a great deal of support for their children and grandchildren, and sometimes their parents and great-grandparents. We've found many are suffering the ill health you'd expect to find among much older people in more affluent areas."

The archive being built as part of Timescapes also aims to transform the way social research is collected. Libby Bishop, the project's senior research archivist, says: "Researchers have been involved with archiving throughout, not as an after-thought as can happen in other projects. All the academic work involves thinking about the future use of the data. Those working on government policy often don't have the luxury of time to collect new data to consider issues like the law surrounding child education, or work-family balance. We have very complex samples of these groups. It will be incredibly useful."

But for now, the Timescapes researchers are enjoying the task in hand. "You never quite know what you're going to find out at the next visit or interview, because people's lives change so much," says Neale. "It's endlessly fascinating – you're never at the end of the story, there's always another chapter."

The Timescapes archive is open for view and to add memories at www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk

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